

# What Are Professional Learning Communities, and Why Should We Promote Them?

There are fifteen people in a room: one district level and one building-level administrator, six teachers from several different subject areas in grades 6 to 8 and subject areas, two teaching assistants, three students, and two parents. The room is filled with the buzzing sounds of work.

A small group is developing a collaborative presentation for the school board on ways to support the needs of diverse learners in heterogeneous classrooms through developmentally responsive lessons. A district-level administrator, a student, and a teacher are designing a survey for all school members on their perceptions of the new advisory program for the middle school. One teacher is polishing the introduction to an upcoming seventh-grade unit of study on bias. A group of five is listening and providing feedback to the principal as she shares her ideas for a handbook of reading strategies she is proposing to develop and publish. A parent, a teacher, and a student are grappling with reconciling grade-level expectations with state standards so that they can begin to identify language and tools for reporting student progress and achievement with the ultimate goal of revising the report card.

Although the work of individuals and groups may be different, each person in the room is challenged by the idea that he or she has an

important role to play in school improvement. Each is focused on articulating or polishing a component of his or her practice for which there is no time set aside in their day-to-day work. While an outsider stopping in for a few minutes might have trouble making sense of what appears to be disjointed work, the group, as a whole, is driven by same purpose: to improve everyone's learning in schools. Tomorrow they will all go back to their routines, carrying with them the impact of today's learning.

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I cannot think of any other profession that is subject to the kinds of demands that teaching faces. These demands are no less than revolutionary, and they explain, to a great extent, the enormous challenge of improving schools. They also provide the context and rationale for professional learning communities.

First, our understanding of how students learn best and of what they need to learn to function in life and in society imposes the demand that teachers become adept at diagnosing and addressing individual student needs and that they adopt a pedagogy that enables them to do so. For example, current scientific understandings about brain functions and how these affect the kinds of reading problems students face demand that teachers strategically select and try different approaches for helping individual students interact with the written word.

Second, teacher preparation programs face the increasing challenge of producing graduates who are able to cope with conditions, structures, and contradictions in schools that have not been reflected in the content or pedagogy of the preservice or even in-service curriculum they offer; the result is that graduates are at a deficit before they even get started teaching. Today's novice teachers are not generally prepared to respond to increasing school demands, such as addressing state and national standards in their lessons and assessments or teaching in ways that support the learning needs of all the different students they teach. Nor are they prepared to adapt to changes resulting from the adoption of new programs and curricula, or of programs that require instructional approaches such as differentiated instruction, while at the same time implementing a fairly structured basal reading series.

Third, although significant attention has been paid to articulating and operationalizing content and state standards, there has not been a parallel effort to help schools or teachers determine how to use them to help make decisions about what to teach or assess.

Fourth, although schools often respond to the need to adopt and use textbooks and educational resources that are aligned with standards, they provide little support to teachers in tailoring these resources to their own and their students' needs.

Finally, schools are structured in a way that minimizes collaboration, reflection, and innovation, the very elements that support meeting these demands.

When new demands are placed on other professions, they are often accompanied by a large investment of human and technical support to facilitate the transition from current to desired knowledge and practice. Most schools, however, lack the resources for professional development that are required for teachers to be effective facilitators and assessors of learning. In light of these deficits, it is truly remarkable that many schools have teachers who are well versed in the facilitation of student learning, knowledgeable and skilled in teaching a standards-based curriculum, and able to work effectively within and outside the classroom.

In the United States, we seem to lack the political will to accept that if we want schools to do what they need to do, we need to strengthen their core. We have to stop measuring their deficits through outside tests and means, and build their capacity and resilience to operate as learning organizations, where learning by students and adults is their most prized commodity. This is where professional learning communities offer a viable and promising approach to improving student learning in schools.

Schools will improve if and when many more teachers can help students learn. Teachers can help students learn best when they have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to make that happen; when they see themselves as learners; when they are supported by structures that value their learning as well as student learning; and when they can work in forums in which students and others can inform their decision making and other practices. Education—and its practitioners—need the context, content, time, and processes to support learning; develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions that promote inquiry around practice; and evidence a value for the learning and contributions of its members, adult and child alike. Such is the promise of professional learning communities.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?

