Efficacy of professional learning communities and their impact upon student academic outcome as perceived by local school administrators and teachers

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ABSTRACT

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EFFICACY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND THEIR IMPACT UPON STUDENT ACADEMIC OUTCOMES AS PERCEIVED BY LOCAL SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS

Advisor: Dr. Moses C. Norman

Dissertation dated July 2010

There are many problems in current school reform efforts, and more specifically the problem is that clear guidelines have not been provided in regards to the most effective method of school reform. Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been identified as a vehicle for bringing about school reform, but again clear guidelines have not been provided in establishing these communities, nor does the research identify the extent to which PLCs actually affect teachers’ instructional practices. This not only poses a problem for the teachers, but for the students that they are serving. This mixed methods study examined the perceptions of administrators and teachers in a medium sized school district in the state of Georgia, and more specifically at Henry Elementary School. Forty-five administrators and teachers were surveyed using Hord’s School Staff
a Professional Learning Community Questionnaire to determine perceptions about the effectiveness of their PLC, with descriptive statistical analysis. Nine administrators and six teachers were interviewed to obtain specific suggestions about effective PLC practices; open coding and subsequent refinement of coding revealed emerging themes. The study showed that administrators and teachers had positive perceptions about PLCs and felt PLCs did impact instructional practices in the classroom, with a positive effect on student academic outcomes. Administrators and teachers recommended that types of PLC meetings vary to include small group, large group, and voluntary meetings. They also recommended PLC meetings have pre-established agendas and that minutes be shared with other teacher groups. Finally, they recommended that administrators provided training and release time to learn more about how to effectively manage PLCs and for follow-up meetings. This study has implications for positive social change because it provides information for school leaders who wish to begin or are already implementing PLCs. It has further implications for positive social change because the study results provide specific suggestions for improving PLCs in an effort to increase student academic outcomes.
Efficacy of Professional Learning Communities and their Impact upon Student Academic Outcomes as Perceived by Local School Administrators and Teachers

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Clark Atlanta University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Doctor of Education

By

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July 2010
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Current legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) has brought about many school reforms, and as a result teachers have become overwhelmed with new initiatives that quite often infringe upon their instructional and planning time. Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been offered in the literature as an effective way to bring about school reform by giving teachers the opportunity to collaborate, identify goals and obstacles, and formulate a plan for accomplishing those goals or overcoming the obstacles (Manthey, 2008; Noguera, 2004; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). When teachers are able to overcome these obstacles by formulating such a plan, they are on their way to bringing about school reform. This plan may include ways that teachers can change their instructional practices to increase student achievement. Graham (2007) suggests that the classroom teacher can have a significant impact on student learning and achievement and that PLCs respond effectively to teachers’ needs and demonstrate a greater propensity to lend changes in teacher instructional behaviors.

Background

Today’s educators are under a lot of pressure because they must ensure that their students are progressing and achieving at the appropriate level as defined by their state departments. Schools are held accountable when their students do not perform at the
appropriate levels. They are placed on a “Needs Improvement” list and various sanctions are imposed as a result (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Individual teachers are held accountable for test scores in their annual evaluations when students do not perform and may be subject to remediation through professional development plans (DuFour et al., 2006).

Many teachers feel compelled to find additional ways of improving their students’ academic performance. According to Donaldson (2001), there is a correlation between PLCs and increased student achievement. School leaders need clear guidelines for establishing PLCs in order to receive the best results. This study is significant because it gained insight from administrators and teachers who are members of PLCs to ensure that PLCs are organized so that this type of collaborative process is worth the effort and not just another fly by night reform model. More specifically, this study was helpful in finding ways to use PLCs so that they will have an effect on the instruction delivered by teachers and ultimately student achievement.

Imants (2003) defines PLCs as “schools in which interaction among teachers is frequent and teachers’ actions are governed by shared norms focused on the practice and improvement of teaching and learning” (p. 296). Educational reform efforts are linked very closely with PLCs, and Meehan and Cowley (2003) suggested that the current millennium is marked by an interest in reforming schools based on student achievement on standardized tests; at the heart of current reform efforts is the perceived need to reculture or restructure schools for student success (Donaldson, 2001; Eaker, DuFour, & DeFour, 2002). The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) is legislation that questions if
some schools as they currently exist are actually organized for student success and suggests that real educational improvement can only occur with changes in school culture.

Raising student achievement is one of the ultimate goals of PLCs; however, it is difficult to determine one particular reason for higher test scores. Focusing specifically on administrator and teacher perceptions was especially helpful because it will help school leaders to determine whether those individuals who are actual members of the PLCs truly believe that the meetings are beneficial. Additionally, it helped to determine whether teachers actually change their daily instructional practices as a result of participating in PLCs.

Problem Statement

There are many problems in current school reform efforts, and more specifically the problem is that clear guidelines have not been provided in regards to the most effective method of school reform. PLCs have been identified as a vehicle for bringing about school reform, but again clear guidelines have not been provided in establishing these communities, nor does the research identify the extent to which PLCs actually affect teachers’ instructional practices. This not only poses a problem for the teachers, but for the students that they are serving. Additionally, being that the principal must ensure effective teaching practices are being used on a daily basis, this poses a problem for them as well. Current research identifies a positive correlation between PLCs and student achievement (Eaker et al., 2002). However, the research does not identify how the PLCs actually affect teachers’ instructional practices on a daily basis, which is a
crucial link to student academic outcomes. This study contributes to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by identifying administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions of how PLCs actually affect their administrative and instructional practices on a daily basis. This research further validated the current research that PLCs affect student achievement by identifying a link between PLCs and teachers’ daily instructional practice.

Purpose of the Study

This mixed methods study focused on how administrators and teachers perceived the effectiveness of the PLCs in which participate. The study began with a written survey in which administrators and teachers responded to the effectiveness of the learning communities of which they are members. Some of the administrators and teachers were then interviewed to add more details to the study. They were asked about the effective use of their time, and about their feelings in regards to the time spent in PLCs in relation to their student academic outcomes. Additionally, they were asked if the time spent in PLCs affected their administrative or instructional practices. The information gathered in this study provided specifics as to how to improve the quality of PLCs at their current work locations, and offers suggestions for those administrators that are interested in implementing or improving a PLC in their school.

Research Questions

In an effort to identify and describe how administrators and teachers perceive the effectiveness of the PLCs that they are members of, this study focuses on the following research questions:
RQ1. What do administrators and teachers in a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia perceive to be the impact of professional learning communities on instructional practice?

RQ2. How do administrators and teachers in a medium sized school district in Georgia believe professional learning communities can be organized to maximize their effect on instructional practices and student academic outcomes?

RQ3. What is the perceived relationship between supportive conditions and student academic outcomes?

Summary

Clear guidelines for bringing about school reform have not been established. This study identified administrator and teacher perceptions about PLCs and whether they affected administrative or instructional practices which impact student achievement and school reform. Chapter two reviews the literature about PLCs and identifies gaps in the literature.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature review focuses on the characteristics of PLCs and their effect on instructional practices, school climate, and student academic outcomes.

Current Research

*Professional Learning Communities Defined*

DuFour et al. (2006) define PLCs as “collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all” (p. 3). Leo and Cowan (2000) state “a PLC is a school where administrators and teachers continuously seek and share learning to increase their effectives for students and act on what they learn” (p. 2). Henderson (2008) states, a PLC is a “collegial group of administrators and staff who are united in their commitment to student learning” (http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education_update). And still another definition by Imants (2003) states that PLCs are “schools in which interaction among teachers is frequent and teachers’ actions are governed by shared norms focused on the practice and improvement of teaching and learning” (p. 296).

PLCs can be uplifting informal groups that offer practical solutions to the difficulties centered experienced on a daily basis. Garcia (2005) believes it is important to give teachers a chance to talk as practitioners, an idea which is often overlooked. He discusses the sharing of teachers helping each other and identifying trends in student
achievement: “This sharing among colleagues can be very beneficial as teachers realize they are not alone in their daily struggles and they gain new ideas about how to identify and address the needs of students” (p. 28). Additionally, because there are many definitions of PLCs and several broad characteristics, Blankstein (2004) posits, “It is more common to find school professionals who say they are part of a ‘learning community’ than it is to actually find a professional learning community in operation” (p. 51). When examining PLCs, Johnson and Donaldson (2007) state, “On the whole, few schools have reorganized to make the most of the expertise teacher leaders offer” (p. 3).

Benefits of Professional Learning Communities

PLCs are considered in the North American discussion to be the most effective institution for school development with a view to improving student achievement (Rolff, 2003). DuFour (2004) discusses the popularity of PLCs and proposes that the term has been used to describe almost any and every type of educational meeting. He goes on to say that he overuse of the term has almost caused it to lose all meaning. Henderson (2008) states that PLCs have been used “to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education” (http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education_update).

Hord (2004) identified five interrelated dimensions that are characteristic of schools that have successfully adopted a PLC model. She proposed that a school that organized itself as a PLC exhibited (a) supportive and shared leadership, (b) shared
values and vision, (c) collective learning and the application of learning, (d) supportive conditions, and (e) shared practice (p. 7).

PLCs provide a setting for teachers to learn about and stay abreast of current research related to their field of employment. Additionally, PLCs provide the opportunity for teachers to share their success stories with others. While working collaboratively with colleagues within the school setting is important because it is relevant, it is also important to be open to suggestions from others outside of the school setting. Due to the lack of time, many administrators and teachers do not seek outside help on their own. By providing time for personal and professional learning, administrators and teachers in PLCs can learn of research based practices that have been proven successful in other classrooms around the world. According to Joyce (2004), staying connected to the current knowledge base is very important. Most teachers can use most of the research findings to geed effect if they learn about it and if the ways of using the information are demonstrated for them.

While it is important for educators to meet for numerous reasons, the ultimate goal should be to benefit the students and determining ways to promote student achievement. Therefore, it can be argued, almost all meetings in education somewhat fit the description of a PLC. However, the literature provides several qualities that make a PLC unique and distinguishes these meetings from other meetings.

One difference cited in the literature is that the mission of educators is not to simply teach students, but to ensure that they learn (DuFour, DeFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Leo & Cowan, 2000). Educators should not focus on teaching, but instead on
learning. School administrators should encourage teachers to examine best practices that research has proven to be successful and how those practices can be adopted in their particular school.

When a school begins to function as a PLC, teachers have practical strategies with which to respond in a timely manner when some students do not learn. The staff then works together to ensure that struggling students receive the additional time and support that they need. The major difference is that the response is based on intervention rather than remediation (DuFour et al., 2004). PLCs should evaluate their effectiveness on the basis of results. Every team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress (DuFour, 2004). PLCs go beyond merely examining data from standardized tests and reacting to that data (Blankstein, 2004). The focus now becomes creating benchmarks for students, analyzing the data from those benchmarks, and implementing practical interventions for those students who fail to meet minimum criteria for the benchmarks (DuFour et al., 2004). Furthermore, teachers must go beyond inquiry into action. PLCs are action-oriented. In fact, the very reason that teachers work together in teams and engage in collective inquiry is to serve as a catalyst for action (DuFour et al., 2004). All members of the team must recognize the fact that all of the inquiry and collaboration is null and void if they are not willing to commit to act differently. All members must be willing to change their practices, if necessary, in order to implement the strategies that promote success. The educators in a PLC recognize that until they “do differently,” there is little
reason to expect improved results (DuFour et al., 2004). This approach must be the way business is conducted on a day-to-day basis.

