Preface

For almost as long as young people have been educated in schools, the adults inside their walls have searched for better ways to help students learn, while those outside school walls have critiqued their efforts and persistently called for change. The result is largely a culture of educational fads that come and go, often distracting administrators, teachers, parents, and students from the real task at hand and diverting valuable time and resources.

In recent years, numerous educational trends—from language labs, phonics, and new math to open classrooms and authentic assessment—have been researched, written about, and implemented (sometimes successfully, sometimes not) in schools across the country. While the focus of the trends has varied considerably, one thing has been remarkably consistent: Their advocates often tell educators *what* to do, but they rarely describe *how* to do it.

The current educational trend is to transform traditional school staffs into professional learning communities. A Web search on creating professional learning communities produces several million hits, the vast majority of which define what they are and justify their value and potential for change. What very few of them do, however, is give educators practical, concrete ways to establish them—specific, easy-to-follow steps they can use not only to start a professional learning community but also to sustain it over time. In other words, what is missing are the information and guidance necessary to help educators stick to their own learning path long enough to see if something works before moving on to the next innovation.

That is what this book is about. It is tied to professional learning communities because we believe they hold real promise for improving the learning of both students and educators and for encouraging continued innovation and improvement. The tools and strategies presented in it, however, will work regardless of whether a staff meets the definition of a

true professional learning community or is exploring the potential of other innovations, such as schools within schools, charter schools, or schools of choice.

The book's purpose is to walk education professionals through a straightforward, collaborative process they can use to bring about change instead of dictating what that change should be. That the process costs little and requires no outside experts to implement is, of course, welcome in this time of financial hardship. It is something educators can explore and put into practice inexpensively and on their own.

IMPETUS

To date, much has been written about the purpose, value, attributes, and benefits of professional learning communities. One of the most comprehensive reports is *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* by Ray Bolam, Agnes McMahon, Louise Stoll, Sally Thomas, Mike Wallace, and associates. This multi-university study attempts to address the following questions:

- What are professional learning communities, and how was the concept developed?
- What makes them effective?
- What processes do they use, and how are they developed?
- What other factors are involved in the creation and development process?
- Are the communities sustainable? (Bolam et al., 2005, p. 2.)

The report concludes, in essence, that professional learning communities are groups of educators dedicated to promoting and sustaining the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing student learning. They are characterized by shared values and vision; joint responsibility; reflective professional inquiry; collaboration; and group, as well as individual, learning (p. 2). These are similar to the elements prescribed by Katzenbach and Smith (1993) for effective teams and Senge (1994) for learning organizations.

This book does not attempt to further define, wrestle with the dynamics of, or advocate the establishment of professional learning communities. We gratefully acknowledge the many contributions that other theorists, commentators, and researchers have made, accept the general definition of professional learning communities, and honor their main characteristics.

Instead, as noted above, our aim is to fill a significant gap in the literature by explaining how to bring professional learning communities to life, specifically, how school staffs with limited time, energy, and resources can convert them from theory to action. While there have been some contributions around the edges of this topic by people like Kolb (1984) on experiential education, Senge, et al. (1994) on practical approaches to organizational learning, and Kaagan (2008) on experiential approaches to organization and staff development, the practicalities of how to go about creating a professional learning community are largely untouched. That is our job here.

OUR PRACTICE

Over the past few decades, we have worked with all kinds of groups to help them build their capacity for continuous improvement and effective joint action. Where there were longer-term successes (as opposed to early excitement that died after groups returned to the grind of their daily work), they were due, in large part, to the process used—we constructed basic building blocks for change that were practical, pertinent, and doable; gave participants opportunities to explore and practice using them; helped them evaluate their potential effectiveness and applicability to their work; and provided follow-up strategies to ensure that budding skills were not later forsaken for more comfortable and well-worn patterns of behavior.

After seeing this process work—with educators at all levels, business leaders, farmers, land use specialists, environmentalists, and government employees—we wondered whether it was possible to turn it into a menu of work that professionals could carry out themselves to identify and achieve their goals without the intervention, guidance, and oversight of consultants or coaches. This query persisted for several years as we honed our own skills and thinking. Then, when the economic clouds darkened and education budgets dwindled, we decided the time was ripe to share with others what we had learned—not through traditional research so much as through years of hands-on experience. One could say, with a tinge of irony, that we thought it was time to put ourselves out of a job.

