

# Exploring the Relationship Between Special Education Teachers and Professional Learning Communities

## Implications of Research for Administrators

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- **School accountability reports reveal that wide achievement gaps exist among different subgroups of students in PK-12 schools.**
- **Research findings reveal that general and special education teachers improve their classroom practices when working in professional learning communities (PLCs). In addition, research shows that special education teachers may play key roles in PLCs.**
- **Research has demonstrated that outcomes for students improve when their teachers are part of PLCs, including those students who struggle most in classrooms.**
- **Administrators play a key role in supporting and sustaining PLCs and in serving as protectors of a school's shared vision and values that anchor PLC work.**

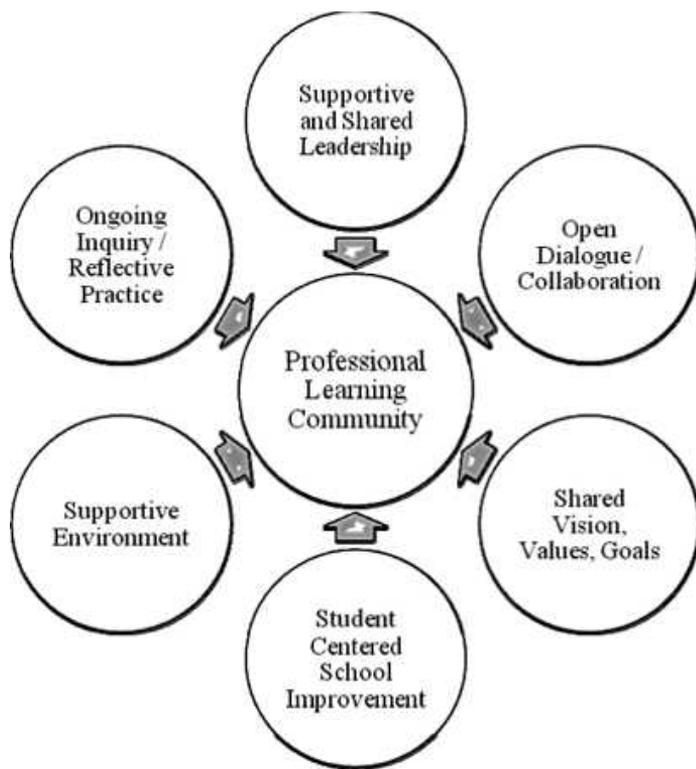
## School Accountability and Professional Learning Communities

The accountability requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) have revealed how wide the achievement gap is among different subgroups of students in PK-12 schools. One subgroup scoring persistently low on state achievement tests when compared with peers is students who have disabilities (M.J. McLaughlin, 2010). The consequences for schools when such gaps are made public, as in reports on adequate yearly progress (AYP) that are required in NCLB, can result in a range of actions from funding cuts to principal removal. Although recent initiatives such as response to intervention have been implemented to address the needs of struggling students, it is not clear how general and special education personnel have worked or will work together in schools to implement these practices. At the very least, collegial work is expected, and one approach that administrators may consider in supporting teachers to collaborate effectively is professional learning communities (PLCs).

Broadly defined, PLCs refer to professionals in a school, typically groups of teachers, who work collaboratively to improve practice and enhance student learning (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, 2001; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). PLCs grew out of major reform efforts in the 1980s when effective schools and effectiveness of organizations shifted school improvement efforts to core concepts of *school culture* (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Fullan, 1993) and *collegiality and collaboration* (e.g., Hargreaves, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1989). Multiple reviews of the literature (Hord, 1997; InPraxis Group, 2006; Morrissey, 2000) have addressed and summarized characteristics of PLCs. Although the different reviews may use slightly different wording or list five versus six major characteristics, the characteristics identified by these reviews are very similar. *Figure 1* provides an overview of the characteristics based on these literature reviews.

Although accountability, mostly in the form of student achievement, has dominated school reform in recent years, research and interest in PLCs continue and raise important questions about the compatibility of strict test-focused forms of school reform and

Figure 1. Major characteristics of a professional learning community.



collegial forms of school improvement. In addition, this research raises the specific question about how special education fits within teacher PLCs. Although research that connects PLCs and special education is sparse, an examination of existing literature reveals a number of implications directly applicable to special education teachers. Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between special education teachers and PLCs by examining research conducted and reported on PLCs in the past 25 years. We begin by reviewing research to understand how PLCs support school improvement. Next, we explore the role that special education teachers play in learning communities. Third, we discuss findings that show that conflict and tension are expected occurrences among teachers in PLCs. We conclude with a set of recommendations for administrators whose goals for school improvement are driven not only by accountability but also by collegiality.