**Challenges in Establishing Professional Learning Communities**

While there is an abundance of research that provides positive data in regards to PLCs, administrators are cautioned when beginning PLCs in their own school settings. Administrators are cautioned to avoid losing the meaning and purpose of PLCs which could thereby have negative results on student academic outcomes or no results at all. DuFour et al. (2004) caution school leaders against the thoughtless, haphazard implementation of PLCs. The researchers state that the model is at a critical juncture that could possibly see it fail as many other well intentioned school reform efforts have failed. In order to avoid this failure, it is imperative that school leaders take the time to implement PLCs carefully and tailor them to their own school’s needs. Wood (2007) writes about PLCs, “I am unconvinced that the world need yet another account of a defeated effort to ‘scale up’ school reform” (p. 282). However, the potential gains are too great for the possibility of failure to be used an excuse as viewing the implementation of PLCs as troublesome. The most promising strategy for substantive school improvement is developing the capacity of school personnel to function as a PLC (Eaker et al., 2002).

There are numerous challenges cited in the literature in regards to implementing PLCs. The most common challenge is the lack of time to interact and collaborate (Blankstein, 2004; Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003; DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2006; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).
Another challenge in implementing PLCs relates to a lack of focus. Personal conversations or crises in the system, for example, can monopolize the time for collaboration. DuFour and Burnette (2002) note that this lack of focus during meetings can derail efforts to develop a learning community. Furthermore, teachers may have negative attitudes going into these meetings and use the time merely to complain while offering few suggestions as to how to alleviate the problems discussed. This challenge may also be a deterrent for school leaders and cause them to avoid PLCs altogether. Marzano (2003) recommends preparing for such problems by establishing norms of conduct and behavior ahead of time. PLC members should be given specific ways to resolve conflicts, and if administrators take the time to teach and model these procedures, then the members of the community will be prepared to deal with these situations when and if they should arise.

A similar challenge in establishing PLCs is the fact that many educators, especially veteran educators, prefer to work in isolation rather than in groups where they are required to share their ideas with others. Joyce (2004) writes that many people select teaching precisely because schools are workplaces of high isolation. This isolation tends to allow teachers to become complacent and satisfied with doing things the way they have always done them. Some teachers prefer working alone; they might feel mistrustful of other staff members, want to protect their "territory," or resist what they perceive as interference from outsiders (DuFour & Burnette, 2002).

School administrators should encourage those teachers who are capable of taking on leadership roles to do so. Many researchers recommend that school leaders begin with
a core group of individuals who will give the PLC movement a greater chance for success (Blankstein, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et. al, 2006; Marzano et al., 2005; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). However, it is imperative that not only those teachers that exhibit leadership qualities participate in PLCs, but even those teachers that tend to be followers. All members of the community should be encouraged to participate in the PLC.

School administrators are responsible for addressing the challenges in establishing PLCs, and cannot assume that simply because they present teachers with state standards that all students will have access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Instructional leaders must ensure that all staff members are participating in the PLC once they are created.

*Guidelines for Establishing Professional Learning Communities*

Schmoker (1996) recommends that PLCs meet every 30 days for approximately 30 minutes per meeting. He further suggests that leaders develop and distribute agendas prior to the meetings so that participants know the purpose of the meeting ahead of time and are able to come prepared to participate. It is also recommended that members have specific duties during the meetings, such as recorder and timekeeper. Schmoker also suggests that a memo summarizing what happened during the meeting be distributed to all stakeholders. These recommendations, however, are fairly limited when considering the broad concept of collaboration through PLCs.

Researchers have found that school leaders must provide time for this important collaboration to occur, often citing common planning times or building time into the
school day (Blackenstein, 2004; DuFour et al., 2004; Leo & Cowan, 2000; Marzano, 2003). Although research is positive and encouraging, it does not offer any magic answers. School leaders must have the courage to lead each individual group to develop its own model based on the unique needs of the school (Fullan, 2000). Dooner, Mandzuk, and Clifton (2008) also point out that little is known about how PLCs get started and how they are sustained.

Summary

The literature shows several characteristics of a PLC, and this study focuses on the five which are most commonly found and which are cited by Hord (2004). Hord proposed that a school that organized itself as a PLC exhibited (a) supportive and shared leadership, (b) shared values and vision, (c) collective learning and the application of learning, (d) supportive conditions, and (e) shared practice (p. 7). All research on PLCs was centered on a collaborative culture with shared leadership.

This chapter reviewed the relevant literature related to the topic of PLCs and established characteristics of effective PLCs. Benefits and challenges of PLCs were discussed. Guidelines and the lack thereof were examined in regards to establishing PLCs.

Chapter three identifies the theoretical framework, defines terms related to this study, and looks at the relationship of the variables.
CHAPTER III
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

As described in chapter two, there is a wealth of documentation on the connection between PLCs and school reform. This study sought to identify the specific PLC practices which are most beneficial in promoting school reforms as perceived by local school administrators and teachers. The researcher solicited suggestions from administrators and teachers who are PLC members in an effort to determine which practices are most beneficial and whether they had an impact on the instructional practices of the administrators and teachers. The researcher also sought to determine whether administrators and teachers feel these changed instructional practices had an impact on student academic outcomes.

Research Questions

RQ1. What do administrators and teachers in a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia perceive to be the impact of professional learning communities on instructional practice?

RQ2. How do administrators and teachers in a medium sized school district in Georgia believe professional learning communities can be organized to maximize their effect on instructional practices and student academic outcomes?
RQ3. What is the perceived relationship between supportive conditions and student academic outcomes?

Definition of Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): a system of accountability established through federal legislation, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. The legislation ensures that schools make academic progress each year with 100% of students achieving minimal expectations on standardized tests by the year 2014.

Collaborative culture: a school culture in which staff members work together to provide each student with access to the same essential learning and a culture in which the proficiency of each student is assessed in a way that is timely, authentic, and consistent (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 87).

Collective learning: the engagement of the staff in seeking the knowledge required to improve student achievement. Collective learning is characterized by the faculty collaboratively determining their learning needs through an analysis of available data (Hord, 2004).

Professional learning communities (PLCs): schools in which interaction among teachers is frequent and teachers’ actions are governed by shared norms focused on the practice and improvement of teaching and learning (Imants, 2003, p. 296). Those formal and informal organizational structures that encourage teachers to work together to examine current practice and to improve that practice in the pursuit of a common, shared organizational vision (Eaker et. al., 2002, p. 3). A collegial group of administrators and staff who are united in their commitment to student learning (Henderson, 2008).
Teacher morale: a condition closely related to job satisfaction and school climate, often affecting student achievement (Protheroe, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was drawn upon the work of several researchers who have been studying PLCs in schools for many years and have shown a positive correlation between PLCs and student achievement (DuFour et al., 2004; Eaker et al., 2002; Manthey, 2008; Schmoker, 1996; Strahan, 2003). PLCs can be a vehicle to transform schools from the older industrial-age model of education into a highly functioning collaborative learning organization. This paradigm shift must occur at the school culture level where the leadership must believe in and develop teachers into a functioning PLC (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The dimensions of a PLC are designed to paint a broad picture of the entire school community (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). If all within the school display the dimensions of a PLC, then the school as a whole is operating as a PLC. However, within this school community, PLCs may also function in smaller groups: vertical teams, grade level teams, and cross-grade level teams (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2007). At all levels, a well-functioning school community operating as a PLC will exhibit an unyielding focus on student learning and results (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006). Independent and dependent variables were investigated in this study. The independent variables are the dimensions of PLCs and the dependent variable is student academic outcomes as perceived by local administrators and teachers (Figure 1).
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Professional Learning Communities

- **Dimension 1**: Supportive and shared leadership
- **Dimension 2**: Shared vision and values
- **Dimension 3**: Supportive conditions
- **Dimension 4**: Shared personal practice
- **Dimension 5**: Collective learning and application

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Student Academic Outcomes as Perceived by Local School Administrators and Teachers

Participant Demographics

- Gender
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Years of experience in education
- Years of experience in the Bibb County School System
- Years of experience in a Professional Learning Community (PLC)

*Figure 1. Theoretical Framework*
**The Five Dimensions of PLCs**

**Dimension 1: Supportive and shared leadership.** Hord (1997) explained that supportive and shared leadership occurs when a principal works alongside the school staff in order to share decision making power. This is a transfer of leadership power: the principal is no longer seen as the chief decision maker, rather, the teachers are the ones who hold power in the decisions that are made in the building (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Administrators, in essence, become “leaders of teacher leaders” (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002, p. 22) which goes against the original intent of the industrial-age model of a top-down leadership style. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) compiled a meta-analysis of school leadership that delineated the 21 leadership characteristics that principals must exhibit in order to have the greatest effect on student achievement. Among 21 leadership attributes, that would support the notion of supportive and shared leadership, are the characteristics of input, intellectual stimulation, and involvement in assessment, curriculum, and instruction (Marzano, Waters, & McCulty, 2005). PLCs, therefore, should involve administrators working side by side with teachers to help better instructional practice (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Administrators who practice flexibility help breed teacher leaders. It is through working side by side with teachers that administrators can model effective leadership practices.

**Dimension 2: Shared vision and values.** By definition, a learning organization (or PLC in action) cannot exist without shared vision (Senge, 2006). Shared vision is often misunderstood as limited focus on the future. With the accountability rigors, established by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), many schools have traded shared vision of student learning for adequate yearly progress results on student learning.
Schools that effectively implement PLCs “express a picture of a desired future centered on student learning well beyond test scores and traditional grades” (Huffman & Hipp, 2000, p. 13). Hord (1997) shares that vision should be used as a benchmark in the decision making process about the teaching and learning in the school setting. Effective vision statements are imaginable, desirable, feasible, focused, flexible, and communicable (Kotter, 1996).

Vision is a critical element in developing PLCs. The school-based leaders must hold a vision for how the school will operate as a PLC. What will PLCs look like? How will they communicate progress across grade level teams and across the school as a whole? Before PLCs can be built, the vision must be clear.

If vision paints the picture of the future, then values define how a staff will operate to make shared vision a reality (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Because leadership is a key element in implementing PLCs, it is critical for school leaders to build shared values. Shared values give teams a common language from which to speak, and unify a staff (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Values are a reflection of the school’s culture, and help to build a school community. Knowing and being able to articulate our values is critical to helping others move forward with their own learning.

Before teams of teachers can start to work together on behalf of students, they must have similar beliefs and values. Understanding that all students can learn and that it is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that they do is a common value that should be shared across PLCs.

Dimension 3: Supportive conditions. Supportive conditions are when, where, and how the staff come together to learn (Hord, 1997). There are two types of supportive
conditions needed to build effective PLCs: “the people capacities of those involved and the physical or structural conditions” (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). Boyd (1992) demonstrated that people and physical factors work together interactively and can influence each other. According to Boyd, physical factors include school schedules, resource availability, policies that promote greater teacher independence, effective communication structures, and collaborative structures. Human (or people) factors include positive teacher attitudes toward education, students and change; high levels of student interest in learning, continual collaborative inquiry, teacher involvement in the decision making process, positive, caring student-teacher-administrator relationships and a sense of community in school (Boyd, 1992). Hord (1997) adds that time is also a resource that is not readily available to staff. Allowing teachers the time to interact with one another to augment their own professional practice is paramount in creating supportive conditions (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Principals and school staffs must investigate creative ways for teachers to be able to meet and discuss their students and their own learning. While doing so, they not only create conditions that support teacher professional growth, but ultimately, enhance student academic outcomes.