We, therefore, bring to this book the lessons of many years as consultant and coach. One of us is a bit older and grayer than the other. He has been a manager and executive in governmental and nonprofit organizations, and a teacher, management consultant, and writer. The younger of us has been a researcher, writer, and policy consultant with a broad portfolio of clients

from industry, trade associations, nonprofits, and most recently schools and the government agencies that regulate them. Together, we delight in contemporary thinking about organizational development and believe it deserves wider implementation than has been the case so far. Specifically, we want to do our part to chronicle, as best we can, what it takes for the main components of organizational learning to come alive in schools and do it in a way suitable to the times—where resources are severely constrained and the need for well-functioning staffs is profound.

THEORY

The ideas behind the process we propose, while practical, also have a strong grounding in theory. They reflect many of the concepts put forward by Senge et al. (1994) on group effectiveness, culture change, and change management and build upon ideas espoused more recently by DuFour (2004), Sergiovanni (2000), and Lieberman and Miller (2008) on how to adapt those concepts to effect positive change in education.

In general, all of these writers shine a light on what principal actors in public and private institutions need to do together to achieve their mission. Although they each define *mission* somewhat differently, they agree that one of the most important requisites for attaining it is to fully tap the assets of the people who do the work. In education, the term *professional learning community* is used describe this concept; in the private sector it is "learning organization," and in the public sector it is often referred to as "reinventing government." Regardless of the label, the intent is largely the same. In order to capitalize on the full potential of their people, organizations must, at a minimum,

- obtain input and agreement on the direction of the organization by all those involved (generally called a shared vision);
- be clear about whom the organization is supposed to serve and how best to meet their needs;
- develop an ethic of cooperation or teamwork such that the whole exceeds the sum of its parts and diversity is considered an asset rather than a liability;
- model positive behaviors to help close the inevitable gap between espoused values and actions (particularly among leaders);
- attend to people's hearts as well as their heads (exhibiting what has become known as emotional intelligence); and
- discover simple ways of ensuring continuous individual and collective growth and improvement (i.e., crafting sustainable change).

The question that remains is how best to fulfill these requisites. What are the steps organizations need to take to implement and sustain them over time? And how do they apply, in particular, to schools where so many influences remain outside the staff's control?

THE QUANDARY

In appreciation of this quandary, imagine that you are a professional basketball player who has just been asked to play professional soccer as well. Admittedly, you have a high level of athleticism and skill in your own area of expertise that you can bring to bear. You also have seen soccer played and, therefore, can visualize what proficiency looks like. And you appreciate the amount of hard work, effort, and commitment it takes to perform at a professional level. You cannot, however, be expected to understand fully the finer points of soccer (this comes only with considerable experience); know all the positions, plays, and rules; or have the highly developed skills necessary to dribble, pass, and score goals—in other words, to succeed, to get from here (an expert at basketball) to there (an expert also at soccer).

While the analogy may be crude, it is not far off from where many schools are with the development of professional learning communities. Their members are professionals at what they currently do, but they need and deserve time, assistance, and practice to be equally successful as collaborative professional learners. It would be unfair to ask them to start down the path toward developing professional learning communities without, at a minimum, providing a detailed set of directions and a well-elaborated practice regimen. Again, that is what we hope to accomplish with this book—to help educators fill in the blanks, to clarify the picture, and to help them build the skills over time that will give them the capacity and wherewithal to succeed.

APPROACH

In this book, we promote increased staff capacity in a simple, consistent, and step-by-step fashion. We start each chapter with a short exercise to ground participants' learning in their own experience. Next, we provide background information on a few key concepts and invite readers to interpret the concepts themselves, weighing their merits and potential usefulness for the group. Then, we ask readers to (1) perform specified exercises or tasks, (2) debrief their performance, (3) assess possible implications, and (4) identify

potential applications to their own work (i.e., specific takeaways that could support their on-site development as a group of learners and leaders). As a capstone, we ask readers to wrestle with an Outcome Narrative (ON)—a two-page mini-case study based on a common educational dilemma and containing proposed solutions—as a way of encouraging further discussion and exemplifying how professional learning communities might approach their own challenges in more active and efficient ways. This overall approach, we believe, is effective because it allows readers to learn by doing (an inductive approach) rather than by being told what to do (a didactic approach).