The term *professional learning community* is as popular now as the terms *restructuring*, *cooperative learning*, *alternative assessment*, and *outcomes-based education* have been in years past. Like these and other terms, it runs the risk of becoming one more fad in the history of educational reform. Those of us who work in or for schools have seen many of these fads come and go without leaving much of a legacy. My intent is to demonstrate in this book that when professional learning communities are treated seriously and supported adequately, they have the potential to greatly improve the lives of students and educators.

As is the case in other disciplines, the field of education borrows, steals, adopts, and even invents its own terminology, often using old words in new ways or to convey new meaning. We are probably not as careful as we should be in defining the terms we use or even in applying such terms in similar ways across contexts. The term *learning community* is one such term. It has been used over two decades and has recently been popularized and used in schools and other contexts to describe several different arrangements and structures (Brandt, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2006; Hargreaves, 2003; Hord, 2004; Lieberman and Miller, 2004; Little, 2003; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001; Ross and Gray, 2006; Senge, 1990; Shulman, 2004; Wenger, 1998). Interestingly enough, earlier uses of the term are broader and deeper than some of the current characterizations. Some emphasize the players, whereas others emphasize the work that the community produces or what the community represents. Table 1.1 shows how different authors have defined professional learning communities in terms of their participants and purposes over time.

Each definition of *professional learning community* has, over the years, contributed to our overall understanding, yet these communities remain complex and fairly elusive as a concept and a practice—complex because they supersede formal organizational structures, which can evolve over time in their focus and work, and elusive because the very name is composed of three terms (*professional*, *learning*, and *community*), each with many different connotations, any combination of which changes the essence of the whole.

In the context of this book, professional learning communities are forums in which participants embrace the privilege and responsibility of learning individually and collectively. Their purpose is to improve their own thinking and practice

**Table 1.1**  
**Selected Characterizations of Learning Communities**

<b>Author</b>	<b>Who Is Included?</b>	<b>What Is Their Purpose?</b>
Shulman (2004)	Collegium or setting where individuals who are peers come together with a shared mission	Overcome the limitations of individual experience and understanding in the absence of multiple perspectives, by having practitioners access, share, and negotiate each other's wisdom of practice
Senge (1990)	People in the organization who see the need for change in the business community	Effect positive change
Sergiovanni (1994)	Collections of individuals who share ideas and beliefs	Do things differently, develop new kinds of relationships, create new ties, make new commitments
Brandt (2004)	Individuals who are responsible for their actions, while at the same time embracing the common good	Harness individual talent and commitment to a group effort that pushes for high-quality learning for all students
Wenger (1998)	Members who join in common activities and learn together through the relationships with other people	Affect performance, handle unstructured problems, and share knowledge outside traditional structural boundaries
Capers (2004)	Teachers who share, identify, articulate, and communicate—to themselves, each other, and the public at large—the practices and procedures that facilitate learning and characterize excellent instruction	Provide the ground on which standards are observed and developed, the means by which they are conveyed, and the structures through which they are enforced on a school-by-school basis
Munro (2005)	Individuals who have a shared commitment to agreed-on community goals and shared learning, including ongoing collaboration and communication among members	Enhanced teacher practice and improved student learning
DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005)	Groups of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research	Achieve better results for students by pondering the questions: What is it we want students to learn? How will we know if they have learned it? What will we do if they do not learn it?