*Dimension 4: Shared personal practice.* According to Hord (1997), shared personal practice involves teachers working collaboratively to give feedback on instructional practice to their own colleagues. Reviewing each other’s practice is a norm in a PLC. DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) support this notion in stating that, “educators cannot help all students learn at high levels unless they work together collaboratively” (p. 16). This means opening the doors of classrooms that were once closed and inviting others in to see that which has for so long been private.
**Dimension 5: Collective learning and application.** Collective learning and application refers to the “staff’s collective learning and application of the learning that create high intellectual tasks and solutions to address student needs” (Hord, 1997, p. 11). Hipp and Huffman (2003) changed the terminology of collective learning and application to collaboration. Both terms mean the same thing. In a more pragmatic sense, DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) further tease out what collective learning and application looks like in a PLC. Teachers meet regularly to identify outcomes for critical student learning, develop common formative assessment measures to see how students are progressing with their learning, set new goals for student growth with strategies for how to reach those goals, and then plan lessons to improve those goals (DuFour, 2004). Regular team meetings at which the following questions are discussed are recommended by DuFour (2004, p. 15):

1. What is it we want all students to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has mastered the essential learning?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences initial difficulty?
4. How will we deepen the learning for students who have already mastered essential knowledge and skills?

Improving the day-to-day instructional practices in the classroom moves the school improvement process from a whole-school context that is controlled and monitored by an administrator to the classroom level where change is controlled by the classroom teacher. Thus, the professional learning community concept is one of the strongest forms of school improvement, and as Schmoker (2006) purports, “arguably the
best, most agreed-upon means by which to continuously improve instruction and student performance” (p. 106).

PLCs have emerged as a result for the need for school reform. “The demands of modern society are such that America’s public schools must now provide what they have never provided before: a first-rate academic education for nearly all students” (Schlechty, 1997, p. 235). As DuFour and Eaker (1998) propose, “Any individual or organization that is committed to improving public schools should seriously consider how professional learning communities could transform education” (p. xx). Manthey (2008) more recently posits about the collaboration of PLCs, “In fact, such purposeful conversations are viewed as essential to most school reform plans” (p. 15). PLCs can be the much needed vehicle for school reform.

The success of a PLC happens because of the collaboration that occurs among its members. Educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This collaboration forms the “community” of a PLC. The authors also state, “the term community places greater emphasis on relationships, shared ideals, and a strong culture—all factors that are critical to school improvement” (p. 15). The collaborative team is the fundamental building block of a PLC (DuFour et al., 2006).

The practices of PLCs have also been studied in the private sector as researchers attempt to pinpoint the practices of effective businesses (Covey, 1989). These researchers also examined the concept of shared leadership and working together to achieve a common goal. Although schools and private businesses are different in many
ways, effective leadership practices can be transferred from one sector to the other (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).
CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

This mixed methods study examined the perceptions of administrators and teachers about the effectiveness of the PLCs of which they are members by gathering data both qualitatively and quantitatively. This method was selected because the researcher sought to identify perceptions and describe reasons for those perceptions as well as any suggestions for improvement. The research was comprised of a written survey as well as interviews. As Creswell (2003) describes, this research involves “a detailed description of the setting or individuals . . . [and an] analysis of the data for themes or issues” (p. 190). Initially, the researcher planned to conduct a purely quantitative study using only a survey to determine administrator and teacher perceptions. The researcher decided against this method of research because the researcher felt that questioning and probing deeper to determine reasons for the perceptions and suggestions for improvement would be more beneficial to school leaders, thereby impacting the possibility to bring about school reform and increase student academic outcomes.

First, the researcher gathered data quantitatively through a 17-question survey developed by Hord (1996) as a way to identify schools that exhibited the five dimensions of the PLC that she had identified through a review of literature. Survey participants answered the questions by ranking their school’s PLC on a continuum from one to five. The survey, School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire
(SPSLCQ), was distributed to a random sample of approximately 78 administrators and teachers who were employed by a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia. All of the teachers that participated in the survey taught at Henry Elementary School, which is a pseudonym for an actual school in the medium sized school district in the state of Georgia. Henry Elementary School has a total of 364 students in which 98% are African Americans and 2% are Caucasians. The participants were chosen as a sample of convenience because of their availability to the researcher and because they were all PLC members. The survey may be limited because participants were not given the opportunity to provide further explanations in regards to the answers that they provide.

Fifteen participants were then randomly selected from the pool of 45 survey participants that actually completed and returned the survey to be interviewed to add qualitative data to the study. Each of these participants were asked to respond to their feelings about whether the time that they spend in PLCs actually affected student academic outcomes . . . whether it was positively, negatively, or not at all. The participants were also asked to explain if they believed that PLCs affected their instructional practices. Finally, the participants were asked to provide any suggestions they had in regards to the PLCs in which they are members as well as suggestions that would be beneficial to other administrators within the medium sized school district in the state of Georgia.

Population

School administrators and teachers of a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia were surveyed because of their availability to the researcher. There are
44 building administrators in the school district and 34 certified teachers at Henry Elementary School. The researcher included all of the 78 possible administrators and teachers to complete the survey. However, only a total of 45 administrators and teachers completed the consent form and returned the actual survey.

Sampling

The sample for the survey was drawn by including all 78 possible participants. The sample size of 78 gives a confidence level of 95% with a 6.12 confidence interval (Creative Research Systems, 2009). The sample for the interview was stratified into 60% administrators and 40% teachers. By stratifying the population, there were a total of nine administrators and six teachers interviewed. The sample for the interviews was drawn by randomly selecting nine names from the list of 44 administrator survey participants and six names from the 34 teacher participants. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each. All 15 interviewees were asked to interview on the school site, but were given the option of determining an alternate location. The time and date of each interview was scheduled according to the preference of the participant with an understanding that the interview has to be conducted after school hours.

Protection of Human Subjects

Permission from the Deputy Superintendent for Education Operations was given before any research was conducted. Participants that completed the survey were instructed to not include any identifying information and were also informed through a consent form that all of their results would remain anonymous. The interview participants were also informed through a consent form that their participation was
voluntary and the information gained through the interview would not be linked to them. Although, there were no foreseeable risks linked with either the survey or the interview, all participants were given the option of answering only the questions that they felt comfortable answering.

Instrument

The participants completed a 17-question survey (see Appendix A). The instrument, *School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire*, was developed by Hord (1996) as a way to identify schools that exhibited the five dimensions of the PLC that she had identified through a review of the literature. The staff of Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) in South Carolina conducted the statistical analysis of the instrument. The instrument was shown to distinguish between learning communities of varying maturity levels (Meehan, Orletsky, & Sattes, 1997). However, the survey is limited in that the respondents did not have the opportunity to elaborate on their answer choices. Each of the 17 items consisted of three descriptors spaced along a five-point continuum from the least to most desirable implementation of each aspect of the PLC model. Participants read through all three indicators for each of the 17 items and determined the point for which they believed their school currently existed. “This type of response requires more mental processing than a typical Likert-type scale in which participants indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with a statement” (Hord, Meehan, Orletsky, & Sattes, 1999).

A pilot test of the instrument was conducted by the AEL staff in 1996 on a sample of 28 students, parents, and educators who were participating in an AEL summer
experience. Hord et al. (1999) posited that the sample was representative of a typical school community and positive results in the pilot test suggested the applicability of the instrument to a wide range of participants in a school community.

After the pilot test, a field test of the instrument was conducted in 21 schools in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia and involved 690 teachers (Meehan et al., 1997). The sample included six elementary schools, six middle schools, and nine high schools. Schools volunteered to participate in the field test for no external rewards. Four large high schools in the sample also agreed to participate in a concurrent validity and reliability study. Based on their analysis of the descriptive statistics for the instrument, Meehan et al. (1997) suggested that the instrument measured and differentiated school facilities based on their maturity in PLCs.

The interview questions consisted of 10 open-ended questions designed by the researcher (see Appendix B). The questions were designed to encourage the administrators to elaborate on PLCs in their buildings and for teachers to elaborate on the PLCs at Henry Elementary School. Hatch (2002) recommends that interview questions should be open ended so as to capture the perspectives of the participants. The interviews solicited information from the participants about current beliefs of PLCs and how they affected teacher practices and student achievement.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection took place in a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia and more specifically at Henry Elementary School, 1 of 26 elementary schools in a mid-sized urban city of approximately 155, 000 residents. Henry Elementary
School has a total of 364 students in which 98% are African Americans and 2% are Caucasians. Data were collected quantitatively first through a survey and qualitatively next through interviews in order to add more details to the quantitative data. The surveys were color coded to identify those that were completed by administrators from those that are completed by teachers. The surveys that were provided to administrators were green, and the surveys that were provided to teachers were yellow. The survey was completely anonymous, requiring no information that identified the research participants. The survey was voluntary, and a window was set of one week to allow participants adequate time to complete the survey. Surveys were placed in the teachers’ mailboxes and sent to administrators via the district’s inter-mail system. Surveys were accompanied by a cover letter giving the purpose of the study and stating that participation was voluntary and results would be confidential. Participants were asked to return the surveys to a designated location in the teacher workroom or through the district’s inter-mail system.

As a follow up, the researcher interviewed 15 survey participants who agreed to give further information about their opinions and suggestions for improving PLCs. The 15 interviews were conducted over a two-week period to obtain qualitative data. Each interview took approximately one hour to conduct, and took place at the school site unless a different location was requested by the participant. The researcher used the same color coding system for the interviews as the survey. Responses from administrators were recorded on green interview questionnaires, and responses from teachers were recorded on yellow interview questionnaires. The researcher used a tape recorder during each interview so that it could be referred to later, when necessary. The
data were coded to identify recurring themes. Upon completion of the interviews, open coding was used by generating categories of information after examining data obtained during interviews.

Data Analysis

After surveys using Likert-type items were collected from the 45 participants, the researcher used descriptive statistics by entering responses into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program to determine mean, median, mode, and standard deviation. While it is recognized that Likert-type items produce ordinal data, with median being the relevant descriptive statistic, such items are frequently descriptively analyzed with mean and standard deviation (Clason & Dormody, 1994), as was done in this study. The qualitative responses that were gathered during the interviews were coded to identify recurring themes. Open coding was used to generate categories of information after examining data obtained during interviews. Subsequent refinement of coding occurred as the data were read and reread and multiple themes emerged. The researcher used member checking to ensure that the written transcripts were accurate and stated what the interviews intended. The researcher also used another colleague to code the qualitative data and ensure that the same codes were found by an outside researcher. This traditional mixed methods model is advantageous because it is familiar to most researchers and can result in well-validated and substantiated findings (Creswell, 2003).
Summary

This chapter discussed the research design, a mixed methods study. The quantitative data were gathered first through the SPSLCQ survey, developed by Hord (1996). The researcher used descriptive statistics to determine the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation of the survey results. Next, interviews were conducted and the researcher coded data to identify recurring themes. The researcher used various techniques to ensure data quality, such as member checking, peer coding, and an expert panel.
CHAPTER V
DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This section includes a brief introduction to the study including the purpose of the study and a summary of the research methodology. Also included in this section are the research questions which guided the study, survey and interview responses from the data gathered, and an interpretation of the data. This section also includes the researcher’s answers to the research questions based on findings of the study.

The purpose of this study was to focus on how administrators and teachers perceive the effectiveness of the PLCs of which they are members. The study focused on administrators and teachers in a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia, and more specifically Henry Elementary School, 1 of 26 elementary schools in the mid-sized urban city of approximately 155,000 residents. Furthermore, suggestions were sought from these administrators and teachers about how to make PLCs more effective.

The research design was a mixed methods study. Upon approval from Clark Atlanta University’s Educational Leadership Department on December 15, 2009, the researcher began the research process. The researcher first distributed a total of 78 survey participation consent forms to the identified population. A total of 45 consent forms were returned. The researcher then distributed surveys to the administrators and
teachers using Hord's (1996) survey, *School Professional Staff as Learning Communities Questionnaire (SPSLCQ)*. The survey consists of 17 items with three descriptors spaced along a five-point continuum from the least desirable (antithetical practice) to the most desirable (exemplary practice) implementation of each aspect of the PLC model identified by Hord (1996). The survey results were entered into the SPSS software program and analyzed to determine mean, median, mode, and standard deviation.

