

**Indicator: The LEA/School promotes a school culture in which professional collaboration is valued and emphasized. (5084)**

**Explanation:** The evidence review indicates that administrators in high-performing LEAs and schools are focused on providing maximum opportunity for teacher collaboration and professional development at all levels within the system. These administrators provide a balance of direct technical assistance and indirect support as teachers incorporate new skills and knowledge gained from the professional development that occurs within a professional learning community environment. In addition, these impactful administrators actively plan for, participate in, and evaluate results from all collaborative efforts and professional development in which staff participate.

**Questions:** How will the LEA engage its staff in a collaborative and shared vision for improving collective and individual professional practices? What sorts of technical assistance will administrators provide to promote improved professional practices? What sorts of indirect support will administrators offer to encourage professional growth? What steps will administrators take to ensure co-planning for and with professional learning events? What commitments will administrators make to staff regarding participating in professional learning offerings? What strategies will administrators use to measure the success of professional learning structures, processes, and outcomes?

**Research Brief:**

School leaders in highly effective schools actively promote the development of staff cohesion and support, and the growth of communities of professional practice. These leaders “strive to create a culture of collaboration and the systems, operations, and policies that provide the infrastructure for that collegial culture” (Murphy, 2007, p. 78). Effective school leaders cultivate collaborative processes (e.g., shared decision making), manage schedules (e.g., common planning time), and develop organizational structures (e.g., team leadership) that allow and encourage shared mission and direction, with mutual accountability for student learning. These leaders ensure that teachers have in place a variety of processes to communicate and work among themselves, and are active participants in the various school learning communities, often serving key linking and pollinating roles in the process (Murphy, 2007). They realize, and help others realize, that communities of professional practice provide the best vehicles for professional learning and the developing of new instructional skills.

Collaborative professional learning is critical to student achievement gains, and high-performing high-poverty schools are consistently better at providing this type of learning than high-poverty low-performing schools (State of Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research, 2014). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are teams consisting of teachers, principals, parents and other staff who meet regularly for curriculum and instructional planning, student assessment and professional development. PLCs allow for ongoing collegial collaboration, and provide an opportunity for teachers to learn and try out new practices in their specific instructional setting, as well as observe and critique each other’s instruction based on shared understanding of effective teaching and goals for student learning. They also provide time for teachers to jointly develop individualized learning plans for struggling students, and serve as a forum for discussing issues affecting student performance such as hunger or discipline, which may be especially common in high poverty schools (Dufour & Marzano, 2011 as cited in State of Arkansas Bureau of Legislative Research, 2014).

Research evidence suggests that PLCs can be an effective vehicle for improving student achievement in struggling schools. For example, a quasi-experimental longitudinal study on the impact of grade level PLC teams found that Title I elementary schools using a PLC model had significantly higher levels of student achievement than similar schools at the end of the study (Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009). A high poverty school district in central California achieved success by adopting PLCs as one of several key initiatives to improve student achievement in its low-performing schools. The district used the DuFour model for PLCs, in which the idea of instructional quality is reframed from individual classroom teacher success to a teacher team's success in getting all students to achieve learning standards (McLester, 2012). The model consists of three essential ideas:

- Schools ensure that *all* students learn by shifting the focus from teaching to learning; they implement a uniform policy for helping struggling students rather than placing the responsibility solely on individual teachers.
- Schools must establish a culture of staff collaboration in which ideas, materials and strategies are shared among teachers.
- Schools must focus on results that focus on the progress of each individual student rather than classroom averages.

This school district made dramatic improvements in student achievement from 2004 to 2011, and 90% of teachers reported that PLCs provided the largest impact to student gains (David & Talbert, 2012). Clearly schools within this district had developed a school culture emphasizing and valuing professional collaboration.

Another district example of collaboration comes from the ABC Unified School District in California.<sup>1</sup> This school district has been praised widely for the collaborative relationship that has been cultivated between teachers and administrators, resulting in improved student achievement (O'Brien, 2014). This partnership between the teacher union, district, and building administrators has resulted in a district culture "of shared planning, decision-making and responsibility built on respect, commitment and trust" (Rubenstein & McCarthy, 2011). An example of collaborative problem solving within this district involved the creation of the Southside Schools Reading Collaborative which directed support and resources to assist six high needs schools within the district; these schools then demonstrated the highest growth on district tests (O'Brien, 2014).

In a set of six case studies (Rubenstein, et al., 2011) of school districts that have created and maintained strong relationships among teachers, unions and administrators while improving student achievement, several common themes emerged:

- Emphasis on teacher quality, including professional development, new systems of evaluation, peer-to-peer assistance and mentoring programs;
- Focus on student performance, with districts creating opportunities for teachers and administrators to work together to analyze student performance to identify and focus on priority areas for improvement;
- Substantive problem-solving, innovation and willingness to experiment, working together to come up with new ways to address critical issues, with the partnership serving as a vehicle for improvement (not as the end in itself);

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.abcusd.k12.ca.us/pages/ABC\\_Unified\\_School\\_District](http://www.abcusd.k12.ca.us/pages/ABC_Unified_School_District).

- An organizational culture that values and supports collaboration, evidenced in part by leaders speaking of a culture of inclusion, involvement and communication, as well as respect for teachers as professionals and for their union; and,
- Collaborative structures at all levels in the district, with an infrastructure that promotes and facilitates collaborative decision-making in schools through building-level leadership teams, school improvement committees, school advisory councils or other such bodies that meet regularly and play a key role in site-based decision-making. (O'Brien, 2014, p. 2)

The research cited has demonstrated the importance and value that inclusive collaborative structures within schools and districts can provide teachers and administrators, equipping them with tools to maximize teaching and learning that results in student achievement gains.

### References and Resources

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