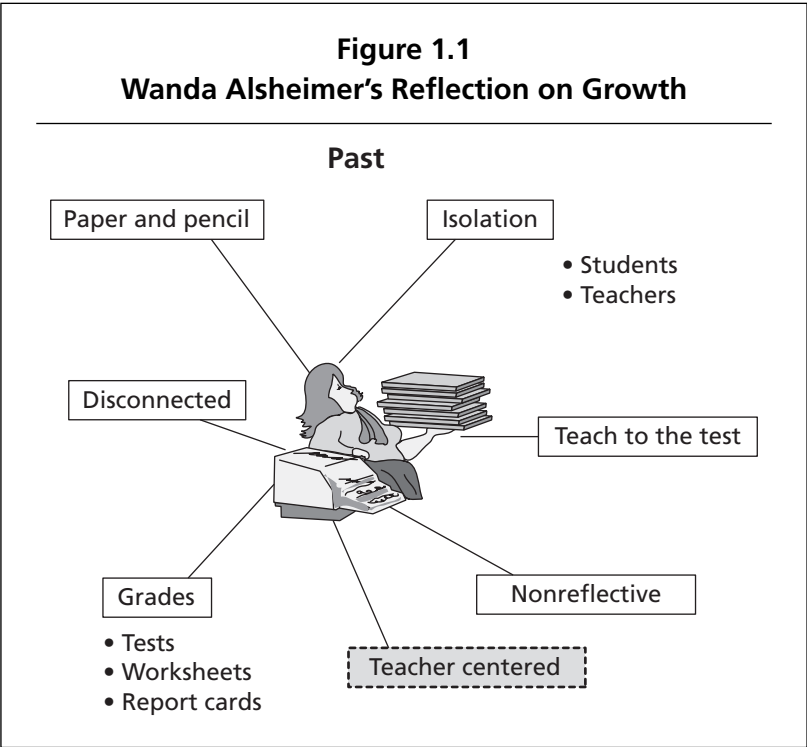
in the service of supporting adult and student learning in the organizations they work for. They include one or more cross-sections of educators and administrators in a school, a school district, or an educational organization who seek to address significant problems related to teaching, learning, and the other work of schools. Participants include teachers, administrators, students, professional developers, and other educators or school specialists. The cross-role structure of the group is critical for two reasons. First, it enables the community to explore and understand multiple perspectives related to teaching, learning, and the other work of schools. Second, it depoliticizes the community by allowing its members to transcend individual or role-specific concerns in order to explore critical issues of practice. Although the individual questions and pursuits of participants may be different, together they share a purpose, a vision, and one or more goals that relate to making the school a learning organization, where inquiry and the pursuit of new understandings are common to all. Their common purpose, vision, and goals are fostered by the belief that they are knowledge producers, or generators, who investigate, document, and publish some aspect of their expertise and experience.

Collegial inquiry and reflective practice are the language and the sustenance of professional learning communities. They provide participants with the opportunity to articulate and analyze their thinking and their practices, reconcile individual questions and issues with organizational needs, compare contexts and situations and find meaningful patterns, and search for the big picture without losing sight of particulars.

What would such communities look like? Let's return to the scenario at the beginning of the chapter.

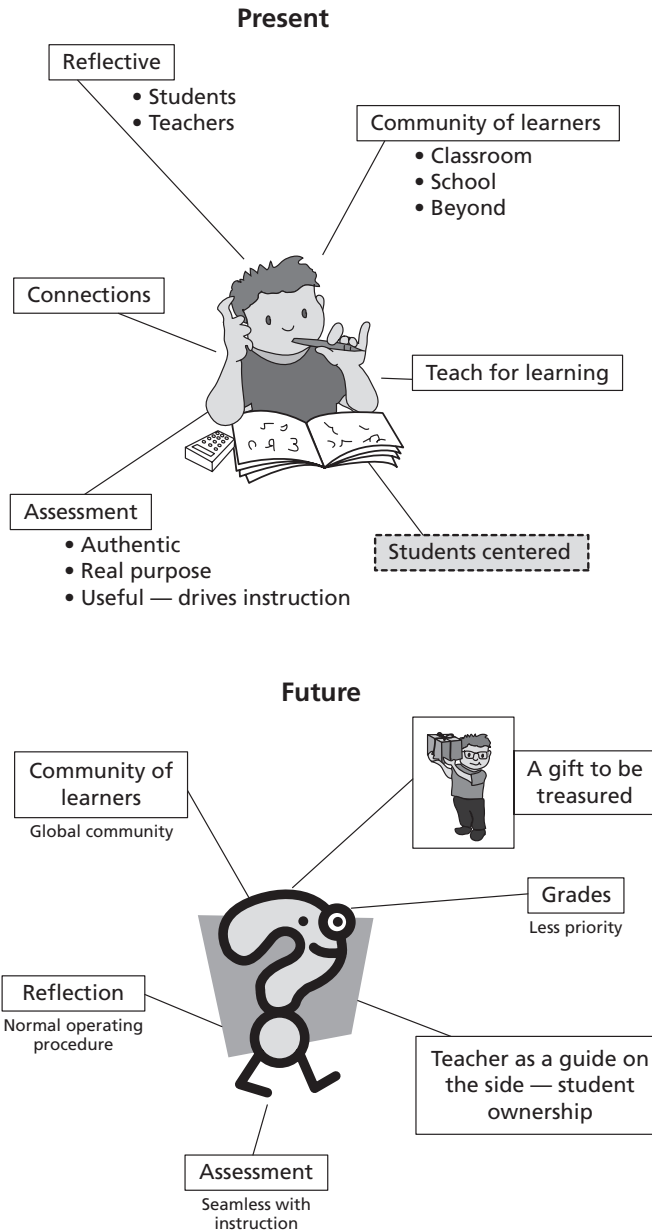
The group of fifteen comes together in five different occasions during the year for one to two days each time. They bring with them their roles and experiences but leave behind the politics of their own contexts. The community provides them with ample space for articulating their perspective but little room for including the minutia of their day-to-day work-related existence. In their shared collective space, they ask questions about their work and the organizations they represent, and they study alone and together, sometimes relying on books and research and at other times analyzing each other's practices. They spend time

