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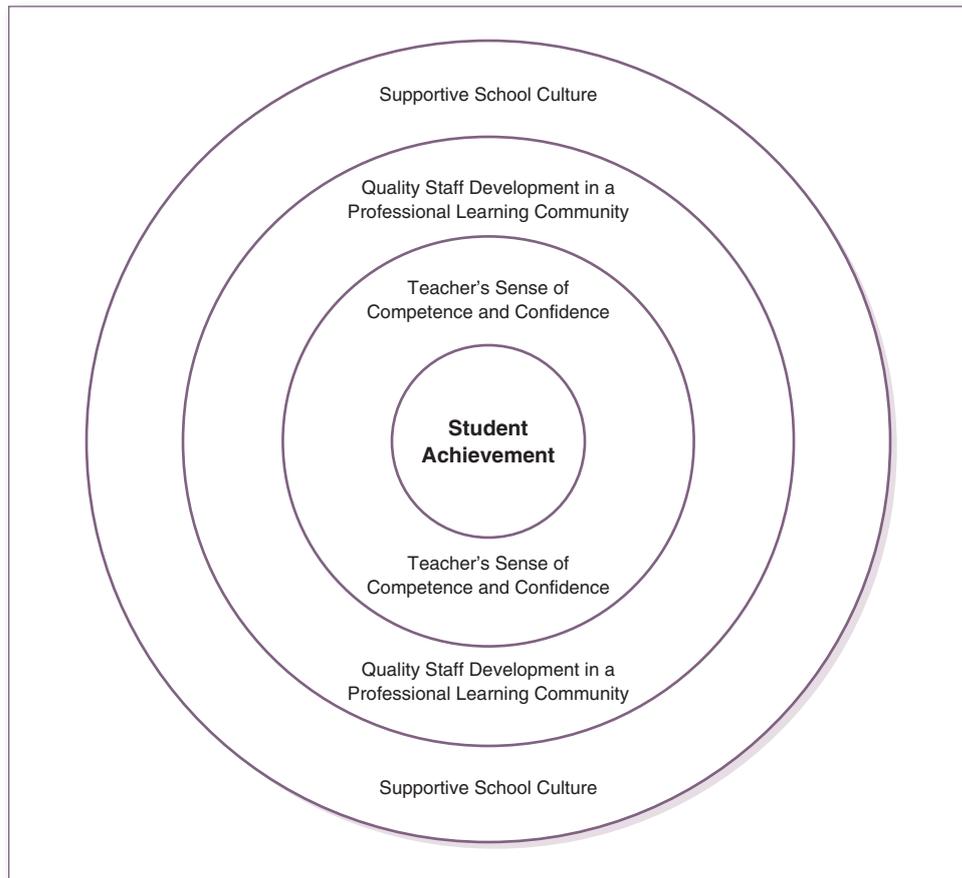
School Capacity and Student Achievement

Educational policies and programs for professional development should support school capacity for change and improvement, according to Newmann, King, and Youngs (2000). School improvement and capacity for change are dependent on multiple factors:

- Teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions, thus quality staff development
- Professional learning communities, thus collaborative learning
- Program coherence, thus consensus and focus
- Technical resources, thus materials and training
- Principal leadership, thus support and encouragement

All of these elements are necessary for improving the quality of instruction, curriculum, and assessment in order to increase student achievement. Principals and teacher leaders who want to improve conditions that build school capacity must focus on these components, evaluating evidence of them in their schools as they develop learning organizations that can manage and sustain change (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Influences on school capacity and student achievement



■ ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR BUILDING SCHOOL CAPACITY FOR CHANGE

Student Achievement. At the heart of school improvement is student achievement. Everything we do in schools should be focused on increasing students' knowledge and skills.

Teachers' Sense of Competence and Confidence. Teachers who are not valued and respected often do not feel comfortable or empowered enough to make the changes necessary to improve student learning. Those teachers who feel that they are incapable or lack the skills to differentiate instruction need continual support, encouragement, and reinforcement of their efforts so that they have the will and skill to succeed in differentiating instruction.

Quality Staff Development in a Professional Learning Community and a Supportive School Culture. A teacher's sense of efficacy (Guskey, 1994) is what a teacher believes he or she can do to effect student learning. Thus the same safe, supportive climate that we want in the classroom for students must also be created for the adult learners in the school community. People who enjoy their work and find their workplace pleasant, nonthreatening, yet challenging usually feel more confident than those who don't.

They are able to take the risks involved in order to learn and develop new skills and strategies.

“Emotional hijacking” (Goleman, 1995), which causes people to react emotionally to stress, threat, or fatigue, makes them feel helpless and unable to think rationally. That is not what we want for learners, whether they are age 5 or age 45. Adults in a state of relaxed alertness are more confident and more open to new learning and change, just as their students are. Treating adult learners with the same respect that we want for our students only models good practice. People who feel valued and are in a state of relaxed alertness are more likely to take risks and venture into new and challenging areas of instruction and assessment.

POWERFUL STAFF DEVELOPMENT SUPPORTS CHANGE AND INNOVATION ■

Professional Development is about change—change in what you know and believe about teaching and learning and in what you can do in the classroom. Part of bringing about real change is creating a context or climate in which change is less difficult.

