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***Professional Learning Communities:  
The Principal's Role***

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It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of the principal in forming and sustaining effective Professional Learning Communities. All the research agrees that 'supportive shared leadership' is a primary ingredient in effective PLCs. The research goes on to explain that the principal is responsible for developing the leadership potential of the whole staff. It also states that the principal must help provide such things as: time for the teams to meet, resources for the teams to use, and the professional development that the teams need throughout the PLC process (Dufour, Eaker, & Baker 1998; DuFour Spring 1997; Schmoker, 2001; Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2004; DuFour May 2004;; Schmoker, 2004; Fullan 2005 ). Everything here is focused upon helping the school to develop as "a learning community...where critical inquiry is practiced by collegial partners who share a common vision and engage in shared decision-making" (Boyd & Hord 1994) that leads to increased achievement for all students.

Since the school's goals are based upon its shared vision and common values, the principal "must insist that staff development be firmly rooted in the goals and vision of the district/school" (DuFour & Berkey 1995). Also to ensure that the professional development is as highly effective as it should be, the principal must be aware of the latest research in professional development. Thus the principal should know what type of professional development works best in this situation. As Senge explains the principal needs to understand that while "the educational enterprise is ultimately about kids learning...we must also give systematic attention to how teachers learn—that learning is always an on-the-job phenomenon. Learning always occurs in a context where (we) are taking action. So we need to find ways to get teachers really working together; we need to create an environment where they can continually reflect on what they are doing and learn more and more of what it takes to work as a team (O'Neil April 1995). PLCs provide this environment, but teachers need added support as they start this process.

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“Research emphasizes that coaching is a prerequisite for the implementation of new skills or strategies” (Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987 in DuFour & Berkey 1995) like those that are part of a PLC. This means that “providing teachers with ongoing support after the initial training is critical to the success of any innovation”(DuFour & Berkey 1995). This is especially true with the formation of PLCs because most teachers are being asked to change long-standing instructional practices, so “leaders need to assist teachers in improving their classroom performance; leaders can look to others, either inside or outside the physical building, but the leader must be certain that help is available” (Hord 1997 b) if they want the PLCs to succeed.

In addition to focusing on staff professional development, the principals need to “model a commitment to professional growth. Principals who hope to convince others to grow professionally must model their own commitment to continual development. If they are quick to identify the need for other individuals and groups to update or acquire skills, but slow to recognize that

need in themselves, principals send mixed messages. Principals who pursue training opportunities, participate in study groups, forward articles to staff members and solicit their comments, make presentations at conferences, write articles for professional journals, and engage in action research at the school site are using their own behavior to communicate the importance of professional growth” (DuFour & Berkey 1995). In short, principals should model in words and deeds what it means to be part of a professional learning community and then help put the structures in place to help their staffs to see it as the useful process that it is.

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