discussing specific texts and pondering the implications for their roles and responsibilities. They write and revise, only to write and revise again. They constantly negotiate the goals and needs that drive their work in the community, aware of the importance of their caring deeply about such work, but mindful that it must link to or address an organization need or goal. They use the community as a forum to think, negotiate, and create. They use it as a place where they can deepen their understandings about teaching and learning, improve their professional craft, and revise their practices. Figure 1.1 provides an example from Wanda Alsheimer, a second grade teacher in upstate New York who analyzed changes in her practices over a three-year period stemming from her participation in a learning community. Professional learning communities recognize the time and space they occupy in the community as a gift.



**(Continued)**

Figure 1.1 (Continued)



Note: Used with permission.

## **WHY SHOULD WE PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?**

The primary underlying tenet of professional learning communities is that expertise in teaching and learning abounds, but the current structure of the educational profession has precluded our capacity to access, use, and disseminate it as well as we could.

There are at least three related sets of arguments for the creation of professional learning communities. One relates to their effect on students, a second one to the outcomes they produce in teachers, and the third to their function in schools. Despite the fact that some of these arguments have been enunciated far more than others, all three are critical if professional learning communities are to have a sustainable and significant impact on the lives of teachers and students. Most important is that these three arguments are interdependent and need to be considered in a systemic and strategic fashion if professional learning communities are to be more than another fad or event in the life of schools.

### **Learning Communities Benefit Students**

The most frequently used argument for learning communities is that these communities can lead to improved student learning by enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills. In other words, learning communities increase teachers' learning, and that in turn translates into increased student learning.

A growing body of research establishes a direct link between teacher quality and student learning (Byrne, 1983; Darling-Hammond, 2003). According to Darling-Hammond (2003) "teacher expertise is one of the most important school factors influencing student achievement, far outweighing the lesser but generally positive influences of small schools and small class sizes" (p. 77). "A study comparing high-achieving and low-achieving schools found that 90 percent of the variation in student achievement in mathematics and reading could be traced to teacher qualifications. Other research found that recruiting and developing more highly qualified teachers is the most cost-effective means of improving student achievement" (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, p. 161). Another study showed that "in just one academic year, the top third of teachers produced as much as six times the learning growth of the bottom third" (Sparks, 2005, p. 47). Research by Bandura (1993) indicates that student achievement is significantly and positively related to collective teacher efficacy and that collective teacher efficacy has a greater effect on student

achievement than does student socioeconomic level. Another study found that “collective teacher efficacy was positively associated with differences between schools in student-achievement in both reading and mathematics” (Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy, 2000, p. 479). Research by Silins and Mulford (2004) suggests that teachers who work in schools that operate as learning organizations produce higher levels of student participation and engagement in learning.