The researcher then randomly selected and interviewed six teachers at Henry Elementary School and nine administrators in the medium sized school district in Georgia to determine if they could identify specific practices they considered effective practices of PLCs. They were given the opportunity to offer suggestions for improvement. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder and handwritten notes. Table 1 shows the interview schedule. The researcher then transcribed the interviews and asked participants to check the transcriptions for accuracy. Major themes and patterns were identified by reading and reviewing the interview responses multiple times by the researcher. The patterns and themes identified by the researcher were verified by a colleague for accuracy. The patterns and themes were compared and analyzed by the researcher in order to answer the research questions.
Table 1

Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Interview Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday, February 1, 2010</td>
<td>Participant A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday, February 2, 2010</td>
<td>Participant B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, February 3, 2010</td>
<td>Participant C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday, February 4, 2010</td>
<td>Participant D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, February 5, 2010</td>
<td>Participant E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday, February 6, 2010</td>
<td>Participant F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday, February 7, 2010</td>
<td>Participant G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday, February 8, 2010</td>
<td>Participant H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday, February 9, 2010</td>
<td>Participant I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, February 10, 2010</td>
<td>Participant J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday, February 11, 2010</td>
<td>Participant K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday, February 12, 2010</td>
<td>Participant L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday, February 13, 2010</td>
<td>Participant M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday, February 13, 2010</td>
<td>Participant N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday, February 16, 2010</td>
<td>Participant O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Questions and Findings

RQ1. What do administrators and teachers in a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia perceive to be the impact of professional learning communities on instructional practice?
This question was answered by survey and interview data. For the survey, mean, median, mode, and standard deviation were calculated for all 17 items on the administered survey. This section presents those results on Table 2. Each survey question was analyzed to determine general perceptions of teachers concerning the PLCs in the medium sized public school district, and more specifically, at Henry Elementary School. Table 2 presents the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation for each survey item.

Table 2

SPSLCQ Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Number</th>
<th>Item Content</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1A</td>
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<td>4.000</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>.76541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1B</td>
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<td>4.000</td>
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<td>2A</td>
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<td>4.000</td>
<td>5.00</td>
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<td>.62497</td>
</tr>
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<td>4.500</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>.62497</td>
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<td>3D</td>
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<td>3.00</td>
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</table>
Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Number</th>
<th>Item Content</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
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<td>5E</td>
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<td>08</td>
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<td>5.00</td>
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</tr>
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<td>09</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Summary of Survey Results

Overall, the analysis demonstrates fairly homogeneous responses to the survey items. Means and medians are in close proximity to each other for each item, which indicates an absence of outliers and supports the usefulness of the mean as a statistic for this analysis. Only two standard deviations exceed 1.0 (items 4A and 4B) with all remaining items showing standard deviations less than half a point (<0.5).

All items, with the exception of 4A, 4B, 5D, and 5E have a mean of 4.0 or higher, which indicates that administrators and teachers perceive the area of shared personal practice and supportive conditions to be a weakness. For items 1A and 1B, participants
perceive that administrators involves staff members in the decision making process. The means were computed at 4.2222 and 4.0476 respectively. Items 2A, 2B, and 2C indicate that survey participants perceive visions for improvement to be discussed by the staff such that consensus and a shared vision result. Additionally, the survey results show that administrators and teachers perceive visions for improvement to be focused on students, teaching, and learning. Item 2B was rated the highest of all questions on the survey with a mean of 4.5682. Item 2C results show that participants perceive visions for improvement to target quality learning experiences for most or all students. The mean for item 2C was computed at 4.4318. Items 3A, 3B, 3C, 3D, and 3E are related to collective learning and application with a mean of 4.2857 for item 3D. This item was very important to this research study because it directly correlates to research question one and how administrators and teachers perceive the effectiveness of PLCs as related to their instructional practices. The median for item 3D was 4.0000 and the mode was computed at 4.00. The standard deviation for item 3D was .63575.

It should be noted that items 4A, 4B, 5D, and 5E were items that were rated lower than any other items with means of 3.7250, 3.3250, 3.6744, and 3.8889, respectively. The specific wording of the survey questions address staff members observing other classrooms and providing feedback to one another based on their observations, and the fact that trust and openness characterize all staff members through caring, collaborative, and productive relationships.

Interview results indicated that administrators and teachers do believe that PLCs affect their instructional practice. The third and seventh interview questions, Has your
use in PLCs affected your teaching or administrative practices and Do you believe that your participation in PLCs has affected your students' academic achievement, received positive responses from all respondents. However, most of them responded in general terms initially and the researcher had to ask a more specific follow up question to get details of how, specifically, PLCs had affected teaching or administrative practices. For example, interview participant D said, “Participating in the PLC has made me more aware of standard based practices and how focusing on the standard can improve student achievement.” When the researcher asked the interview participant to give specific examples, she then stated:

One activity I used which targeted place value partnered students together.

Each partner had a die and a place value chart. The object was to apply place value skills to form a number higher than your partner. Each student worked independently to form a number by deciding which place to put the number rolled on the die. For example, if a 9 is rolled, the student must decide whether to place it in the ones, tens, hundreds, or thousands place. Of course, the best place to put the high number like 9 was in the thousands place, which they quickly learned. Once each student formed the number, their number was compared and a number sentence written using greater than and less than symbols. Then the students used math journals to describe their learning using pictures, numbers, and words. The math journal showed progress, misconceptions about math, and it showed where students needed additional remediation.
In another interview question, *How do administrators and teachers in your school district share their personal practice*, participant L responded:

During our meetings we often share various strategies with each other. One of my co-workers told me about a research based strategy to help with writing fluency called Writer’s Workshop. After the meeting, I was able to ask my co-worker for more advice about what she did to implement this approach in her classroom and the following day, I gave it a try. It was a really neat lesson because my students felt as though they were authors and I didn’t have to work as hard to get them to put their ideas on paper. My co-worker was even able to come into my room, after I had the opportunity to conduct several lessons, and observe me teaching and then provided constructive feedback on ways that I could improve my lesson. Overall, this communication between the two of us truly benefited to students in my class.

Additionally, in response to the previous question participant E, who is a building administrator, responded:

Each month when we participate in the Superintendent’s Forum, we discuss job embedded professional learning, and what we are doing in our building to build the capacity of others. I have found that this type of professional development has helped our school system to become a community of schools in which, although not exactly the same, many of our administrative practices are along the same lines. I appreciate being able to take the ideas of others and tweak them to fit my school. Quite often, administrators don’t have the
time to just call one another or sit down together to discuss ways of improving the instructional program, but the sessions that we have had thus far have been very beneficial, and I hope that the Superintendent will continue to have this item on her monthly agenda.

RQ2. How do administrators and teachers in a medium sized school district in Georgia believe professional learning communities can be organized to maximize their effect on instructional practices and student academic outcomes?

The researcher analyzed interview data to answer this question. Nine administrators from the school district and six teachers from Henry Elementary School were interviewed over a period of two weeks (see Table 1). Interview transcripts were given to interviewees for verification of accuracy. The data were then coded to look for specific suggestions from administrators and teachers as to how PLCs can be organized or improved. The researcher’s coding was verified by a colleague. Three main themes emerged. First, it was recommended that types of PLCs should be varied to include small, large, and voluntary PLCs. Secondly, teachers recommended and administrators agreed that it is very beneficial to have a pre-established agenda to guide the focus of the meeting, after which notes from the meeting can be taken back to other staff members. Finally, both administrators and teachers agreed that release time be provided in order for meetings to occur.

RQ3. What is the perceived relationship between supportive conditions and student academic outcomes?
The researcher analyzed survey and interview data to answer this question. Of the 45 surveys that were collected, the mean response for survey item 8 was 4.2444 and the standard deviation was calculated at .77329. More than half of the participants believed that supportive conditions had a positive impact on student academic outcomes. Additionally, in response to interview question number 10, participants believe that dimension 3 (supportive conditions) have had a positive impact on student academic outcomes. Participant N said:

When we know that we have the support of our administrators, it makes us work harder because we want do not want to disappoint that person. We know that if there is anything that we need to help our students our administrators will be willing to try and do for us. It makes you work harder knowing that someone has your back. If I had to come to work everyday thinking that I was the only one that was concerned about my students and their progress, I'd quit. I feel like I have to have support from the top before I can make a difference.

Also in response to this question, participant J stated:

Supportive conditions are a must. I once worked at a school where I honestly believe that the principal was there only to get paid every month. She never came by our classrooms to see how we were doing, much less to check on the students. There were times when some of my students asked me who the principal was. We all like to feel as though we can depend on someone else, even if we really don’t need them, and in an elementary school it’s important
for the administrator to be supportive of the teachers to keep them motivated because if they don't then the teachers may not put forth their best effort. However, I have been fortunate for the last five years to have a very supportive principal as well as other support members. We work well as a team and I honestly believe that my students are reaping the benefits and progressing at the rates in which they are because I have the support that I need to do my job. Needless to say, if I had stayed at the school in which the principal was not supportive, I believe that I would have become a teacher that just showed up for work each day and expected a check for babysitting the students in my class.

Finally, participant O, who is a building administrator stated:

I do believe that supportive conditions have a positive impact on student academic outcomes. The students at my school know that I will do anything for them in order to help them be successful. Last year, the students dared me to spend the night on top of the roof if we made AYP. I accepted the challenge and all throughout the year my students kept asking me if I was ready to sleep on the roof. I told them that I was and that I just needed for them to do the very best that they could on the upcoming CRCT. Students would walk away grinning because they were so excited, and I really think that they knew that they had my support. I would make sure to go into as many classrooms as I could during the day and just check on my students, then during afternoon announcements I would mention special activities that
I'd seen throughout the day. I really think that this kept students on their feet and encouraged them to work harder which often times led to increased student performance.

Summary of Interview Results

First, interview participants believe that there should be different kinds of PLCs in place. They spoke specifically about grade level PLCs, whole school PLCs, and PLCs where members volunteer to participate based upon their interest level. Participant C spoke of the benefits of grade level PLCs:

In my particular case, PLC meetings have helped to create unity in my grade level. We began to depend on and trust each other. Eventually, we began planning our lessons and mini assessments together. Each person in the grade level was given a specific task to complete, and now we all depend on each other. We are really more of a team.

Participant G agreed that grade level PLCs were beneficial and "should probably happen more frequently than any other kind of PLC." He went on to state, however, that "the school wide leadership PLC is very beneficial because it forces us to look at the school as a whole and talk about things beyond student achievement, like the culture and climate."

Participants A, B, H, L, and N also agreed that both grade level and school wide PLCs are beneficial.

Secondly, participants believed that there should be a pre-established agenda provided to each participant before the PLC meeting so that participants can come prepared to provide meaningful dialogue and will be better prepared to take notes that can
be shared with other staff members. Participant B stated, "I think the practice of using an agenda for the meeting was beneficial in keeping the focus of the meeting on the topic of discussion. Quite often PLC meeting can turn into a gripe session that lasts longer than was expected."

Several participants also shared that they believe someone should take notes during the meetings to be shared with other staff member in the school. Participant J said:

By giving us a specific job, we get more involved. For example there are some teachers that generally don’t have anything to say, but when they are assigned to be the note taker, for example, they start to ask more questions to make sure that they had the information correct.

Other participants believed that sharing these notes with others in the school was beneficial. Participant M stated:

When we are required to take notes during meetings and share them with others, we are held more accountable. We know that other people will be depending on us so it helps you to stay focused on the agenda and not get sidetracked by other conversations. Also, when we know that our supervisor may read the notes, we are more likely to take the meeting more seriously. I also appreciate being able to read the notes from minutes that I didn’t necessarily attend as it helps to keep me abreast of what’s going on in the building.
The third theme that emerged from the interview data was that it is necessary for administrators to provide time for meetings. Participant L said, "Time is always a factor when just trying to meet the basic needs of a typical school day, so being able to provide a time frame other than our common planning time or after school hours would be beneficial." Participant E suggested that release time be provided for the meetings: [We need] release time to hold the meetings because we don’t have time after school.

