

Not JUST Another Meeting Literacy Meeting

By Douglas Fisher, Sandi Everlove, and Nancy Frey

A picture is worth a thousand words; here's a snapshot of what a successful learning community looks like.

Another staff meeting. Can you hear the collective sigh among the teachers and possibly even the administrators? It doesn't have to be that way, which is perfectly illustrated by the experience that Sandi Everlove had while observing at Hoover High School in San Diego, CA.

It's three o'clock on the second Thursday of the month and time for the monthly staff meeting. Having sat through my share of staff meetings over the years, an immediate picture forms in my head: 90 teachers crowded into the library, some grading papers, others chatting about the fight at lunch, a few parked by the door ready to bolt when the hour is up, and the front-row contingent politely waiting to bolt when the hour's up. It gets better. It's the day before winter break—so add a few more people to the "rapid exit" section. Because I am a visitor (and a polite "front rower" myself), I put on a brave face and hope for the best. What happened next changed my thinking about literacy-related professional development for secondary school teachers forever.

Groups of 6–8 teachers gather around tables. At each table there are two students—all English language learners, many of whom have been in the country less than one year. Their teacher explains to the staff that the students have been reading *The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream* by Sampson Davis, George Jenkins, and Rameck Hunt (Riverhead Books, 2002), which will be the schoolwide teacher read-aloud book selection for second semester. The teacher explains that the students will read passages from the book that were particularly meaningful to them and describe how the book connected to their lives. Teachers are encouraged to take notes, jot down specific passages, and any other information they think will help them introduce the book to their class during sustained silent reading in January.



The four-minute timer is set, and the students are on. One confident young woman begins, "Hello, my name is Julia Pinto. I am going to read a passage from this book to you and then explain why I liked this part so much. Please turn to page 43...." Another student gently concludes her excerpt with a reminder, "Teachers, tell your students to read this book, and it will change their lives. It's about their lives." After eight minutes, the students rotate to a new table so that each teacher has the chance to hear from at least four students. For the next hour, 16 students and 90 teachers are absorbed in a dialogue about the lives of the people in the book, their own lives, and the love of reading. There's nothing more powerful than watching people in the act of learning—teachers and students alike. It went beyond a culture of learning; it was more like a "cult of learning." My first thought was, How did this literacy cult get started? My second was, How can I join?

Building a Learning Community

By their very nature, schools are already communities, yet anyone involved with secondary schools knows that middle level and high school teachers often work in alone and that such meetings are not commonplace. In many schools, Teacher A establishes classroom procedures, grading policies, and lesson plans that may have little or nothing to do with what Teacher B is doing across the hall. As a result, students bounce from class to class trying to figure out what they are supposed to do instead of what they need to learn. This fractured approach rarely gives students enough practice with any one strategy, skill, routine, approach, or procedure to become expert at it.

Note taking is a prime example. Most secondary teachers agree that note taking is an important skill and one that should be developed in school. What they rarely agree upon is a note-taking structure or process. Students are forced

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to adapt to four different approaches to note taking in as many subjects—rarely mastering any one style. The result is that students spend precious time and energy focused on *how* to take notes instead of *what* the teacher wants them to learn. As a result, students rarely master any one approach or learn to use note-taking strategies for independent practice. It's a system that would frustrate the most patient adult, let alone a struggling student.

Thinking deeply about what works for adults in a school and what works best for students is the first—and easiest—step in building a learning culture. The tough part is acting on this new knowledge.

From Me to We

At Hoover, the hard work of learning and refining teaching practices began and continues through PLCs. The teachers and administrators see PLCs not simply as another reason to attend meetings, but as a means of engaging with their colleagues about the implementation of a schoolwide literacy instructional framework. PLCs also give teachers a place to focus on student work and to plan instruction on the basis of student performance.

A major factor in their success is that teachers participate in two PLCs: one with teachers who teach the same subject and another with teachers from other disciplines. Teachers in "course alike" PLCs meet Wednesday afternoons to develop common formative assessment items, review and analyze student performance on assessments, and plan interventions and reteaching options for students who did not learn.

The cross-disciplinary PLCs focus on implementing the schoolwide literacy plan. The teachers have selected specific research-based approaches they wanted to learn about and implement schoolwide. Those include developing anticipatory and background activities, reading aloud and shared reading, developing vocabulary, using graphic organizers, writing to learn, note taking, and reciprocal teaching. (See Fisher & Frey, 2008, for more information.) Meeting as cross-disciplinary PLCs enables teachers to examine and discuss whether or how the use of those content-area literacy strategies improves student achievement across all subject areas.

The idea that increasing teacher learning is paramount to improving student learning is more than a belief; it has shaped the entire approach to professional learning at Hoover. Two things distinguish the PLCs at this school

from other PLC schools. First, PLC attendance is mandatory. Increasing the literacy skills of students who enter ninth grade reading at the fourth-grade level cannot be done by a few teachers in a few subject areas. Every teacher, every period, every day must actively contribute to students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. For that to happen, all teachers need to learn and use content literacy strategies.

Second, PLC topics are selected from a schoolwide literacy plan that was developed by the staff. Groups of teachers can focus on a wide range of topics within the plan, but they can't choose to also focus on school gardens, referral policies, or the new math adoption. Although these may be very important topics in the life of the school, they aren't topics that deserve the level of attention of a PLC. These two major differences have resulted in changing from a culture of "me" to a culture of "we"—a change that has benefited both teachers and students alike.

Powers of 10

An added benefit of having successfully used PLCs to improve literacy is that once word gets out, there are ample opportunities to share what works and extend the collaboration and learning beyond the school's walls. Technology has amplified that ability, and videos of instruction can reach teachers anywhere in the world. An example is a recent training in Virginia, at which PLC facilitators were asked to share what they were learning and practicing with their PLCs. One of the facilitators played a video of a veteran middle school teacher in her group. The teacher had filmed herself and her

students using an anticipation guide before and after reading, as well as her observations about students' comprehension of the text as a result of using the guide. Anticipation guides commonly include 4–8 statements that students read and determine whether they are true or false. This activates their background knowledge and provides a review opportunity at the end of the unit. The teacher in the video had learned about anticipation guides by watching Rita Elwardi, a teacher at Hoover, and her ESL students.

Although these two teachers are not part of the same PLC (in fact they have never met) they are part of a community of learners who are continuously looking for ways to

improve their teaching. Perhaps someday, 21st century tools will provide a window into classrooms around the world, and virtual PLCs will enable the exchange of ideas among educators that will transform learning for thousands of teachers and students, expanding the impact of a small group of teachers and their professional learning community tenfold. Perhaps someday is now. **PL**

REFERENCE

■ Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Content area strategies at work* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

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