We realize there are inherent risks with this strategy. For example, some readers may struggle with the unconventional use of exercises at the beginning of each chapter and will choose to bypass them altogether. While that is understandable, we included them because we believe in the benefits of authentic learning, in particular that experience is the best teacher and an important precursor of idea formation. By putting exercises at the beginning of the chapter, therefore, we give readers a chance to experience the ideas in practice before reading about and evaluating them.

We also know that exercises, in general, make some people uncomfortable. For that reason, we have worked hard to make sure that all of them—those at the beginning of each chapter and those contained within—are strictly professional, related directly to the topic at hand, and unlikely to make anyone feel awkward or uneasy. Their sole purpose is to elaborate what we have written in ways that professional learning community members will find useful and memorable—in other words, to enrich the learning experience, not to distract from it or merely entertain.

Finally, the chapters and exercises are cumulative in nature—that is, they build on the ideas and skills developed in previous chapters. Therefore, while learning community members can choose to read the book in any order or pick and choose from the different elements within a chapter, it will be most beneficial to attack the book from beginning to end—to explore the concepts sequentially, as designed, and to master the skills in one chapter before moving on to the next. As the road maps at the beginning of each section indicate, it should only take professional learning communities about eight or nine months to work through the entire book—a rather small investment, we believe, for a high potential return.

AUDIENCE

There are a number of people who could benefit from reading this book, including

- school and district leaders seeking to spur greater and more effective collaboration among their staff members;
- teacher leaders working cooperatively with administrators to bring learning communities to life;
- citizen leaders and other activists working with small and large groups to effect educational or other types of change; and
- others who want to know, in detail, what is involved in shaping and sustaining learning communities—whether they exist in schools, government agencies, or businesses.

While the aims of these audiences may be quite different, the path to creating and sustaining change is largely the same.

Specifically, we believe this book will appeal to those educators—many of whom we have encountered through our own work—who have a deep and abiding "can do" spirit and attitude. On a daily basis, they overcome daunting obstacles—often with little outside support—to help students learn and to improve the quality and effectiveness of their school or district. They do it not only by being professionals inside their own classrooms but also by reaching out to their colleagues and working collaboratively to bring about the changes necessary for students, and those who serve them, to thrive. These are the people who—even after seeing various innovations produce minimal results—are still willing to give it another shot, to make an investment in themselves and their fellow educators because they believe it is in the best interest of students.

If this description fits you, if you yearn for a deeper understanding of professional learning communities and how they function, if you value self-discipline, if you believe in the power of joint action, and if you have seen for yourself the benefits of effort and persistence, then this book is for you. The challenges will be substantial, but the rewards equally so. Educators who pursue the strategies and use the tools presented herein will begin to actualize the considerable potential "professional learning communities" offer.

ORGANIZATION AND SPECIAL FEATURES

The book is divided into two sections: "Laying the Foundation," which includes Chapters 1 and 2, and "Putting Your New Skills to Work," which includes Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Each section represents a unique but connected wave of capacity building that is essential to developing a highly functioning professional learning community. After each section

description, there is a road map estimating the amount of time learning communities will need to invest to complete the recommended development activities.

Section I: Laying the Foundation

In Chapters 1 and 2, we introduce what we call the ten pillars of productive discussion. They derive from the belief that high quality conversations (1) are seminal for professionals seeking to become a learning community and (2) rather than being part of people's birthright, require skills that must be carefully honed and nurtured. In the first chapter, we focus primarily on the discussion responsibilities of individuals, whereas in the second chapter, we concentrate on the collective responsibilities of the group to enhance its impact through more meaningful and effective communication. These two chapters also include short self-assessments and numerous exercises that enable readers to practice applying the pillars during staff deliberations. At the end of both chapters, readers are challenged with an exemplary ON as a way of advancing their learning, debriefing their work, and assessing the usefulness of the tool for managing current and future challenges.

Section II: Putting Your New Skills to Work

Chapter 3 calls upon readers to shape an identity for their work together as a professional learning community. It begins by making the case that developing an identity—a step that most groups skip—is, in fact, an effective way to help them stay the course and not be distracted by each new trend that comes along or each new leader who takes the helm of the district or school. We describe four tasks necessary for creating an identity, including

1. conducting a simple culture audit to reveal underlying assumptions and behaviors that govern group behavior (in good ways and bad);

2. drawing vision sketches to bring new perspectives and understanding to group aspirations;

3. developing a charter to consciously identify and define desired team leadership attributes as a way of encouraging more effective collaboration; and

4. establishing group ground rules to help clarify and govern the way the learning community performs its day-to-day work.

