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Professional Development Dates:

January 7-9, 2013
Penn Stater
Conference Center
State College, PA

April 22-24, 2013
Penn Stater
Conference Center
State College, PA

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Instructional coaches provide professional development for teachers and school leaders focused on classroom practices to increase student engagement and improve student learning.



PLCs in Practice: What, When, and How Works Best?

By Mike Baker, Altoona Area School District Instructional Coach

The goal of a professional learning community (PLC) is to change an organization's culture. The resulting cultural shift increases student achievement. Before taking on such a daunting task, consider the nuts and bolts of a PLC.

What

The first step in creating a PLC is to determine need. Scour existing data sources, looking for areas of need. Use a Google form to create a needs assessment survey. Classroom visits are a great way to discover trends. Or, simply ask colleagues or school leaders what they need. The key to a successful PLC is a relevant topic that leads to professional growth and increased student achievement.

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When

Next, consider when the PLC will meet. As with all new initiatives, time is a concern. Teachers have much to do, so PLCs must fit into already crowded schedules. Some schools are able to offer PLCs during the school day. Supportive administrators allow teachers to miss principal's assignments such as hall or lunch duty to become part of the community. The lunch period can be fruitful, but calls for creativity. Entice teachers to the PLC by offering two things the faculty cafeteria can't: meaningful discussion and homemade baked goods.

How

Before announcing the PLC, consider how the community will be structured. Productive communities require strong leadership. In many cases, the coach starts the PLC, determining its structure and direction.

In order to sustain and grow a community – be it a town or a group of educators – other leaders must step forward. Encourage teachers, specialists – even principals – to take the reins.

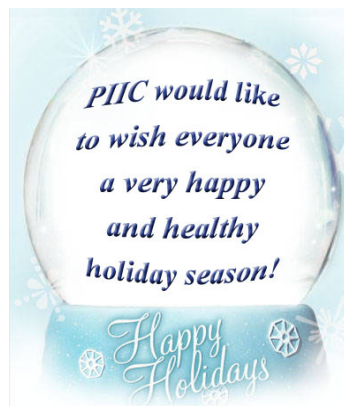
The PLC's size is organic, growing and shrinking as it progresses through the year. What may start with a few science teachers could easily grow to

include math teachers when the topic turns to solving equations during a lab. PLCs can exist as departmental subgroups or expand to include the entire building.

In some cases, PLCs will reach beyond the school walls to include professionals from other schools or community stakeholders.

Thanks to readily-available technology like Skype and Moodle, professionals located across the hall or across town are able to participate in a PLC. While asynchronous communication is not ideal, at times it is the only way to involve all interested parties. Online PLCs can flourish, but only with occasional synchronous discussions, either in the same room or using videoconferencing.

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Letter from PIIC's Executive Director

As educators, we are all proponents of practitioners working and learning together. If teacher performance plateaus at four years, we need to ensure that instructional coaches and school leaders work together in teams committed to continuous improvement and uninterrupted learning so that all staff members can thrive and student learning can flourish.

Unfortunately, the teaching day goes by so quickly that few opportunities exist for us to collaborate about issues that improve learning for all students. Very often, we grab a quick few minutes on the way to class or in the mailroom. The good news is that our questions/comments must be very specific and "to the point." Maybe the questions surface about a particular student and changes in his/her classroom behavior; maybe the questions are about how to read a data report or when the next report to parents is due. Maybe, even, the quick dialogue is about a lesson posted on SAS website or a tweet posted by someone following an education guru. Regardless of the content, not much time is available as we rush to start our day and meet the challenging needs of our students. The bad news is that we often do not revisit the same question

that started our day and the opportunity for collective problem-solving is lost.

Every school is a professional learning community (PLC). In order to function in a job-embedded learning environment, however, the larger PLC must be organized into smaller ones that meet the needs of the individuals, the teams, and the school. Coaches and school leaders are at the forefront for creating the opportunity of making learning visible and sustainable through these PLCs. The ultimate goal of the PLC is to discuss how to increase student engagement, improve student outcomes and build teacher capacity through a variety of ways including examining and using multiple forms of data, looking at student work, and implementing a plethora of evidence-based instructional practices. When colleagues meet together and discuss student learning, students benefit. In fact, as the quality of a teacher's colleagues improve, the students of that teacher benefit (Jackson, C.K. & Bruegmann, E., 2009). With a 2.6 times greater variation in student achievement across classrooms in the same schools than school to school (OECD, 2008-PISA Science), teacher learning teams through PLCs can serve as an invaluable

way to help teachers share and learn about effective classroom habits that yield positive student outcomes.