Increasing teacher expertise clearly lies at the heart of improving student outcomes. Improving expertise is no small matter since teaching requires far more than acquiring technical skills; among the necessary categories of knowledge and skills are these:

- Content knowledge (what to teach)
- Pedagogical knowledge (how to teach)
- Pedagogical content-specific knowledge (how to teach subject-specific material)
- Curriculum design knowledge (how to craft and implement learning experiences)
- Assessment design knowledge (what to assess) and assessment skills (how and when to assess)
- Classroom management skills
- Intrapersonal or self-understanding (reflectivity)
- Interpersonal skills (how to relate to students, peers, parents, and others)
- Practical knowledge (about parents, schools, colleagues, and school, for example)

Professional learning communities can be a means to increasing teachers’ expertise, which is the most direct path to improved learning for students.

Teaching so that all students learn to achieve at high levels requires that teachers understand how students learn; that they plan and design lessons that enable all students to attain desired outcomes and that such lessons account for differences in their background, skills, or dispositions; that they diagnose students’ learning needs and use that information as the basis for curriculum planning; and that they use varied assessment practices that enable students to demonstrate their learning of content, skills, and habits of mind.

Such teaching and learning cannot be prepackaged, neatly structured into pacing guides, or reduced to teacher-proofed curriculum consisting in scripted lessons that bypass teachers' knowledge and expertise. Now more than ever before, teaching requires collegial structures that enable teachers to articulate, refine, negotiate, question, and share their expertise and practice so that they can benefit students. Professional learning communities can become structures that lead to the improvement of student learning.

When learning communities include students as members, students can benefit by joining adult conversations in which their insights related to teaching and learning are respected and valued. These communities can also help students learn about perspectives related to teaching and learning that they do not hear in the classroom, and participate in democratic forms of discourse.

### **Learning Communities Benefit Teachers**

The second and related argument for the creation of learning communities relates to their value for teachers' learning and work. Teaching is a highly complex professional endeavor involving science, craft, and art, often simultaneously. Its complexity lies in the facts that no single practice works for every student; that it is difficult at best to tailor specific instructional and assessment approaches to the needs and interests of different students; and that despite decades of standards, there is a wide range of understandings about desirable learning outcomes.

Lee Shulman's instrumental work around teacher expertise (2004) provides compelling arguments for the role that professional learning communities can have in terms of helping teachers transcend the limitations of their individual practice. Individual teachers have difficulties articulating, understanding, and internalizing specific practices and events without either the assistance of colleagues who can help them observe or monitor their own teaching behavior or a system for record keeping or reporting. Teaching occurs at too fast a pace, with little room for recovery, processing, or revisiting future courses of action based on past and current events. For the most part, teachers' work revolves around dealing with specific lessons, issues, and students.

These working conditions create the need for forums where teachers can learn from each other, share their experiences with other teachers related to individual incidents and students in order to derive sound generalizations about effective practice, and improve their thinking and work. Because learning is primarily a

social process and human beings construct their understanding about what they learn through social discourse (Vygotsky, 1962), professional learning communities can provide the means to support the development of a shared and collective expertise about teaching and learning. They can offer teachers opportunities to negotiate the meaning of what they know in the same kinds of social environments that students require. When these communities include students, teachers can deepen their understanding of their own practices by testing their assumptions with students and learning from students' own insights, questions, and assumptions about teaching and learning.

To the extent that we will always be limited by our own context and experience, we need to figure out ways of sharing what we know and understand so that collectively we can become wiser. Shulman and Carey's work on bounded and collective rationality (2004) suggests that only through shared learning can teachers come to understand things in depth and transcend the limitations of their unique and individual perspective. Collectively teachers can find answers to questions and insights into issues that as individuals they find difficult to understand.

Despite the fact that teacher induction programs of one sort or another exist in many schools, all teachers, and especially new teachers, lack organizational support structures that enable them to learn what they need to know about teaching and learning in order to be effective practitioners. More often than not, learning the craft of teaching is a solitary pursuit that is enhanced when a teacher has the good fortune to be close enough to one or more role models. The American Federation of Teachers (Robinson, 1985), the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986), and Capers (2004) have reached some consensus regarding the conditions that characterize teaching as a profession. "Based on this general consensus," writes Capers (2004), "a profession can be defined by four broad categories: critical self-consciousness, practical expertise, trustful client relationships, and collegial regulation—including shared personal practice" (p. 155). Ironically most schools today are structured and function in ways that minimize, if not preclude, the conditions needed for strengthening the professionalization of teaching.