We then explain the potential value of the four tasks and show readers how to implement them so they can determine their potential benefits themselves.

Chapter 4 makes the case for building professional learning communities by first taking small, manageable steps—micro-moves, if you will—rather than trying to change everything at once. When taken together, these small steps will turn into full-fledged movement, which, in turn, will generate momentum, build enthusiasm, and foster greater long-term commitment to professional learning. In fact, the small steps will eventually overtake governing norms and, thus, start to redefine the group's culture in very different and important ways. Numerous moves—such as how to kick off meetings in a manner that fully engages participants and how to make the physical environment more conducive to group work—are presented, and their implications and impact are explored.

Chapter 5, the last of Section II, examines the dynamics of and rationale for authentic learning and explains why staff development for professional learning communities should adhere closely to its tenets. This discussion is followed by a recommendation that readers consider using a particular form of authentic learning—ONs, which combine the benefits of constructed experiences with the everyday challenges that schools face, such as shaping curriculum, engaging staff, managing people, and keeping student discipline. The chapter concludes with a full exposition of the ideas behind ONs, as well as a detailed description of how staffs can develop and apply them. To further assist readers, we have gathered all the ONs that appear in the chapters, as well as some additional ones educators may find intriguing and useful, into a Reproducible Resource section that comes at the end of the text. Here individual narratives can be easily accessed and used as handouts for discussion.

In addition, we have created other resources to help professional learning communities in their work, including brief introductory exercises, practice exercises, tasks, checklists, and road maps, all of which are contained in the text and can be reproduced as well.

A NEW TOOL

Because ONs are a relatively new tool, particularly in the education arena, we would be remiss if we did not include one in this Preface for your review. We believe ONs are a powerful tool for promoting shared experience as the basis for reflection and self-improvement. We invite readers to read the ON below, and if they like, form a discussion group to work through the ideas presented in it. Specifically, the group might want to use

the debriefing questions as a platform for challenging the desired outcome, reviewing the roster of main actors and their specific roles and responsibilities, and questioning whether what typically happens is reflective of the ways in which your own school or district operates.

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Exemplary Outcome Narrative: Teaching to the Test

Situation

Julie Phelps, a fifth-grade teacher at Crystal Lake Elementary School, is growing increasingly frustrated. At a recent meeting, she and her fellow teachers were informed that the school did not do well on the state's general education assessment and is in jeopardy of not making "Adequate Yearly Progress" for the second year in a row. The School Improvement Team and the principal reviewed the school's assessment results and noted that the primary weakness for fifth graders was in mathematics; therefore, the fifth-grade teachers have been directed to review the school's mathematics results and focus heavily on providing instruction in those areas where their students did not do well.

Julie is a fairly new teacher and understands that her own performance will be evaluated largely on her students' test scores; however, she also knows that (1) she must complete the district's mathematics curriculum, which already has a very ambitious implementation schedule; (2) the district curriculum does not align well with the state's content expectations and assessments; (3) she is not very skilled at interpreting test results and has no experience in applying them; and (4) many of her students have come into her classroom without the foundational skills needed to understand and master the mathematics concepts she is now supposed to teach. She clearly sees the school's and her own need to teach to the test, but she also believes that her students would benefit more from following the district's current curriculum and a rigorous review of basic mathematical concepts. She is frustrated because she doesn't know how to balance the new directive with what she believes is best for her kids.

Roles and Responsibilities

The School Improvement Team—*must not only present test data to teachers and recommend actions but also play a key role in investigating possible solutions. For example, it could use school assessment reports to identify the specific grade-level content expectations where students are struggling, review released test items to determine how the state measures those expectations, and identify instructional strategies that have been proven effective in teaching those mathematics concepts and skills to students. Professional development opportunities could then be provided to help teachers apply those instructional strategies in the classroom.*

The Principal—*must step back and look at the broader picture on behalf of all teachers in the school. If fifth-grade students are not meeting mathematics expectations, it most likely means they have not mastered the necessary skills at earlier grades. Therefore, a coordinated schoolwide effort to improve mathematics performance is needed (not just intervention at*

Grade 5), and the principal is the ideal person to lead that effort. In addition, the principal needs to work closely with teachers to help them navigate trade-offs (instead of leaving it entirely up to individuals). For example, if meeting state requirements conflicts with meeting district requirements (because they are not aligned), the principal needs to explore ways to (1) improve alignment where possible, (2) help teachers prioritize efforts where not possible, and (3) provide guidance on how to balance instruction so that student achievement is not jeopardized (and so that next year English language arts is not the content area where the school needs improvement).