Building administrator and interview participant F, repeated these sentiments and added that:

I don’t really think after school meetings are always they best. I wish that I could provide my staff with early release days or late star days for meetings.

We could extend the school day for 5 or 10 minutes which would allow for the restructured time because there are times when all administrators and teachers need to be involved.

Similar sentiments were expressed by thirteen of the fifteen interview participants.

Summary

From the results of the data, the researcher drew several conclusions. Research question 1, *What do administrators and teachers in a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia perceive to be the impact of professional learning communities on instructional practice,*, is answered by concluding that teachers at Henry Elementary School have a positive perception of the PLCs at their school. They perceive that the PLCs have changed their administrative and instructional practices by helping them focus on student needs and more effective teaching practices, as evidenced
in results for survey question 3D. Teachers at Henry Elementary School perceive their administrators to involve staff consistently in making decisions about school issues as evidenced in survey results for item 1A. Results from survey questions 2B and 2C illustrate that administrators and teachers perceive PLCs to help them focus their visions for improvement on students, teaching, and learning and to involve the entire staff in discussing these visions.

Interview results illustrate that teachers believe PLCs to be beneficial. All respondents responded positively when asked how the meetings had affected their teaching practices, and five of the six teachers could cite specific examples of how their teaching methods had changed as a result of the meetings.

Research question 2 is, *How do administrators and teachers in a medium sized school district in Georgia believe professional learning communities can be organized to maximize their effect on instructional practices and student academic outcomes?* Coding interview data revealed that many administrators and teachers believed that organizing different kinds of meetings was beneficial, to include grade level, school wide and voluntary PLCs. Many participants believed that establishing an agenda before the meeting was an advantageous practice and that recording minutes or notes during the meeting was helpful. They also suggested that release time be provided so that teachers could have meetings without asking them to give extra time after school. Overall, results of both survey and interview data show teachers have a positive perception of and beliefs about PLCs in the medium sized school district in Georgia, and more specifically at Henry Elementary School.
This chapter shows that administrators and teachers in a medium sized school district in the state of Georgia and at Henry Elementary School have a positive perception of the PLCs of which they are members and believe them to have affected their administrative and instructional practices. They further believe these changed instructional practices have positively affected student academic outcomes. They believe that PLC participants should be given a pre-established meeting agenda and should take notes during the meetings to share with others. They believe that school leaders should provide time during the school day for teachers to hold PLC meetings. They also believe that different types of PLCs are beneficial, including grade-level, school-wide, and voluntary PLCs. Chapter six identifies recommendations for action and further study identified after gathering the data.
CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to focus on how administrators and teachers perceive the effectiveness of the PLCs of which they are members. The study focused on administrators and teachers in a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia, and more specifically Henry Elementary School, 1 of 26 elementary schools in the mid-sized urban city of approximately 155,000 residents. Furthermore, this section includes a brief summary of the perceptions and beliefs of administrators and teachers as related to PLCs. This section also presents an analysis of the research findings and conclusions, implications for other groups and recommendations of the researcher.

From the results of the data, the researcher drew several conclusions. Research question 1, *What do administrators and teacher in a medium sized public school district in the state of Georgia perceive to be the impact of professional learning communities on instructional practice*, is answered by concluding that teachers at Henry Elementary School have a positive perception of the PLCs at their school, as evidenced and discussed in chapter five. They believe the PLCs have changed their instructional practices by helping them focus on student needs and more effective teaching. Teachers also perceive administrators at Henry Elementary School to consistently involve staff in making decisions about school issues. Survey results illustrate that teachers perceive PLCs help
them focus their visions for improvement on students, teaching, and learning. Teachers also believe PLCs involve the entire staff in discussing these visions, also discussed and evidenced in the previous chapter.

Interview results illustrate that administrators and teachers believe PLCs to be beneficial. All respondents responded positively when asked how the meetings had affected their administrative or teaching practices, and 14 of the 15 interview respondents could site specific examples of how their leadership or teaching style had changed as a result of the meetings. These results verify what previous studies have shown. Honawar (2008) cites a specific example where teaching practices changed as a result of implementing PLCs and student achievement increased. DuFour et al. (2004) discusses the importance of acting as a catalyst for action. The authors state that educators in an effective PLC recognize that until they “do differently,” there is little reason to expect improved results (DuFour et al., 2004). The results of this study validate these findings and show that administrators in a medium sized school district in Georgia and teachers at Henry Elementary School do believe their teaching methods have changed as a result of PLC meetings.

Research question 2 is, How do administrators and teachers in a medium sized school district in Georgia believe professional learning communities can be organized to maximize their effect on instructional practices and student academic outcomes? Coding interview data revealed that many administrators and teacher believed that organizing different kinds of meetings to include grade level, school wide, and voluntary PLCs was beneficial. Many survey participants believed that establishing an agenda before the
meeting was an advantageous practice and that recording minutes or notes during the meetings was helpful. They also suggested that release time be provided so that teachers could have meetings without asking them to give extra time after school. Overall, results of both survey and interview data discussed in the previous chapter show administrators and teacher to have a positive perception of and beliefs about PLCs at Henry Elementary School.

Interpretation of Findings

It is concluded by the researcher that that administrators and teachers in the medium sized school district in Georgia and more specifically at Henry Elementary School, believe that PLCs affect their administrative and instructional practices. They believe that PLCs should be organized in a variety of ways, including grade level and school wide PLCs, as well as PLCs which allow teachers to volunteer on the basis of interest. They believe that agendas should be established prior to meetings so that topics discussed focus on student academic outcomes. They also believe that notes should be taken at each meeting and shared with others so that the PLC participants feel as if they are held accountable. They also believe the practice of sharing notes helps to share ideas and best practices among various PLCs. Finally, administrators and teachers time should be provided for PLCs to meet, specifically suggesting that release time be provided. The survey participants do not believe PLCs are as effective when they must meet after school hours.

Research has shown a positive correlation between PLCs and student academic outcomes. Honawar (2008) cites one specific school, Adia E. Stevenson High School, as
being an example of a school who catapulted from an ordinary good school to an extraordinary nationally recognized Blue Ribbon school as a result of embracing PLCs. Vescio et al. (2008) also discuss how student achievement scores increase over time after implementing PLCs. This study adds to the body of research by showing how, in the perception and beliefs of administrators and teachers involved in PLCs, that PLCs actually affect the way teachers teach on a daily basis, thereby ultimately affecting student academic outcomes. Interview results show that administrators and teachers in a medium sized school district and more specifically at Henry Elementary School feel that PLCs have affected the way they teach on a daily basis and this change has had a positive effect on student academic outcomes. These results further validate the previous cited research.

Implications for Social Change

Due to the added pressures that accompany the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school personnel are constantly looking for ways to increase student academic outcomes. One possible was of positively impacting student academic outcomes in the research is that of reculturing a school to become a PLC (Phillips, 2003). When embarking upon such a collaborative culture, a school leader should ensure that teachers feel the process is a valuable use of their time or that there is teacher “buy-in.”

The study showed that administrators and teachers in teachers in a medium sized school district in Georgia and more specifically at Henry Elementary School felt PLCs to be a valuable use of their time and that the meetings positively affected their teaching practices and student academic outcomes. Research outcomes presented in chapter five
illustrate these beliefs. These results imply that school leaders seeking to implement change can consider PLCs as a vehicle for such change. Previous research also validates these findings: The PLC is one school reculturing effort being proposed as a way to rethink the ways in which schools are organized for teachers’ work (Eaker et al., 2002; Hord, 2004).

Recommendations

Recommendations for Action

After analyzing the data, including survey and interview responses, the researcher has made several recommendations that can be useful for any school leader who seeks to establish PLCs in their own school setting, as well as any leader who seeks to improve PLCs which have already been established.

1. Organize various levels of PLCs within the school to include school wide PLCs, grade level PLCs, and voluntary interested related PLCs.

2. Establish an agenda prior to meeting that will focus on items related to student academic outcomes.

3. Record notes during meetings to be shared with other PLCs and supervisors.

4. Provide release time for PLCs to meet during the school day.

The following recommendations were recommended by the researcher, and can be useful for any school system district leader who seeks to assist building administrators in establishing PLCs or improving the PLCs which are already established.

1. Provide funding for release time for PLCs to meet during the school day.

2. Provide training for school leaders on how to effectively implement PLCs.
3. Provide time for system administrators to meet and discuss the level of implementation of PLCs in their schools.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study contributed to previous research on PLCs by gathering recommendations from administrators and teachers who are PLC members about which PLC practices are most beneficial. The research indicates that guidelines for establishing PLCs are unclear and should be developed differently in each school setting. Each school leader must have the courage to lead her group to develop its own model based on the unique needs of the school (Fullan, 2000). DuFour and Eaker (1998) state, “Educators willing to embrace the concept of the school as a professional learning community will be given ambiguous, oftentimes conflicting advice on how they should proceed” (pp. 15-16). Schmoker (1996) suggests that leaders develop and distribute agendas prior to the meetings so that participants know the purpose of the meeting ahead of time and can come prepared to participate. This study further validated that suggestion; however, it is the recommendation of this researcher that sample agendas be given so that PLC leaders know the kinds of topics that PLCs should discuss in order to focus on student academic outcomes.

Schmoker (1996) also suggests that a memo summarizing what occurred during the meeting be distributed to all stakeholders. Again, this study validated his suggestion; however, the researcher recommends that sample memos or notes be provided so that school leaders understand what should be expected of PLC members. This process would also help the members of the PLCs to better understand expectations.
Finally, Schmoker (1996) recommends that school leaders provide time for teachers to meet. This study again reiterated this recommendation by suggesting that teachers be given release time for PLC meetings. This researcher recommends that sample schedules for all school levels be provided (elementary, middle, or high) so that school leaders better understand how to build schedules to include PLCs.

The implications of this study validate the work of previous researchers. It is the overall recommendation that further study be conducted of schools which have established effective PLCs in order to gather practical guidelines for implementation, specifically giving examples of meeting agendas, notes and school schedules including PLCs. This study indicates that teachers believe these practices to be most beneficial; therefore, it is recommended that further studies be conducted to give school leaders practical suggestions for including these recommendations. DuFour and Eaker (1998) posit, “Concepts are great, but at some point most of us need practical suggestions on applying those concepts to our current situations” (p. 16). By giving them a place to start, it eliminates much of the uneasiness leaders may feel as they embark upon the collaborative culture of a PLC.