Professional learning communities support teaching as a profession by enabling teachers to explicitly describe and discuss their practices and the decisions that inform them. The critical self-consciousness that emerges from this

shared discourse can help them grapple with some of the complexities of the profession. One such complexity lies in the reconciliation of teachers' role as coaches with their role as evaluators. Practical expertise can be fostered through the shared analysis of teachers' approaches to curriculum design, instruction, and assessment. Trust-based collegial relationships can be supported when teachers engage in a continuous dialogue with other practitioners and educators who hold different roles and perspectives but share a common purpose.

Recent statistics on the increasing deskilling of teachers in U.S. schools underscore the need for professional learning communities and remind us of the critical need for preservice and in-service mechanisms to support teachers in developing their professional identities. In addition, "almost one third of teachers exit the field within their first three years; one half leave by the end of the fifth. The result of this exodus is that for the first time in American history, the number of teachers leaving the profession is exceeding the number who is entering the profession" (Lieberman and Miller, 2004, p. 5). Although there are many explanations for this attrition, several of them relate to the ways in which teachers are socialized and supported in their formative years. They also underscore the importance of creating supportive structures within schools, such as professional learning communities in which newer teachers can be mentored and supported during their first three years as teachers and in which more veteran teachers can have a forum for sharing the wisdom of their practice. Such structures may include pairing new with experienced teachers so that the experienced teacher can help the new teacher develop a portfolio of her work and learning over the first two years in the school, peer coaching opportunities, and cross-visitations of classrooms followed by opportunities to debrief and learn from classroom observations.

Now more than ever before, we need to find ways of harnessing the expertise of teachers and using it to inform school improvement and the sound implementation of educational programs and processes aimed at supporting student learning.

### **Learning Communities Benefit Schools**

The third argument for the creation of learning communities relates to their potential role in supporting schools. From an organizational standpoint, several decades of failed attempts at school reform indicate that we need to

reconceptualize what we mean by an “effective school system” and rethink the roles within it. School improvement efforts tend to be driven and promoted by entities or organizations outside schools and continue to rely on professional development models that rarely leave any lasting mark.

Notwithstanding the fact that outside consultants and facilitators can and do initiate positive school-based changes and learning processes, outsiders are not likely to sustain progress in the absence of an internal structure that incorporates and internalizes the changes made. Changes in administration, policies, and programs further hinder the sustainability of outside-driven innovations. Professional learning communities have the potential for increasing the resilience of individuals to adapt to leadership and other changes in schools and develop an internal structure for sustaining change and learning in schools.

There is increasing evidence that professional learning communities and collaborative structures have a strong impact on positive outcomes for schools (e. g., Fieman-Nemser and Floden, 1986; Hargreaves and Macmillan, 1991; Little, 1989).

According to Darling-Hammond (2003), what we need is a complete transformation of teaching and the organizational structure of schools into learning organizations where capacity can be cultivated from within and professional talent can be sought, recognized, articulated, and disseminated. The transformation that schools demand requires that we rethink the way we attract, prepare, support, and develop administrators so that they can become the kinds of leaders who understand and know how to leverage teachers’ expertise. Ross and Gray’s research (2006) supports Darling-Hammond, with evidence that transformational leadership has an impact on the collective teacher efficacy of the school.

School improvement is intrinsically tied to leadership. Professional learning communities can foster the creation and implementation of leadership structures, procedures, and programs that enable the school, as an organization, to develop and fulfill its mission through inquiry and shared leadership rather than through compliance or managed work.

While it is clear that the role of principals is instrumental in the effective management of schools, the complex nature of schools and the increased demands placed on them promote the consideration of distributed leadership structures, as defined by Spillane (2006), where the principal and other adults within the building address issues related to policies, programs, practices, and processes.

True learning communities position the adults (teachers, principals, and other professional staff), and the children within them, as active learners who are constantly in the process of meaning making and knowledge negotiation. Learning becomes a shared endeavor, prized above anything else. It lies at the core of the work of the community.