PLCs are the ideal vehicle to make certain that all educators continue to improve their effectiveness. It is systems approach and organizational structure that promotes a shared vision and collective responsibility; PLCs support regularly scheduled time for colleagues to collaborate with their coaches and each other and to discuss student learning in a non-evaluative, non-threatening setting. It is an arrangement where professional talk is the norm and everyone is a learner and a member in a community of practice. Imagine being able to meet with one's peers in a risk free environment where not only are you valued for the timely and relevant feedback you can provide to your colleagues, you can also get specific feedback for your own learning needs and become a better prepared practitioner. Sounds like a win-win situation for all where teacher isolation is replaced with teacher collaboration.

Have a wonderful holiday season,



Please access PIIC's online resource, ***The Instructional Coaching Resource Guide***:
www.instituteforinstructionalcoaching.org

Leading Through Quality Questioning

Book Review by Amy Walker, IU 4 PIIC Mentor

The Regional Mentor Group consisting of the mentors from Intermediate Units 1, 3, 4, and 27, and led by Regional Mentor Coordinator Dr. Charles Territo, regularly engage in an annual book study. This year's one book is *Leading Through Quality Questioning: Creating Capacity, Commitment, and Community* by Jackie Acree Walsh and Beth Dankert Sattes (Corwin, 2010).

The authors of this book see quality questioning as a way to enhance communications school-wide—from students to top level administration. The authors promote an inquiry-oriented approach to planning and decision making. They believe that questions,

not answers, drive school improvement efforts.

Quality questioning is defined as a "process for engaging individuals in thinking together" (p.xii). Quality questioning

begins with the crafting of a focused, purposeful, engaging question. The authors suggest a four part process for crafting a question: 1. identify the focus; 2. get clear about the purpose of the question; 3. decide on a

process for engaging all parties; and 4. word the question simply and understandably. The inquiry process continues with the intentional use of strategies that facilitate thinking such as nonverbal prompts and follow up questions.

"Quality questioning begins with the crafting of a focused, purposeful, engaging question."

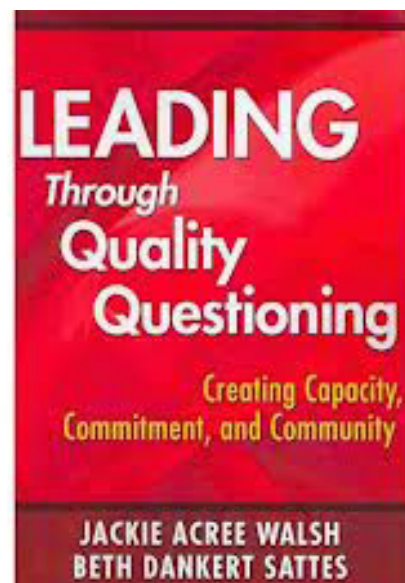
Continued on page 3, [Questioning](#)

The book includes figures and charts aimed at aiding readers in crafting questions and understanding the framework for continuous school improvement they are advocating. There are a number of examples of follow-up questions and question stems that would be very useful when trying to build a culture of inquiry. A resource section describing structured group processes (or what other sources term as protocols) for engaging people in thinking and dialogue proved particularly valuable when planning meetings and professional development sessions. Overall, this book is a valuable resource for helping coaches discover the power of quality questions in helping to move thinking to increasingly higher levels and build capacity in their learning communities.

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Other books by this author

- *Inside School Improvement: Creating High-Performing Learning Communities*
- *Thinking Through Quality Questioning: Deepening Student Engagement*
- *Quality Questioning: Research-Based Practice to Engage Every Learner*



"When teachers and school staff operate within a professional community of inquiry, they are better able to support and sustain inquiry-oriented classrooms."
-Leading Through Quality Questioning

Building Capacity One Conversation at a Time

By Chad Evans and Chris Roth, Quakertown Community School District Instructional Coaches

In *Learning by Doing*, Richard DuFour and his fellow authors define a Professional Learning Community (PLC) as:

"An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators."

Over the past five years in the Quakertown Community School District (QCS), PLCs continue to change and evolve as we further understand the implications and change that can result in participation and learning alongside one another. Building-level and cross-district PLCs continue to explore instructional pedagogy, assessment practices, technology integration, and a host of other topics. Although we haven't completely achieved the vision DuFour and other experts have laid out, we are beginning to see further

teacher growth through PLCs.