## PLCs Support School Improvement

Many school administrators find that the reason a school fails to meet AYP is that students who have disabilities were among those who failed to improve sufficiently on achievement tests (Eckes & Swando,

2009). Solutions to this dilemma may be found in establishing school cultures where PLCs can flourish. Research findings show that teachers improve their classroom practices when working in learning communities and, correspondingly, the school performance of students taught by these teachers improves, including the performance of students who struggle most.

## Teachers' Classroom Practices Improve in PLCs

Although limited, research on PLCs reveals that special education teachers' classroom practices, like those of their general education counterparts, often change in a positive direction as a result of their participation in PLCs. This is supported in the research generally (Curry, 2008; Little, 2003; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Wood, 2007; Wood & Whitford, 2010) and in one study focused on special education specifically (Englert & Tarrant, 1995).

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 Little's (2003) research findings revealed that the interactions of members of the groups studied supported teacher learning and improvement of practice as evidenced by allocating time to talk about problems in their practice, revealing their dilemmas to each other, exploring their problems openly, and sharing specific classroom materials, such as student work, to find solutions.

In a study of mathematics and English teachers in two high schools, Little (2003) conducted case studies to explore how teacher learning opportunities and the dynamics of professional practice affect teacher-led groups. Little's interest was in looking inside teacher communities to understand how interactions among teachers promote the positive outcomes that are often attributed to PLCs. Her findings revealed that the interactions of members of the groups studied supported teacher learning and improvement of practice as evidenced by allocating time to talk about problems in their practice, revealing their dilemmas to each other, exploring their problems openly, and sharing specific classroom materials, such as student work, to find solutions. Similarly, Wood's (2007)

investigation of PLCs in five schools (elementary, middle, secondary) over a 2½-year period revealed a number of positive outcomes. These outcomes included increased collaboration and more discussion about teacher practice and student work, enhanced trust among participants, and an increased focus on students and their needs.

In their research synthesis, Vescio et al. (2008) reported that all 11 studies they identified for their review discussed improvements in teachers' classroom practices as a result of participating in PLCs. In addition, all of the studies revealed changes in the professional culture of the school when teachers participated in PLCs. When Vescio et al. analyzed the corpus to uncover how teachers' classroom practices changed as a result of involvement in a PLC, they found that only five of the studies explained these changes (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, & Towner, 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Strahan, 2003) and that only two (Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Louis & Marks, 1998) of these five collected data on teacher practices when the study began as a way to make comparisons with practices observed later in the research.

Englert and Tarrant's (1995) research was one of the few studies to provide sufficient data on teacher classroom practices throughout the course of the project to describe the nature of these changes. The changes in the three special education teachers' literacy practices in this study transformed from the use of a few restricted instructional practices to the use of a variety of new interactive literacy practices. Analysis of the discourse in meetings among the teachers and researchers showed that the teachers' talk evolved over time from a focus on practical activities to discussions that included the theoretical underpinnings of the activities they were implementing in their literacy instruction.

Although the findings about teacher practices lacked specificity, Vescio et al. (2008) reported that all 11 studies provided empirical support for changes in the professional cultures of schools as a result of teachers' participation in PLCs. Vescio and colleagues categorized the characteristics that seemed inherent in PLCs that contributed to changes in school culture. These were (a) collaboration, (b) a focus on student learning (e.g., regularly scheduled meetings to discuss students), (c) teacher authority (e.g., making decisions regarding curriculum), and

(d) continuous teacher learning (e.g., seeking new information).

An investigation by Curry (2008) addressed how Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), defined as a type of school-based PLC in the study, influenced instructional improvement and/or schoolwide reform in an urban high school by exploring teacher interactions and practices within CFGs. A qualitative case study approach was used to collect data over a 3-year period and was organized around four design features of CFGs: diverse menu of activities (i.e., multiple pathways for learning), decentralized structure, interdisciplinary membership, and the use of protocols to guide discussion. Each design feature was found to both enhance and constrain teacher learning and school improvement. For example, because the CFGs offered teachers multiple pathways for their learning and development, this provided opportunities for teachers to connect their classroom practices to the larger reform agenda in a school. In other cases, however, the availability of multiple pathways stood in the way of teachers seeing the bigger picture and coming together to improve student achievement.

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The current focus on accountability in schools results in many teachers performing under the scrutiny of assessment data. Research conducted by Wood and Whitford (2010) underscored how this scrutiny can lead some PLCs to focus their deliberations narrowly on standardized test scores. Although teachers occasionally steered the groups in this direction, administrators (building, district, and/or state) sometimes expected the groups' primary focus to be on improving test scores. However, Wood and Whitford also found that although more successful PLCs accepted test scores as one type of data, they "extended the notion of what ought to count in assessing their work" (p. 172). Teachers within these PLCs explored new strategies and

assessed the impact of these strategies on student learning and behavior. In the most promising communities, teachers actively engaged in self-assessment and reflection while maintaining the highest of expectations for themselves and their students.

