

## **Study Groups Strengthen the Learning Community**

by Barbara Bray

Column for OnCUE – February 2001- Volume22 – No. 2

An environment where teachers, administrators, students, and parents participate in collective inquiry and reflection provides opportunities for all to solve problems, address student needs, and learn from each other. Teaching is more complex than it used to be with standards, testing, and technology. Teachers need a supportive environment that allows for time to network, share, reflect, and learn. Yet, it is not a simple matter to change from a traditional organization to a school where everyone has a say in classroom practice. Shared decision making is a factor in curriculum reform that will transform teaching in some schools. To have this happen, time is provided for teachers to work together in planning instruction, observing each other's classroom, and sharing feedback. (Darling-Hammond, 1996). This and other types of study groups are what make a learning community that will benefit all students.

### **Five Components of Successful Professional Learning Communities**

The five aspects of successful professional learning communities compiled by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory include (1) supportive and shared leadership; (2) collective creativity; (3) shared values and vision; (4) supportive conditions; and (5) shared teaching and learning practices. (SEDL, 1997). This online resource is a collection of articles that state without a supportive environment, teachers are not as committed to the school's improvement efforts. A principal who has a collegial relationship with teachers and shares decision-making with the staff will find teachers more willing to actively participate in professional development. Teachers that have opportunities to collaborate and contribute to a shared vision will own the vision and want to see it become a reality. Schools were designed around structured periods of time that leaves little time for informal discussions. Time is one of the main concerns for teachers. Learning new teaching strategies does not happen only after school in a one or two hour workshop. Learning happens all day. An effective professional learning

community is one where there is time for sharing, teaming, coaching and learning from each other and from their students at any time.

### **Technology Use**

Technology adds another dimension to the learning community. Technology use in schools is not going away. There are teachers that are reluctant to use technology even for personal use but the majority wants to learn and use technology. No other profession asks so much of their employees. Teachers not only are supposed to be experts in a curricular subject or grade level; they need to be technology experts. On top of that, there are some teachers who find out every year they are teaching a new subject or different grade level. Just imagine learning a new curriculum and technology, learning how to teach it to your students, and then creating a lesson that integrates technology. For some teachers, learning the skill alone and out of context is overwhelming. Teachers have different pre-conceived sets of belief on how technology can be used with their curriculum that are based on prior experiences and knowledge. Staff developers have their work cut out from them, because teachers have a wide range of abilities and beliefs about technology. Technology can play a large role in developing the learning community through on-line discussion groups, courses, and resources. However, teachers will not go on-line if they do not have the time, support, and resources.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development traditionally is not part of the culture of the school day. Most schools are designed so learning is directed to students in isolated classrooms. Teachers are finding creative ways to develop constructivist approaches to teaching even within the traditional system. Separate inservices may provide teachers skills or theories that they can then later transfer back to their classroom. But, because of limited time, this may not happen. Funding priorities tend to purchase things not time, so there is little on-going follow-up on the initial inservice. This means that, only if there is time and the teacher's determination, in only a few cases the new knowledge will be incorporated into the curriculum. The administration needs to allow for risk-taking, because even the best ideas

may fail. Every class is different. Sometimes a teacher who feels isolated may try something new and fail which can totally devastate them. Teachers join the profession to make a difference. If they continue to fail and have no time to reflect on what happened, they will stop trying new projects and may become disenchanting with teaching. Even the best teacher can get a challenging class with one or more problem students. Another factor may be that the technology may not work just when you need it, so teachers always have to have a backup plan for every lesson that includes technology. Teachers need time to reflect on their day, what worked, what didn't work, and why.

### **Study Groups**

Coaching teams and study groups can be the foundation of your professional development program (Joyce and Showers 1996) and built into the school day. Peer coaching teams can support teachers after the initial inservice with 2-3 teachers forming small study groups. Time needs to be built into the weekly schedule for these teachers to develop shared language and common understandings that are necessary for the study of new knowledge and skills. Usually, we teach skills without the knowledge base to implement the skills successfully. Larger study groups could develop to include teachers from different schools where the focus of monthly meetings is on similar interests or projects. This study group is more like a user group with time to share projects, ideas, and invite experts to answer questions. A smaller study group where a coach is available to work one-on-one with the teacher will help them in the classroom. Through modeling, observations, and on-going feedback, the teacher can get the support that is necessary for real change. Each teacher can keep a portfolio of work, ideas, and reflections that can be shared in study groups. This type of collegial work provides an opportunity for growth not realized when working in isolation in the classroom.

### **Study Groups beyond the Classroom**

Ideas from study groups can also be shared through an on-line threaded discussion area, a listserv, and a web site that archives discussions and projects. Being able to share ideas face-to-face during the day and on-line at anytime from anywhere creates a sustainable

professional learning community. Administrators can join the study group's on-line discussions to ask for feedback on budget or purchasing issues. Parents can post concerns and share ideas from the community. Students can be part of a study group that includes the teacher and their parents, so they can take an active role in what they best need to accomplish for understanding. Students can form study groups with other students to do action research projects. Experts can join in at any time to provide advice or mentoring. The building of a learning community on-site and on-line based on study groups help to ensure the necessary support teachers need to try new ideas and for students to use inquiry so they can be successful in any endeavor.

### **Resources**

Darling-Hammond, L. (1996, March). The quiet revolution: Rethinking teacher development. *Educational Leadership*, 53(6), 4-10.

Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (1996). Staff development as a comprehensive service organization. *Journal of Staff Development*, 17(1), 2-6. Resource also provided through listserv by Mary Herrin (mary.herring@uni.edu) Dec. 9, 2000.

Professional Learning Communities: What Are They And Why Are They Important?  
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory: Issues about Change. Vol. 6. Number 1. <http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html> – Online. Available. December 1, 2000.

Barbara Bray writes a monthly column for the CUE newsletter on staff development. Please write her with questions, comments, or ideas to [bbray@compstrategies.com](mailto:bbray@compstrategies.com) or join the listserv she moderates by emailing [techstaffdevelop-subscribe@egroups.com](mailto:techstaffdevelop-subscribe@egroups.com). Visit her new website <http://www.my-ecoach.com> to check out the online assessment for teachers.