As our involvement in PIIC developed last year, unbeknownst to us, a PLC was forming and evolving. A core group of teachers and administrators began to explore what instructional coaching could do for teachers and,

"Building-level and cross-district PLCs continue to explore instructional pedagogy, assessment practices, technology integration, and a host of other topics."

more importantly, for our students.

The group began by creating a vision statement that would refocus our efforts when conversations led us astray. The vision of peer-to-peer instructional coaching in Quakertown is:

"A confidential non-evaluative process through which teachers provide one another with feedback, support, and assistance for the purpose of enhancing practice, building collaborative cultures, and improving student learning."

From that vision, we began to "play"

in small coaching cohorts, exploring how it felt to coach and be coached and leaning on our IU PIIC mentor, Carol Adams. We read books, articles, and blogs on coaching. We discussed scalability, impact, and sustainability and met continually to better understand whether the Quakertown model of instructional coaching was worth pursuing. Universally, the members of our PLC felt that it was a significant next step in improving student learning district-wide.

This year, others have joined us in our PLC, bringing new perspectives and broadening our scope and potential impact on teaching and learning in our district. As we continue to move forward, engaging in deep conversations around research and coaching, we are also experiencing by "playing" and uncovering what coaching looks and feels like for us here in QCS. As we move forward together, we continue to build capacity from the ground up, one conversation at a time.

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Coaching Culture: Professional Learning Communities

By Andrew Halter, Hampton Township School District Instructional Coach

Coaching presents a unique perspective; we have a broad and inside view of teaching and learning in our schools that no one else does, and our position provides a wealth of opportunity to nurture the professional milieu of our buildings. Our daily contact with teachers helps us to spread best practices and reflective conversations, initiate collaborative growth, and impact student learning through teacher driven change. By connecting groups of teachers, this open culture can grow even faster, eventually impacting teaching and learning in individual buildings and across the district. This is the essence of a true Professional Learning Community.

Much like the philosophy that drives coaching, professional learning communities are grounded in the premise that *educators themselves hold the power to impact change and improve schools*. Research shows that when leadership shifts from top down “initiatives” and administrators work alongside teachers to identify measurable, attainable, results oriented goals, there is a profound impact on student learning (DuFour 2004; DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, 2008). In our district, I have seen PLCs begin through hallway conversations and departmental meetings through connections discovered via the BDA cycle of coaching, professional committees and other building initiatives (like the Penn Literacy Network), and through planning and facilitating professional development. While none of these are PLCs in and of themselves, they are places to germinate rich professional conversation. As educators uncover needs in student learning, these conversations continue onto areas such as teaching methodology, articulation of curriculum, professional development needs, technology implementation, etc. PLCs begin when this open, honest conversation ignites teacher inquiry.

To be successful, these PLCs should meet on a consistent basis, have a clear, strategic focus grounded in improving student learning, and have accessible resources that support and encourage instructional change. Coaching becomes an invaluable commodity in facilitating this, helping to transfer ideas into classroom practice by providing

resources and ideas, encouraging reflective practice, and modeling strategies. Coaches are also in a position to help keep administration involved and aware of the effectiveness of these PLCs and to act as a conduit for these best practices throughout their buildings. As impact on student learning becomes visible and quantifiable, ideas shared and generated via this small group PLC will inevitably affect the larger culture of the school. By keeping their eyes and ears open for opportunities to spark this powerful inquiry, coaches can play a critical role in promoting and sustaining this healthy culture of growth.

“Much like the philosophy that drives coaching, professional learning communities are grounded in the premise that educators themselves hold the power to impact change and improve schools.”

Resources to consider:
<http://www.centerforsri.org/plc/index.html>

<http://allthingsplc.info>

DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker.
Revisiting Professional

Learning Communities at Work: Insights for Improving Schools. Bloomington, IN: SolutionTree Press, 2008 (formerly National Educational Service).

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The PIIC 4 Quadrant Framework

PIIC advocates **one-on-one and small group support** for teachers, coaches, and school leaders.

PIIC focuses on **collecting, analyzing, and using data** to identify student needs, assess changes in classroom instructional practice and measure student progress.

PIIC emphasizes the use of **evidence-based literacy practices** and research-based instructional techniques.

PIIC supports **reflective and non-evaluative** practices.

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