Schools are rapidly losing the wisdom of practice of teachers and administrators who are retiring and are depleting them of the one asset that can make the most difference in the lives of students: good practitioners who know and understand teaching, learning, and schools. School-based professional learning communities structured in ways that honor everyone's expertise can address this problem by providing teachers, administrators, other school specialists, and other adults who share a commitment to improving schools with mechanisms for knowledge creation and dissemination, enabling them to unpack and refine the wisdom of school practice. As Shulman (1987) stated so eloquently, they allow individuals who work in or for schools "to see the world as they see it, then to understand the manner in which experts construct their problem spaces, their definitions of situations, thus permitting them to act as they do" (p. 257).

The usual organization of schools today, characterized by teacher and principal isolation, minimizes knowledge creation and prevents schools from capitalizing on its primary asset: teachers' expertise. By encouraging practitioners to revisit and articulate the meaning and consequences of their experiences, professional learning communities become the means through which teachers and administrators can maximize what they have learned as individuals, while identifying, consolidating, and sharing best practices. In so doing, they can increase what Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000) have identified in a school reform study as "collective efficacy"—a sense that educators who work together can transform schools.

Professional organizations such as the National Board for Professional Teacher Standards (2001) and studies disseminated by the National Commission for Teaching and America's Future have recognized the relationship between increasing teachers' capacity and the creation of learning communities. They support professional learning communities, arguing for the need to "reinvent . . . professional development," "encourage and support teacher knowledge and skills," and "create schools that are organized for student and teacher success" (Capers, 2004, p. 160). Organizing schools for teacher and student success requires that we tinker

with the current roles ascribed to teachers and administrators and rethink leadership structures in ways that maximize collective problem solving and shared accountability for the effective functioning of schools.

## **WHY WE NEED ALL THREE ARGUMENTS**

Each of the arguments for the creation of learning communities is critical. Although the potential for learning communities to benefit students is of great merit, isolating it from the role that learning communities can play in supporting teachers as professionals and schools as organizational entities is at best naive. In fact, much of the literature about learning communities suffers from myopia in that the arguments for their creation often have a single focus and are narrow in scope. In our efforts to find the culprit and take charge, we create learning communities to solve a specific problem, such as using student data to drive instructional decisions related to increasing their success on standardized tests, or develop a formal mechanism for the induction of new teachers. Such interventions, however worthy, assume either that professional learning communities are temporary structures serving single purposes or that they are a permanent fixture to organize the work of teachers.

True professional learning communities assume that their members have valuable experience and expertise to contribute. They value the wisdom of practice that Lee Shulman has often described in his work. They operate from a strength-based perspective and assume that each individual is an asset to the community. They understand that the community is as rich as its members and that the most important activity they can engage in is to learn with and from each other.

Professional learning communities can address and solve specific problems related to programs, policies, and practices. But they can also do and be much more. They offer the promise of new organizational cultures and contexts for the schools we have. They provide mechanisms for capturing practitioners' current expertise and for the creation of new knowledge and understandings. They help us develop new and shared forms of leadership that can result in a collective sense of purpose and accountability for school outcomes. "Professional learning communities writ large means *changing cultures to create new contexts*. . . . The key to this involves conceptualizing sustainability and using leadership to change context or the environment by (1) increasing leaders' participation in wider contexts and

(2) helping to develop leadership in others so they can do the same” (Fullan, 2005, p. 218). Professional learning communities entail new structures for the distribution and dissemination of individual and organizational intelligence.

Professional learning communities are necessary if we want schools to improve and become settings in which teaching and learning are considered prized commodities. They promote environments in which students’ minds and bodies are considered in the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation of curriculum; in which teachers are able to negotiate and prioritize the vastness of what they have to teach so as to create lessons and assessments that hang together well—lessons whose purposes are transparent and whose outcomes are the learning that was intended and assessments that capture the wide range of outcomes that rich curricula possess. They can help teachers, administrators, researchers, students, university faculty, board members, and others become part of a community of learners and thinkers who share a purpose and mission and whose work together can make their individual work and perspective far better and more important than it would be if they were not a part of such community.