Teachers—need to help each other identify strategies for balancing competing priorities and push back on principals, school improvement teams, and district officials when the multiple outside requests become unmanageable. Because most of their work is done alone in their own classrooms, teachers often do not reach out to each other to address problems and find workable solutions; this, however, is clearly an area where teachers can harness their collective power and wisdom to positively affect decisions and consequent actions.

Desired Outcome

Although there is always some danger in and great resistance to teaching to the test, more frequent and rigorous standardized testing now appears to be an unavoidable way of life. Therefore, schools can either fight it or look for the potential benefits of aligning their standards and expectations with the district's and state's standards and expectations—pulling the best from all three in order to concentrate effort and benefit students.

This effort, however, should not be undertaken by teachers alone, operating as separate islands. It needs to be undertaken collaboratively by teachers, principals, school improvement teams, and district personnel, ideally with input and help from key state officials when needed. The effort also needs to be viewed not as an add-on—we'll squeeze it in when we have extra time—but as the most important work that schools do, deciding what will be taught, how it can best be taught (i.e., not by dictating to teachers but by providing them with access to instructional strategies and professional development programs that will assist them directly with their work), and how improvement will measured.

What Typically Occurs

More often than not, teachers are left alone to determine whether and how they will accomplish something. Someone or some group—the state, the district, the school improvement team, the principal—notices a problem, points out a weakness, or introduces a new regulation, and teachers are told to figure out how to address it in their classroom. There may be a meeting or two to discuss what the problem is or what the new regulation means, but too often, no comprehensive plan emerges for how to address it collectively. In addition, little relevant support is provided to sustain action over time.

Debriefing Questions for Interpreting the Narrative

(Conduct a group discussion to analyze the narrative and test its applicability to your situation.)

1. *What problem or problems are presented in the narrative?*

2. *If there is more than one problem, differentiate among them. Which are more important, which can be addressed relatively easily, which require more thoughtful treatment?*

3. *Is the list of main actors comprehensive, or are there others you think may play consequential roles? If so, who are they?*

4. *To what extent are the roles and responsibilities of the main actors well presented, or are there gaps that should be filled?*

5. *To what extent do you agree with the desired outcome?*

6. *How close is the description of how the situation is typically handled to the way it is handled in your work context?*

7. *What are your recommendations here with regard to how the situation could have been better handled?*

CONCLUSION

As we said at the beginning, we have no intention or desire to persuade readers to form professional learning communities or convince them that they are necessary to enhance the quality of education. A host of more eloquent and persuasive writers have already documented their incontrovertible benefits. We do, however, believe that once you read this text, you will be even more certain of their potential for true educational change because you will have become a seasoned practitioner of the art.

We also do not want to consume your limited time with rhetoric and lofty, but unattainable, ideals. Therefore, we promise to respect you and your budget by providing simple, straightforward strategies that you can implement on your own to build a functioning learning community or make your existing learning community more effective. Enhancing the quality of your interactions (not only with colleagues but also with students, parents, and others) and helping you fulfill your educational mission—whatever it may be—are our main goals.

In sum, we strive to fill a frustrating gap in the current literature about professional learning communities by giving educators a detailed road map that will enable to them to move the concepts from the page to the school building.

Notes: The idea of using ONs was born out of work the authors did for corporate clients. It is adapted from work originally done to support an IBM merger and acquisition and is detailed in the book *Can Two Rights Make a Wrong?* by Sara Moulton Reger (2006).

To generate topics for ONs, the authors met with focus groups of administrators and teachers. One took place in Haslett, Michigan, on December 10, 2008, involving seven teachers from Haslett Public Schools. Another took place in Atlanta, Georgia, on February 2, 2009, involving 23 educational leaders brought together by the Georgia Association of Secondary School Principals. In addition, the authors were engaged to assist administrators and teacher groups involved in establishing small learning communities at Loy Norrix High School in Kalamazoo, Michigan. These engagements took place on December 9, 2008, and April 1, 2009. Both were helpful in identifying topics for ONs and field-testing their usefulness.