Summary

This study examined administrator and teacher perceptions of and beliefs about PLCs in a medium sized school district in Georgia and more specifically at Henry Elementary School as well as suggestions for effective practices of PLCs. Specific suggestions for implementing or improving PLCs were given. All data gathered were from administrators and teachers who are actual PLC members so that the suggestions
may easily be applied in other school situations. Since PLCs are so closely related to increased student academic outcomes as evidenced in the literature, the implications of this study are crucial to school leaders who seek to improve student academic outcomes in their own settings.
# APPENDIX A

## School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire

**Directions:** This questionnaire concerns your perceptions about your school staff as a learning organization. There are no right or wrong responses. Please consider where you believe your school is in its development of each of the five numbered descriptors shown in bold-faced type on the left. Each sub-item has a five-point scale. On each scale, circle the number that best represents the degree to which you feel your school has developed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. School administrators participate democratically with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision making.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Although there are some legal and fiscal decisions required of the principal, school administrators consistently involve the staff in discussing and making decisions about school issues.</td>
<td>Administrators invite advice and counsel from staff and then make decisions themselves.</td>
<td>Administrators never share information with the staff nor provide opportunities to be involved in decision making.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrators involve the entire staff.</td>
<td>Administrators involve a small committee, council, or team of staff.</td>
<td>Administrators do not involve any staff.</td>
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<tr>
<th>2. The staff shares visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and these visions are consistently referenced in the staff’s work.</th>
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<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Visions for improvement are discussed by the entire staff such that consensus and a shared vision result.</td>
<td>Visions for improvement are not thoroughly explored; some staff members agree and others do not.</td>
<td>Visions for improvement held by the staff members are widely divergent.</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visions for improvement are always focused on students, teaching, and learning.</td>
<td>Visions for improvement are sometimes focused on students, teaching, and learning.</td>
<td>Visions for improvement do not target students, teaching, and learning.</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visions for improvement target high-quality learning experiences for all students.</td>
<td>Visions for improvement address quality learning experiences in terms of students’ abilities</td>
<td>Visions for improvement do not include concerns about the quality of learning experiences.</td>
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### Appendix A (continued)

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<tr>
<td>The entire staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.</td>
<td>Subgroups of the staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.</td>
<td>Individuals randomly discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The staff meet regularly and frequently on substantive student-centered educational issues.</td>
<td>The staff meet occasionally on substantive student-centered educational issues.</td>
<td>The staff never meet to consider substantive educational issues.</td>
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<td>3c.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The staff discuss the quality of their teaching and students’ learning.</td>
<td>The staff does not often discuss their instructional practices nor its influence on student learning.</td>
<td>The staff basically discuss non-teaching and non-learning issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The staff, based on their learnings, make and implement plans that address students’ needs, more effective teaching, and more successful student learning.</td>
<td>The staff occasionally act on their learnings and make and implement plans to improve teaching and learning.</td>
<td>The staff do not act on their learnings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The staff debrief and assess the impact of their actions and make revisions.</td>
<td>The staff infrequently assess their actions and seldom make revisions based on the results.</td>
<td>The staff do not assess their work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff members regularly and frequently visit and observe one another’s classroom teaching.</td>
<td>Staff members occasionally visit and observe one another’s teaching.</td>
<td>Staff members never visit their peers’ classrooms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff members provide feedback to one another about teaching and learning based on their classroom observations.</td>
<td>Staff members discuss non-teaching issues after classroom observations.</td>
<td>Staff members do not interact after classroom observations.</td>
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Appendix A (continued)

5. School conditions and capacities support the staff's arrangement as a professional learning organization.

5a.  
Time is arranged and committed for whole staff interactions.  
Time is arranged but frequently the staff fails to meet.  
Staff cannot arrange time for interacting.

5b.  
The size, structure, and arrangements of the school facilitate staff proximity and interaction.  
Considering the size, structure, and arrangements of the school, the staff are working to maximize interaction.  
The staff take no action to manage the facility and personnel for interaction.

5c.  
A variety of processes and procedures are used to encourage staff communication.  
A single communication method exists and is sometimes used to share information.  
Communication devices are not given attention.

5d.  
Trust and openness characterize all of the staff members.  
Some of the staff members are trusting and open.  
Trust and openness do not exist among the staff members.

5e.  
Caring, collaborative, and productive relationships exist among all staff members.  
Caring and collaboration are inconsistently demonstrated among the staff members.  
Staff members are isolated and work alone at their task.

Hord, Shirley M. (1996). School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Available by permission from:

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Austin, TX 78723
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### Additional Questions

6. To what extent do you believe that Dimension 1 (supportive and shared leadership) has had a positive impact upon student academic improvement?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe that Dimension 1 has made a positive impact upon student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 1 has made somewhat of an impact on student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 1 has not made an impact on student achievement.</td>
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7. To what extent do you believe that Dimension 2 (shared vision and values) has had a positive impact upon student academic improvement?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe that Dimension 2 has made a positive impact upon student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 2 has made somewhat of an impact on student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 2 has not made an impact on student achievement.</td>
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8. To what extent do you believe that Dimension 3 (supportive conditions) has had a positive impact upon student academic improvement?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe that Dimension 3 has made a positive impact upon student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 3 has made somewhat of an impact on student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 3 has not made an impact on student achievement.</td>
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9. To what extent do you believe that Dimension 4 (shared personal practice) has had a positive impact upon student academic improvement?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe that Dimension 4 has made a positive impact upon student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 4 has made somewhat of an impact on student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 4 has not made an impact on student achievement.</td>
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Appendix A (continued)

10. To what extent do you believe that Dimension 5 (collective learning and applications) has had a positive impact upon student academic improvement?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe that Dimension 5 has made a positive impact upon student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 5 has made somewhat of an impact on student achievement.</td>
<td>I believe that Dimension 5 has not made an impact on student achievement.</td>
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11. To what extent do you believe that PLCs are helpful in improving the academic success of all students, not just a segment of the population?

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<td>I believe that PLCs are very helpful in improving the academic success of all students.</td>
<td>I believe that PLCs are somewhat helpful in improving the academic success of all students.</td>
<td>I believe that PLCs are not helpful in improving the academic success of all students.</td>
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Appendix A (continued)

Survey Participant Demographics

*Please check the most appropriate response for each question.*

1. Which of the following best describes your job title?
   - Administrator □
   - Teacher □

2. What is your gender?
   - Male □
   - Female □

3. What is your age?
   - 21-25 □
   - 26-30 □
   - 31-35 □
   - 36-40 □
   - 41-45 □
   - 46-50 □
   - 51-55 □
   - 56 or older □

4. What is your ethnicity?
   - African American □
   - Caucasian □
   - Hispanic □
   - Bi-racial/Multi-racial □
   - Native American □
   - Asian-American □
   - Other □

5. How many years of experience do you have in education?
   - 5 or less □
   - 6-10 □
   - 11-15 □
   - 16 -20 □
   - 21-25 □
   - 26 or more □

6. How many years have you been employed by your present school system?
   - 5 or less □
   - 6-10 □
   - 11-15 □
   - 16 -20 □
   - 21-25 □
   - 26 or more □

7. How many years of experience do you have working in a Professional Learning Community (PLC)?
   - 5 or less □
   - 6-10 □
   - 11-15 □
   - 16 -20 □
   - 21-25 □
   - 26 or more □
APPENDIX B

Interview Questions and Participant Responses

1. Describe what you know about professional learning communities (PLCs) and how they compare to traditional faculty meetings.

A. PLCs are very similar to faculty meeting because it’s a time when we get to come together to discuss what we are doing in our classrooms. We also get to talk about things that our system has us doing.

B. PLCs a very common practice in education today. When I attend our monthly principal’s meetings, the professional learning director normally shares information with us, and recently she talked about job-embedded professional learning which I think is the same as PLCs. Basically you are learning more about your profession with a group of other educators.

C. PLCs are used as a means for groups of people to come together and discuss their profession. For example, they are very similar to faculty meetings because that is when we have an opportunity to come together as a whole. There isn’t enough time during the regular day, without getting substitutes, for us to meet. So they (PLCs) normally come together after hours and can be very helpful....especially to new teachers. I think the way in which we currently use PLCs at our school is very similar to a faculty meeting except other staff members such as paraprofessionals attend these meetings but they don’t go to faculty meetings.

D. I thought that they were the same, just a different name. I really don’t know what the major difference is except we focus on one thing at a time in PLCs, but in faculty meetings we could talk about ten or more topics during one meeting.

E. PLCs are much more deeper than traditional faculty meetings because during this time you have an opportunity to really discuss specific topics. PLCs are more organized and formal than a faculty meeting. Generally when these meetings take place there is a specific agenda and you may have to meet more than once or twice to cover the topic that you are studying. Usually, after the faculty meeting is over, you don’t have to come back and talk about the same topics.
Appendix B (continued)

F. PLCs are faculty meetings that go into greater details. The groups are able to focus on a particular topic more than they would be able to in a traditional faculty meeting.

G. Traditional faculty meetings are just long drawn out meetings that principals like to have in order to share information with you. Many times it doesn't even require the entire staff to be present, but we have to sit through it anyway. PLCs are groups of teachers participating in book studies.

H. PLCs are a part of current reform models. They are used in an effort to improve student achievement. The can be very beneficial if teachers are open-minded and everyone does their share of the work. They are similar to traditional faculty meetings because the focus is the same. The focus for all work done in education should be the success of all learners.

I. They are very similar. They are used for school staffs to come together to have dialogue about the educational process.

J. PLCs and traditional faculty meetings are the same thing. PLC is just a better term for faculty meetings. Most of the time when you have a faculty meeting the principal is simply going over important information, but PLCs go much deeper than that.

K. PLCs are commonplace today. They are used to extend classroom practices, whereas faculty meetings are held to review pertinent information with your staff at large. It is my belief that many faculty meetings can normally be eliminated by sending an email.

L. PLCs are a part of professional development for educators. They are used to assist educators in growing in their field. Faculty meetings are just for documentation.

M. Faculty meetings are held so that school staff members can talk about information in regards to the school, make decisions about upcoming events, plan with other grade levels and participate in professional learning activities. PLCs are used for professional learning activities.

N. As far as I understand, PLCs are more organized meetings than traditional faculty meetings. They are both used for principals and teachers to talk about information in regards to their school.

O. Traditional faculty meetings and PLCs are actually quite similar because they are both used to essentially effect student achievement. Everything that
educators do should be about the success of children, and PLCs and faculty meetings are tools for getting the job done.

2. Please share your experience with PLCs.

A. I have been a part of a PLC every since I began teaching. They have been beneficial to me because when I first started teaching, it was helpful to be able to discuss the curriculum with other teachers and we normally didn’t have time to meet during the regular day.

B. I have been in education for 16 years, and even though we haven’t always called them PLCs I think that I have always participated in one….one way or another. Every time you turn around they are giving something a new name, but it’s the same old thing that educators did many years ago.

C. Since I have been a principal I have begun to use PLCs more as a way to get my staff to come together to move our school forward. We have made AYP consecutively for five years, and I believe that it is largely due to our constantly sharing ideas with one another which is what we do when we have book studies and brainstorming sessions on how to improve our school.

D. I haven’t been teaching that long, but I think they are the same as when we have our weekly faculty meetings. They are helpful because that’s really the only time that I get to talk to teachers that aren’t on my grade level or hallway. It is really good when the younger staff members can hear others that are having some of the same problems that we are having.

E. I am use to working in PLCs. I came from another school system that was really ahead of the game, and we used PLCs very frequently to make decision in our school. There were times in which we would have to do some research before we could make a decision, and it really helped when we worked in smaller groups to get this done.

F. I have had the opportunity to work in a number of PLCs during the course of my career. Many times, I am the one that is facilitating the meetings making sure that everyone stays focused during the session.

G. PLCs are used a lot in our school system, and I have experience working in them when attending professional learning courses that are offered through the system.

H. I must say that I have an abundance of experience in PLCs. Ever since I started teaching and moved into a leadership position I’ve been in PLCs because as a
teacher my co-workers and I would work together for the good of our students, and as an administrator I’ve had the opportunity to ensure that teachers work collaboratively together for the good of the school.

I. I have a lot of experience working in PLCs from the five years that I worked as a teacher on special assignment. I was responsible for working with new teachers and monitoring the progress of their portfolios that were to be completed with their assigned mentors. Very often the other teachers on special assignment and I would plan sharing sessions for new teachers. We’ed address any concerns that they might be having and found this to be very beneficial to the entire group.

J. My principal has our staff to participate in vertical team meetings at least once a month, and these meetings are productive because we are able to get a better understanding of what our students should have learned the previous year and what they will be exposed to once they leave our classrooms.