—David Collins (1998)

In *A New Vision for Staff Development*, Sparks and Hirsh (1997) point out that powerful staff development supports innovation, experimentation, and collegial sharing. Staff development has real impact when it engages people in daily planning, critiquing, and problem solving, and when it provides ongoing practice-based assistance. Powerful staff development deepens the content knowledge, instructional skills, and assessment skills that help teachers regularly monitor student learning.

Powerful professional development is also *results-driven* staff development, connected to what students need to know and be able to do. It provides educators with the knowledge and skills they need to ensure student success related to targeted standards, competencies, and expectations.

The content of staff development sessions should be focused on the body of knowledge and skills necessary to produce greater success for students, recognizing that adults need to learn in ways that are comfortable and engaging for them. The school and its organizational structures should support adult learning within the context of the professional learning community.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ■

The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities.

—Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998)

Professional learning communities change the climate and purpose of professional dialogue between and among teachers. Dialogue differs from discussion because dialogue increases the depth of understanding of ideas and concepts.

These are the purposes of a professional learning community (Murphy & Lick, 2001):

- Developing a deeper understanding of academic content
- Supporting the implementation of curricula and instructional initiatives
- Identifying a focus for the school's instructional process
- Studying research on teaching and learning
- Monitoring the impact of instructional initiatives on students
- Examining student work

Administrators who want to cultivate professional learning communities within their schools can use the following checklist (adapted from Collins, 1998) to identify activities that cultivate and sustain a professional learning community.

Creating and Sustaining a Professional Learning Community

- ___ Do teachers talk regularly about teaching and learning?
- ___ Do teachers have opportunities to observe each other teach?
- ___ Do teachers examine student work and solve problems collaboratively about the next steps in the learning process?
- ___ Are there opportunities for book studies or action research facilitated by teachers or administrators?
- ___ Do teachers have shared planning time to develop lessons and share strategies during the school day?
- ___ Do teachers have time to examine data to determine how students are progressing?
- ___ Are there opportunities to play as well as work together?
- ___ Do people give advice as well as ask for suggestions?
- ___ Do teachers share and support one another's efforts?
- ___ Are training and developing new skills and knowledge collegial experiences in which teachers can share a common language, implement together, and coach one another?
- ___ Do teachers participate in setting the school's focus for differentiation?
- ___ Is collective decision making part of the process of designing staff development?

In the words of Peter Senge (1990),

We can then build . . . organizations where people continuously expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (p. 3)

School Culture

The culture of an enterprise plays the dominant role in exemplary performance.

—Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson (1999)

The culture of the school facilitates or inhibits its evolution into a professional learning organization. Deal and Peterson (1999) suggest that culture includes a shared mission and purpose within which people work, and it includes the norms, values, and beliefs that make up the fabric of the school.

The school's mission and purpose come from the values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms embraced by its faculty. *Values* are what the organization stands for, that which gives the work a deeper meaning. *Beliefs* are what we understand and believe as truth. *Assumptions* are created through dialogue that facilitates shared values and beliefs. *Norms* are those stated or unstated group behaviors that all members expect to be upheld in their interactions.

These are examples of positive norms:

- Everyone's ideas are respected.
- Everyone has a voice and an opinion.
- Everyone is positive in talking about the school and students.
- Everyone is entitled to support and help.

These are examples of negative norms:

- Put down rather than put up.
- Pretend to be involved.
- Criticism and complaints are okay.
- Negative leaders are powerful.

Principals and staff developers must take every opportunity to create dialogue that will lead teachers toward a more positive school culture in which shared vision and mission can prevail and influence actions.

LEARNING AND IMPLEMENTATION ■

Joyce and Showers (1995) reported that the levels of transfer increase based on the type of learning experiences and training in which people are involved. Being exposed only to theory and modeling results in very

little actual application in the classroom, whereas those teachers who have opportunities to practice in risk-free conditions increase their skill level considerably. Further, teachers who are in collaborative situations with a coaching component that includes study teams and opportunities to problem-solve with supportive colleagues have an 80%–90% better chance of applying the innovation in their classroom repertoire, thus the power of job-embedded learning.

Figure 2 displays the percentages of awareness, skill attainment, and application that can be expected from the following components of staff development training:

- Presentation of theory
- Modeling of the innovation
- Practice and low-risk feedback
- Coaching, study teams, and peer interaction

Note that in-service training, workshops, and how-to-do-its are all useful and important in the change process, as is the opportunity to practice in safe environments, but most profound of all is the necessity for ongoing dialogue with coaches, peers, and study teams. Sharing, problem solving, and collaborative supports are essential to facilitating implementation and transfer into the classroom and into a teacher's repertoire.

Figure 2 Training, implementation, and transfer to teacher's repertoire

Components of Training	Awareness Plus Concept Understanding	Skill Attainment	Application/Problem Solving
Presentation of theory	85%	15%	5%–10%
Modeling of the innovation	85%	15%	5%–10%
Practice and low-risk feedback	85%	80%	10%–15%
Coaching, study teams, and peer interaction	90%	90%	80%–90%

SOURCE: Adapted from Joyce & Showers (1995).