

Criterion 8: The Equalizer

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ABSTRACT

This Case Study allows readers to peek into a highly functioning, very diverse professional learning community (PLC) and witness what happens with the eventual turnover in staff. (Pre-Criterion 8)

CRITERION 8:

Exhibiting collaborative and collegial practices focusing on improving instructional practice and student learning.

DEFINITION: *The teacher participates collaboratively in the educational community to improve instruction, advance the knowledge and practice of teaching as a profession, and ultimately impact student learning.*

CASE STUDY

“Well that’s a wrap!” Our 7th grade English PLC put our pens down and shut the big VHS video camera off. Our stint at filming, while a bit unnerving, was over. This event took place over seven years ago, and our team had been asked to share what was working with a wider audience . . . the school board! The school board was considering juggling the school day to allow for a late-start collaboration across all grade bands and job contexts. On the video, a meaty conversation had just ensued: in our typically scrappy way, we had developed a rubric for scoring student responses on a piece of non-fiction text, and the rich diversity of our personalities shone throughout the recorded session.

Our group of four represented a range of teacher personalities and lifestyles. One grey haired old-timer, Mary, was a constructivist in all things: crazy-loose in her teaching style, yet still passionate about students even with only one year left on her career horizon. The next was a relatively young teacher of 7 years, already a National Board Certified Teacher. Handpicked and recruited to join us from an elementary school, Janet’s heart for kids was only outpaced by her need for tight classroom order. One special education teacher was on our team. Carla was a staunch advocate for differentiation in every aspect of our lessons. Forty-five years young and just beginning her teaching career, she brought her mom-heart to every student issue of access. Last up, I was a mid-career veteran, with a new empty nest at home, a National Board certificate behind my desk, and a vision to have every one of my students grow in both confidence and academic skill. We were fiercely diverse, arguing openly about the right things, and all of our students were reaping the benefits of our regular, but unpaid meetings: our state assessment scores were #1 in writing and #2 in reading for schools with our demographics.

Reflecting back upon this experience, I realize there is something utterly amazing about belonging to a highly functioning professional learning community. When it was happening, I

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was only tangentially aware that I was taking part in something extraordinary. However, once this experience was over, I was acutely conscious of the loss. This type of “professional nirvana” seems to happen very few times in one’s teaching career, where passion and the willingness to “play school” may be the only common denominator. In the blink of an eye and a shifting page of the calendar, it’s over.

Fast forward to that next school year and Mary’s retirement: bring in the next player in the ever-revolving cast of teachers. Just like the game of Chutes and Ladders, with one change in personnel our collaborative efficacy slid to the bottom and would have to be rebuilt. The shift in team dynamics caused me to sort through my own assumptions. Perhaps a newcomer does not have time for extra meetings, as the newly funded “PLC-time” seemed more attached to hoops, department meetings, and scripted agendas. Perhaps the conversations must shift to the more rudimentary aspects of lesson planning, sharing with a newcomer the broad strokes of navigating the new curriculum. Perhaps a team member thinks or says, “I just want to do my own thing.” In this not-so-distant past, our work with colleagues included many opportunities that were optional, and choosing to participate – or not – created pockets of inequity across classrooms, buildings and districts.

As a legislative mandate across all three instructional frameworks, Criterion 8 has the potential to be a true equalizer in the work of collaboration: “Professional Practice; the teacher participates collaboratively in the educational community to improve instruction, advance the knowledge and practice of teaching as a profession, and ultimately impact student learning.” Yet, can the law truly make a teacher engage? Insist that someone be vulnerable by sharing his/her practice and students’ work? Nudge someone to go back into his / her classroom and deliver an agreed-upon common formative assessment?

As a true believer in the intent and rollout of this portion of our new evaluation, I am banking on it. Why am I so hopeful? Student Growth Goal 8.1. As we wrestle with addressing the elusive issues that surround the Achievement Gap across the state, it is increasingly evident that teachers working in isolation cannot meet every child’s specific needs. Whether we are currently part of an effective grade level team or perhaps teaching in a rural community as a singleton, every teacher can answer the question, “Who is going to help us/me meet our/my goal?” Whether we reach across content, grade level, or district, Student Growth Goal 8.1 lays a framework to brainstorm about our practice, problem-solving the quirky issues that surround our ever-changing students and curriculum. Groups of teachers and staff – the diversity of whom is amplified and crucial to student success, will now consistently work together to strive to achieve their student growth goals.

The state’s teacher and principal evaluation system will provide a common structure that is less dependent on the whim of personalities, different teaching styles, or the dice roll of one’s career-calendar. With our colleagues beside us and the teacher and principal evaluation language in hand, more conversations will have the focused, professional meat necessary in order to move every child, every day. PLC might begin to stand for Professional Learning CONSISTENCY. After all, playing Chutes and Ladders can get old, really fast.



REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

1. What resonates with you as you read this case study?
2. How does this experience relate to your own experiences working with collaborative groups/teams?
3. Why might some PLCs feel like a “professional nirvana,” while others may feel frustrating?
4. How is setting a goal with a group different than setting a goal individually? What are the potential strengths and challenges?

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