K. I have worked in PLCs for the past five years as an administrator. I have worked with other groups of teachers and administrators before, but I don’t believe that we had the format of what a PLC should be correct. We would, for instance, participate in a book study in which each person was placed in a group or required to work individually to learn new information. Afterwards each person or group would present information to the rest of the group, but this wasn’t really an effective PLC.

L. As a classroom teacher, I participate in PLCs on a regular basis. There are so many times that my principal has our faculty to work in small focus groups to discuss a particular topic. After we have had our discussion and reflected on the material that was presented, we have to share what we learned with the rest of our staff.

M. I haven’t had a lot of experience with PLCs as I’ve only been an administrator for three years, and prior to that I worked in retail for 15 years after teaching for five years. However, from what I have experienced recently PLCs take faculty meetings to a deeper level. During PLC meetings, we have a chance to focus on specific topics to improve our craft.

N. I learned about PLCs during my first year and have been working in them ever since. They are helpful when you want to learn more about a specific topic and for sharing ideas with other people.

O. My experience with PLCs has been interesting. We have been using PLCs in my building for the past two years, and I truly think that our students are
Appendix B (continued)

benefiting from our hard work. There are teachers that have stated that they have grown professionally because of their participation, and I believe that my leadership style has improved as well.

3. Has your use in PLCs affected your teaching or administrative practices?

A. Yes, it has. I think that I am a more reflective individual that is constantly trying to improve what I do, and every time I hear some of the good things that other teachers are doing, it inspires me to work harder.

B. Yes. I am a better administrator because of my participation on PLCs. By participating in PLCs, I have identified a few areas in which I need to improve, and the members of my group help to move me in the right direction.

C. Yes, my use in PLCs has made me be more focused on quality instruction and not as many discipline problems.

D. Participating in the PLC has made me more aware of standard based practices and how focusing on the standard can improve student achievement. One activity I used which targeted place value partnered students together. Each partner had a die and a place value chart. The object was to apply place value skills to form a number higher than your partner. Each student worked independently to form a number by deciding which place to put the number rolled on the die. For example, if a 9 is rolled, the student must decide whether to place it in the ones, tens, hundreds, or thousands place. Of course, the best place to put the high number like 9 was in the thousands place, which they quickly learned. Once each student formed the number, their number was compared and a number sentence written using greater than and less than symbols. Then the students used math journals to describe their learning using pictures, numbers, and words. The math journal showed progress, misconceptions about math, and it showed where students needed additional remediation.

E. Yes. I think that I have grown professionally by being able to share ideas, questions, and concerns with other administrators in our system.

F. Yes, it has. My participation in PLCs has made me a better administrator. I always thinking of ways to improve the quality of instruction in my building, and I think that the best way to achieve that is by improving the quality of my leadership.

G. Yes it has.
Appendix B (continued)

H. Yes. As an administrator, I must constantly think of the students that I work for. Everything that I do is about them, and I try to give my all for them. I put forth my best efforts everyday because that’s what I expect of my teachers and students on a daily basis.

I. Yes, it has.

J. Yes. Before I started participating in the PLC at my school, I thought that I knew everything there was to know about good teaching because I not only had earned my bachelors degree but my parents were both educators who had talked to me and I’d watched through the years. However, there was so much that I didn’t know. By participating in the PLC, I have been able to learn from others that are in my building, and they can relate to the questions and concerns that I might have. This helps me to tweak my teaching style to meet the needs of my students.

K. Somewhat. I think that I would feel more positive about PLCs if they tracked student data or better yet teacher performance and their student academic performance.

L. Yes

M. Yes

N. Yes. By participating in PLCs I do think that my teaching practice has been affected. When we come together and I hear all of the wonderful things that other teachers say they are doing, I tend to go back into my classroom and try some of their ideas for myself.

O. Yes, it has.

4. How do administrators and teachers in your school district share their personal practice?

A. In our district, we get to share our practice with each other every time we have a workshop….especially those that are geared toward each grade level. We don’t normally have a lot of time in our buildings to discuss the current trends in education, but when we attend these meetings after school, it is the perfect time to talk to someone who can relate to what you might be experiencing in your classroom.

B. We have monthly administrator’s meetings and this is really the only time that I feel I have to talk to other administrator’s about what’s going on in my building.
During the meetings we get a chance to share our personal practice and it is very helpful.

C. Administrators get a chance to share their personal practice during our monthly meetings and when the administrator's institute meets for professional development. Teachers have an opportunity to share their personal practice during their collaborative planning time as well as during faculty meetings and professional learning courses.

D. We get a chance to share our personal practice during meetings when there are employees from the system. Even though we share information at our individual schools, I think that we open up a little more when we come together as a system because we have an opportunity to really talk to other people that can relate to what we are experiencing in our buildings.

E. Each month when we participate in the Superintendent's Forum, we discuss job embedded professional learning, and what we are doing in our building to build the capacity of others. I have found that this type of professional development has helped our school system to become a community of schools in which, although, not exactly the same many of our administrative practices are along the same lines. I appreciate being able to take the ideas of others and tweak them to fit my school. Quite often, administrators don't have the time to just call one another or sit down together to discuss ways of improving the instructional program, but the sessions that we have had thus far have been very beneficial, and I hope that the Superintendent will continue to have this item on her monthly agenda.

F. We (administrators) get a chance to share our personal practice with other administrators during our monthly meetings. Generally, we have information that we should have read or collected prior to the meeting and then we have meaningful dialogue about the topic(s) for that meeting.

G. We share information with each other on a regular basis at our school. Every week we are required to meet with our grade level at least twice and during one of the meetings we have to talk about our instructional focus. It's during this time that we get a chance to hear about what our strengths and weaknesses are and share ways to improve our mini assessment results. If I am weak in a particular error then my colleagues offer ideas and vice versa.

H. When we go to our monthly forums, during faculty meetings with our staff, and professional learning courses. Teachers get a chance to talk with each other during grade level meetings and new teachers share information with their mentors often.
Appendix B (continued)

I. As administrators, we share our personal practice during our Superintendent’s forums each month and in our pods. Pods have more chances to get together to share ideas than we do during the meetings.

J. We get a chance to share our personal practice during faculty meetings and workshops.

K. When we get a chance to we share with each other during our principals’ meetings.

L. During our meetings we often share various strategies with each other. One of my co-workers told me about a research based strategy to help with writing fluency called Writer’s Workshop. After the meeting I was able to ask my co-worker for more advice how what she did to implement this approach in her classroom and the following day, I gave it a try. It was a really neat lesson because my students felt as though they were authors and I didn’t have to work as hard to get them to put their ideas on paper. My co-worker was even able to come into my room, after I had the opportunity to conduct several lessons, and observe me teaching and then provided constructive feedback on ways that I could improve my lesson. Overall, this communication between the two of us truly benefited the students in my class.

M. Sometime we have a chance to break up into small groups during our monthly meetings. We also get to share our personal practice during workshops that are held after school hours.

N. During our planning time and after school.

O. Normally during our monthly meetings we get a chance to share our personal practice. Teachers usually have more time to share their personal practice because they have common planning time each day.

5. What do you perceive to be the benefits of PLCs?

A. PLCs are beneficial because we get a chance share ideas with each one another. It’s also good to hear how other teachers might be feeling like you in regards to being overwhelmed. If it’s a safe environment, the PLC meeting can actually go rather deep and personal.

B. I do think that PLCs are beneficial, and the practice of using an agenda for the meeting was beneficial in keeping the focus of the meeting on the topic of
Appendix B (continued)

discussion. Quite often PLC meetings can turn into a gripe session that lasts longer than was expected.

C. In my particular case, PLC meetings have helped to create unity in my grade level. We began to depend on and trust each other. Eventually, we began planning our lessons and mini assessments together. Each person in the grade level was given a specific task to complete, and now we all depend on each other. We are really more of a team.

D. I feel like the stakeholders have a voice in what's being said and done, and by having a voice I am more willing to do what's asked of me.

E. The greatest benefit of PLCs is the collaboration that takes place. As an administrator, I don't have to make many decisions on my own. I am able to share the decision-making process which saves me a lot of time.

F. I believe that the benefits of PLCs include the opportunity for educators to share information with each other without feeling pressured to respond in a particular way.

G. PLCs are beneficial and should probably happen more frequently than any other kind of PLC. However, the school wide leadership PLC is very beneficial because it forces us to look at the school as a whole and talk about things beyond student achievement, like the culture and climate.

H. PLCs have many benefits, but I believe that the greatest one is the impact that they have on a teacher's teaching style. If teachers are open to the ideas that are shared in PLCs, quite often, they can improve their craft which will hopefully cause students to learn more.

I. PLCs are beneficial because they provide an open forum for sharing.

J. In the smaller group sessions, everyone has a chance to have input and you can understand better the task at hand. Whereas, in larger groups you may not always have a chance to have your voice heard.

K. I think that PLCs are useful because teachers can help decide what is best for their students while looking at their student data. Teachers can also build better relationships with their coworkers during the time that they are participating in PLCs.

L. The time that is given to becoming a better teacher or administrator is the greatest benefit of a PLC.
Appendix B (continued)

M. When we are required to take notes during meetings and share them with others, we are held more accountable. We know that other people will be depending on us so it helps you to stay focused on the agenda and not get sidetracked by other conversations. Also, when we know that our supervisor may read the notes, we are more likely to take the meeting more seriously. I also appreciate being able to read the notes from minutes that I didn’t necessarily attend as it helps to keep me abreast of what’s going on in the building.

N. Sometimes small groups of PLCs are beneficial because there are times when too many heads working together can cause a problem, but if the small PLCs work through the kinks and bring a summary of what was discussed then sometimes it’s easier to make decisions.

O. I believe that the greatest benefit of PLCs is the fact that we are able to share ideas with one another.

6. What do you perceive to be the obstacles of PLCs?

A. There is never enough time for us to really discuss what we need to.

B. Time and money are the biggest obstacles. Teachers everywhere complain about not having enough time to plan with one another, and principals complain that they don’t have enough money in their budgets to pay for substitutes, consultants, or the resources required for effective collaboration.

C. Money, time, resources, support from the district office, and willing teachers.

D. We don’t have enough time to meet like we should during the school day, and most people don’t like staying after school so we don’t get a lot accomplished.

E. One of the biggest problems with PLCs is finding enough hours in the day to get everything done. There are so many requirements placed on teachers nowadays that teachers are busy during their planning time just trying to get paperwork completed, and afterhours you rarely get full participation from everyone.

F. I don’t really think after school meetings are always they best. I wish that I could provide my staff with early release days or late star days for meetings. We could extend the school day for 5 or 10 minutes which would allow for the restructured time because there are times when all administrators and teachers need to be involved.
Appendix B (continued)

G. We waste so much time complaining about how "bad" our students are and what their parents aren't doing at home that we aren't really focused on what we should be.

H. Trying to find the money to provide release time for teachers and to pay for materials when necessary.

I. PLCs can be very effective if the people that are participating in them are willing to complete the required reading and share what they have learned with one another.

J. There isn't enough time in the day to do all of this stuff. We give all that we have to our students and then they want us to stay after hours for class.

K. The biggest obstacles of PLCs are money and time. We don't have enough of either one to effectively get the job done.

L. Time is always a factor when just trying to meet the basic needs of a typical school day, so being able to provide a time frame other than our common planning time or after school hours would be beneficial.

M. From what I have experienced, time is the biggest obstacle.

N. Having enough time to meet during our planning period because our principal is always giving us something else to work on during that time.

O. There isn't enough time for proper planning and I don't have enough money in my Title I budget to cover substitutes for everyone.

7. Do you believe that your participation in PLCs has affected your students' academic achievement?

A. Yes

B. Yes

C. Yes

D. Well, sort of. I think that my students would have been successful even if I hadn't participated in the PLC at my school. Maybe if I had some data that I was tracking I could tell.
E. Yes. Several of the teachers in my building have stated that they believe that their students are performing better on their weekly mini assessments because of the fact that teachers are working with one another in their weak areas to provide creative ways of presenting instructional material. I think that if this were not happening, the areas in which teachers struggle would not even be taught at all.

F. Yes

G. Yes

H. Yes

I. Yes, but I think that the teachers on my staff could probably answer this question better. While I can answer it based on test results, I think that the teachers that are working with students everyday can tell you about the progress that they have seen in their students.

J. Yes, I do. Before I began working with other teachers I think that I was complacent with my teaching style. However, I have seen how some of our students respond to other teachers and I wanted some of that excitement for my students as well. Therefore, I have tried to be more flexible and in turn this is affecting my students’ performance.

K. Yes

L. Yes

M. Yes

N. Yes

O. Yes. I think that our school can say that we have seen improvements since we have been working together. We aren’t afraid to offer suggestions to one another and I have several teachers that have teamed up with a buddy teacher to observe each other and offer feedback on what was taught and how it was perceived by students. This practice has really helped. Now everyone isn’t open to this yet, but I think that we are headed in the right direction, and once we get some teachers to see that it’s not about them, but rather the success of our students the better off we’ll be.
Appendix B (continued)

8. In your opinion, what is the school administrator’s role in PLCs?

A. They are supposed to make sure that we have enough time to meet and purchase all of the materials that we need.

B. We have to provide the opportunities for our staffs to come together as well as the resources needed, and supervision of students when necessary. Also, depending on the topic administrators may have to serve as a facilitator of the group.

C. Administrators are responsible for ensuring that PLCs meet when they are suppose to and making sure that they are productive.

D. They have to make sure that we have time to meet, and provide the topics that we are suppose to talk about.

E. Administrators have to ensure that the environment is conducive for learning, provide time for teachers to meet, refreshments if sessions are after school, and resources.

F. We have to make sure that teachers are knowledgeable about how PLCs should be conducted, and also that they are meeting as required. Administrators are also required to make sure that the meetings remain productive.

G. Our principal makes sure that we are on task during our meetings. She assigns specific roles for us when we are meeting so that everyone knows that the meeting is important. Additionally, our principal makes it possible for us to meet during the day whenever she can.

H. Administrators are responsible for facilitating meetings and providing the materials necessary for each participant. We also have to make sure that the meetings are productive and provide make-up work for teachers that are absent if SDU credits are being earned.

I. The administrator’s role in PLCs is to act as a facilitator of the meeting while making sure that everyone is participating. We also have to make sure that substitutes are secured when necessary, provide the necessary materials, and plan dates for the staff to meet.

J. I think that administrator’s have to make sure that we discuss all of the topics that are sent from the board office and document it for their records.
Appendix B (continued)

K. Administrators have to survey their staff members about courses or topics that they are interested in discussing, and then for planning the agenda for the course. We also have to ensure that all participants are on task, the necessary time is set aside for collaborating, and purchasing any required materials.

L. They have to make sure that we are doing what they want us to do. They have requirements from the board and they have to make sure that they complete them in a timely manner.

M. To provide coverage for classes, resources, and time for teachers to meet.

N. Principals must set aside special days in our year for us to get together to look at data and plan our instruction. They also have to make sure that we have substitutes in our classes.

O. As an administrator, I think that we have to oversee PLCs when they are functioning and reshape them when they are not in line with the vision for the school.

9. Do you have any suggestions for improving the PLC that you are currently a member of or recommendations for administrators that are seeking to implement PLCs within their school?

A. No

B. Not really, but I do think that when we have to participate in book studies during our monthly meetings, we should be given an opportunity to offer suggestions for the topic to be focused on.

C. No

D. No

E. I think that if there is an administrator that wants to implement PLCs in their building, they should go and visit some other schools where the PLC are functioning properly and possibly review current literature related to the topic. I also think that it would be beneficial for other administrators to have small focus groups for some topics because I have found that we can chase a lot of rabbits when there is a large group, and then I spend more time putting out fires than we do actually accomplishing our goals.
Appendix B (continued)

F. They should make sure that they send the agendas out prior to the meetings because then the participants are prepared for the discussion and understand they are responsible for completing their assignments prior to the meeting.

G. I think that principals should find a better time for their staff to meet rather than after school. Everything that we do seems to be after school. We have families that we have to go home and take care of, and some administrators allow their lives to revolve around their school. Even those people that don’t have families want to go home and relax every now and then.

H. No

I. No

J. I don’t think that we should be forced to be in a PLC if we don’t want to. Some of us are in school already, and that’s more than enough in addition to working a full time job. I also think that we should be able to meet during the school day. There could be two different sessions so that we could use one set of substitutes for the whole day.

K. No

L. No

M. No

N. I think that sometimes we do too much other stuff and not enough time is spent teaching our students. I wish that we didn’t have to always have some book to read or a lesson to model for someone else. I just wish that I could focus on making myself a better teacher and not have to sit through what may be intended for someone else. If my principal wants a certain teacher they should just go directly to them instead of dragging everyone else in.

O. I think that any administrator that wants to implement a PLC in their school should take it slow. They might want to begin with a small group first to get an idea of how things will work or to even set the ground rules before making it school wide because if they make it school wide and it flops then not only have they lost the respect of their employees, but it will be very difficult to attempt implementing another PLC school wide.

10. To what extent do you believe that supportive conditions have had a positive impact upon student academic improvement?
Appendix B (continued)

A. I believe that by knowing that my principal is interested improving the quality of instruction at our school, and demonstrating that she’ll go above and beyond for us makes me work just a little bit harder.

B. I think that when your employees know that they are supported by the administration they are more apt to putting their best foot forward. Quite often you’ll find people that will give you 110% as long as they know that you’ve got their back. I try my best to support the people that work for me because I need them to do a job, and if I don’t support them as their administrator....who will?

C. When teachers feel supported, they feel safe and comfortable, and when they feel safe and comfortable they are eager to go to work everyday, and when teachers are eager to go to work, students are eager to learn. It’s just a continuous cycle that supports our teaching and learning process at our school.

D. Yes, I do think that having supportive conditions has a positive impact on our students.

E. Without supportive conditions we don’t feel appreciated and tend to slack off from our responsibilities. And this isn’t just in education. Even in your marriage, for example, your spouse wants to feel supported and appreciated, but if they don’t you can begin to have problems. This is true in education as well. Administrators, teachers, and students all want to fell supported, but if they don’t then they won’t put forth their best effort and this will certainly have a negative impact on the student outcomes. But if they do feel supported there is no limit to the dedication that you have from them in regards to their students. They will be determined to ensure that what they do supports student achievement which can only result in improvements.

F. I think that supportive conditions at our school have made a huge impact upon student achievement. The majority of the staff works harder because they know that they have my support and I believe that I work harder because I know that I have the support of the central office.

G. I think that the student achievement is what it is because of hard working teachers, not because the principal supported the teachers. A hard working teacher is going to do their job anyway....regardless or not if someone support them.

H. Supportive conditions have a made a positive impact on student achievement.
Appendix B (continued)

I. When I was a teacher and felt that I had the support of my administrator, I think that my students benefited because I was excited about working each day. I try to provide that same level of support for the teachers in my building, and I believe that it has positively impacted the students achievement at our school.

J. Supportive conditions are a must. I once worked at a school where I honestly believe that the principal was there only to get paid every month. She never came by our classrooms to see how we were doing...much less to check on the students. There were times when some of my students asked me who the principal was. We all like to feel as though we can depend on someone else, even if we really don’t need them, and in an elementary school it’s important for the administrator to be supportive of the teachers to keep them motivated because if they don’t then the teachers may not put forth their best effort. However, I have been fortunate for the last five years to have a very supportive principal as well as other support members. We work well as a team and I honestly believe that my students are reaping the benefits and progressing at the rates in which they are because I have the support that I need to do my job. Needless to say, if I had stayed at the school in which the principal was not supportive, I believe that I would have become a teacher that just showed up for work each day and expected a check for babysitting the students in my class.

K. Supportive conditions have made a positive impact on student achievement, and our test scores can support this. I believe that the board office has been very supportive of our school, and I in turn have been supportive of my staff. The teachers also support me in the decisions that I make in the best interest of our school, and I believe that the support that everyone has does have a positive impact on our students.

L. I think that the students in our school are reaping the benefits of the hard work of their teachers which is driven by the hard work of our administrator and all of the support that he gives us to get our jobs done.

M. Supportive conditions have made a huge impact on student achievement in my building.

N. When we know that we have the support of our administrators, it makes us work harder because we want do not want to disappoint that person. We know that if there is anything that we need to help our students our administrators will be willing to try and do for us. It makes you work harder knowing that someone has your back. If I had to come to work everyday thinking that I was the only one that was concerned about my students and their progress, I’d quit. I feel like I have to have support from the top before I can make a difference.
O. I do believe that supportive conditions have a positive impact on student academic outcomes. The students at my school know that I will do anything for them in order to help them be successful. Last year, the students dared me to spend the night on top of the roof if we made AYP. I accepted the challenge and all throughout the year my students kept asking me if I was ready to sleep on the roof. I told them that I was and that I just needed for them to do the very best that they could on the upcoming CRCT. Students would walk away grinning because they were so excited, and I really think that they knew that they had my support. I would make sure to go into as many classrooms as I could during the day and just check on my students, then during afternoon announcements I would mention special activities that I’d seen throughout the day. I really think that this kept students on their feet and encouraged them to work harder which often times led to increased student performance.
APPENDIX C

Survey Participation Consent Form

Please complete the lower portion of this form and return it in the WHITE envelope that has been provided.

January 18, 2010

Greetings!

My name is Shandra Yarbrough and I am currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at Clark Atlanta University. The Deputy Superintendent for Education Operations has granted me permission to survey building administrators in your school district and teachers at Henry Elementary School to examine the efficacy of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). In this regard, I am conducting a study entitled Efficacy of Professional Learning Communities and Their Impact Upon Student Academic Outcomes as Perceived by Local School Administrators and Teachers.

This mixed-methods study will focus on how administrators and teachers perceive the effectiveness of the PLCs in which they participate. The study will begin with a written survey in which administrators and teachers will respond to the perceived effectiveness of the learning communities of which they are members. Nine (9) administrators and six (6) teachers will then be randomly selected to participate in an interview to add more details to the study.

I am asking that you participate by completing the attached survey and returning it to me, via the district’s inter-mail system (PONY), in the enclosed MANILLA envelope no later than Friday, January 29, 2010. Participation in this survey is voluntary, and I am asking that you do not include any information that might identify you as all results will be anonymous.

If there are any questions or concerns, please contact me via email: syarbrough.williams@bibb.k12.ga.us

Thank you for your assistance.

Shandra Yarbrough

I, _________________________________, agree to participate in the survey being conducted by Shandra Yarbrough, and understand that the results from this survey will be anonymous.

I, _________________________________, would not like to participate in the survey being conducted by Shandra Yarbrough at this time.

Signature ____________________________ Date ______________
APPENDIX D

Survey Participants Demographics Summary

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APPENDIX E

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To: Shandra Yarbrough (Licensee)
205 Spring Hill Court
Macon, GA 31210-1680

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Information Associate
SEDL
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Austin, TX 78723

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Date: December 4, 2009

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Thank you, again, for your interest in SEDL's *School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire*. If you have questions about SEDL's License Agreement, please contact me at (800) 476-6861, ext. 6548 or 512-391-6548, or by e-mail at nancy.reynolds@sedl.org.

Sincerely,

Nancy Reynolds for SEDL

Date signed

Agreed and accepted:

Signature: [Signature]

Date signed

Printed Name: Shandra Yarbrough
REFERENCES


Boyd, V. (1992). *School context: Bridge to barrier or change?* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.