## Students' School Performance Improves When Teachers Work in PLCs

Research reveals that PLCs improve outcomes for students generally and may also improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Eight studies in the review by Vescio et al. (2008) provided evidence that student learning improves in schools where teachers are involved in PLCs (Berry, Johnson, & Montgomery, 2005; Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Hollins et al., 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz & Christman, 2003). Most studies documented change in student learning by reporting longitudinal results on state achievement tests. For example, Strahan (2003) used case studies to examine school culture in three schools serving low-income and minority students that showed dramatic improvements on state achievement tests. Achievement test scores reported from 1997 to 2002 showed that the percentage of students at or above grade level in reading and math changed on average from 46.2% in 1997 to 75.6% in 2002. The analysis of findings of this 3-year study revealed that although the schools differed in some respects regarding what they emphasized (e.g., a focus on literacy) to accomplish school improvement, their similarities included building strong PLCs that focused on data-driven dialogue. Other studies (e.g., Louis & Marks, 1998) revealed a relationship between student performance and the extent to which a PLC focuses on student learning.

Some research (e.g., Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008; Louis & Marks, 1998; Wood, 2007) has found that as PLCs mature, they reach a point at which they place a greater focus on students, including those students who struggle most, although it must be noted that students who have disabilities are not mentioned specifically in this research. In addition, there is no way of knowing whether teachers' activities in a PLC focus equally on different subgroups of students (e.g., students who have disabilities, English language learners,

struggling readers) in a school. This is important to point out because students with disabilities are often excluded from school reform research (Koh & Robertson, 2003). However, some research on school reform has shown that a distinctive characteristic of exemplary schools is that general and special education teachers accept increased responsibility for focusing on improving the performance of all students in their school, including those who have disabilities (Caron & McLaughlin, 2002).

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In a recent report of the results of a 6-year funded project on PLCs, Wood and Whitford (2010) explored the reasons why teachers' participation in PLCs led to improved student learning, including improvements for struggling students. First, teachers in PLCs often focus their energy and discussion on assessment data and the use of these data to drive their decisions about children. In addition, teachers in strong PLCs examine student work and talk openly and honestly about how to reach students who are not performing well in their classrooms. These discussions often lead to teacher interactions about approaches they might use to work with students who might otherwise be "slipping through the cracks" (p. 169). Although Wood and Whitford do not mention students with disabilities specifically, these researchers talk about how the collaborative work among teachers as seen in strong PLCs supports teachers in meeting the individual learning needs of their students.

## The Role Special Education Teachers Play in PLCs

PLCs continue to be the subject of research, but most of these investigations refer to all teachers in a school or to groups of general education teachers, and they rarely mention special education teachers specifically, even when whole-school PLCs are the focus of the research. However, as revealed in the research on the contribution of PLCs to school improvement, much can be inferred about the relationship between special education teachers and PLC work. This includes the promise that these communities hold for

what and how general and special education teachers learn from each other, as well as about the specific benefits these communities may provide special education teachers.

### Teachers Learn From Each Other in PLCs

Research evidence indicates that teachers who come together in PLCs will often improve their classroom practices (e.g., Vescio et al., 2008), and the school performance of their students will often improve (e.g., Strahan, 2003). Moreover, teachers in PLCs gradually assume greater responsibility for struggling learners, an outcome that suggests that special education teachers are part of the whole-school communities in which research investigations have been conducted. Such findings point to the significance of the learning and support that may be taking place among teachers, including general and special education teachers, where, possibly, general education teachers are acquiring greater knowledge about students who struggle in classrooms (e.g., students who have disabilities) and special education teachers are making important linkages between the needs of students who have disabilities and the general education curriculum. In examining PLC studies for findings that suggest such learning opportunities among general and special education teachers, the following emerged:

- *A culture of shared learning takes place in PLCs.* Teachers working in PLCs report trusting their colleagues (e.g., Wood, 2007), openly discussing their classroom dilemmas and problems (e.g., Little, 2003), and engaging in cross-disciplinary discussions (e.g., Curry, 2008). Furthermore, in their report of the early stages of a 2½-year study in an urban high school that included 22 English and social studies teachers, as well as a special education teacher and an English-as-a-second-language teacher, Grossman et al. (2001) described how teachers in mature PLCs grow to accept as much responsibility for the learning of their colleagues as they do for their own individual learning.
- *PLCs provide a safe environment for teachers to tackle core educational issues.* In Curry's (2008) investigation of CFGs, she reported that the decentralized nature of a learning community enables discussions of sensitive topics (e.g., tracking and inclusion) in open and constructive

ways. However, Curry's findings revealed that debating core issues did not necessarily lead to follow-up and action because of the limited decision-making power of CFGs. Although the interdisciplinary makeup of CFGs supported cross-disciplinary discussions and led to greater collective responsibility for students, the interdisciplinary nature of CFGs also hindered teachers' growth in the subjects that they teach because of the inability to engage in in-depth discussions about their subject matter. Achinstein (2002) reported similar findings to those of Curry (2008) regarding how PLCs support the open debate among teachers of sensitive issues. Achinstein found that in one of two schools in her investigation, teachers openly debated the inclusion or exclusion of students with problems. Similarly, Grossman et al. (2001) noted that over time, members of PLCs grow in their appreciation of the unique contributions and different perspectives of teachers in the community.

### Special Education Teachers May Benefit From Working in PLCs

Research provides strong support for changes in the professional cultures of schools (e.g., a focus on student learning) as a result of teachers' involvement in PLCs (e.g., Curry, 2008; Little, 2003; Vescio et al., 2008; Wood, 2007). Such changes may benefit special education teachers in a number of ways, particularly because they are only one or a few of the total number of teachers in a school. However, the workplace structures of schools (e.g., departments) may create obstacles that deserve consideration in examining the potential benefits of learning communities for special education teachers. The few studies (Little, 2003; M.W. McLaughlin, 1993) investigating the relationship of workplace structures such as departments to teacher communities reveal that these *bounded communities* have the potential to create exclusionary groups that either support or deter teacher learning and their interactions with teachers who are not part of the group. Although these studies made no mention of special education, one can infer that such organizations would have an impact on teachers who may have no other colleagues in a school, as, for example, the special education teacher. Studies focused specifically on

learning communities, however, point more directly to possible benefits for special education teachers, or other teachers who are few in number in schools, as a result of participating in whole-school PLCs, and include the following.

- *PLCs have the potential to serve as a catalyst for integrating teachers who, because of their small numbers in schools, might become marginalized and isolated.* A number of themes in the research on PLCs point to the potential for integrating the often lone teacher in special education into the center of teacher activity in a school. First, as PLCs mature, teachers place greater emphasis on students who struggle and engage in sharing, reflecting, and developing solutions for these students (e.g., Wood & Whitford, 2010). Another critical theme is that the culture that develops in PLCs is one of taking on as much responsibility for the learning of colleagues as for oneself (e.g., Grossman et al., 2001). A third feature contributing to the integration of the special education teacher is the willingness of teachers in mature PLCs to engage in difficult discussions such as those that might occur in debates about inclusion (Curry, 2008). Moreover, PLCs enhance the professional culture in schools, and as noted by Vescio and colleagues (2008), collaboration is one such positive characteristic.
- *Special education teachers may become central participants in teacher communities as a result of involvement in PLCs.* Two studies reveal how teachers who may be the only teacher in an area (e.g., special education) can become central to the work of PLCs. Grossman et al. (2001) targeted their investigation on the formation of a teacher community to examine the process involved in the emergence and sustainability of PLCs. It was of particular interest that the special education teacher in the group of English and social studies teachers was a peripheral participant in the early stages of the PLC but emerged as a central participant as the PLC developed. Similarly, in Curry's (2008) research, she reported that a journalism teacher moved from feeling completely isolated to being centrally involved after joining a critical friends group. In describing her experiences, this journalism teacher noted that her colleagues finally learned about her discipline and what she does in her classes, they became highly supportive of her role in the school, and they "will go to bat for her in a crisis" (p. 757).

## Conflict and Tension Are Expected Occurrences Among Teachers in PLCs

Another important implication of PLC research for special education is the natural occurrences of conflict, tension, and disruptions in PLCs (e.g., Achinstein, 2002; Dooner, Mandzuka, & Clifton, 2008; Grossman et al., 2001; Hargreaves, 1991; Westheimer, 1999; Wood, 2007). Successful PLCs go through cycles of learning and in doing so are able to repair the problems the community experiences. Strategies to manage conflict and identify and solve problems should be continuous activities of PLCs and should be included early in the startup of a PLC. Special education teachers, along with their general education counterparts, would be better served if all members of a PLC are expected to collaborate on developing solutions to problems and have an opportunity to discuss strategies for managing conflict when it inevitably occurs.

### Conflict and Tension Occur, and Often Early

The purpose of some studies we examined was to analyze and understand how teachers manage the tensions they encounter in PLCs. Drawing on micropolitical and organizational theories, Achinstein (2002) analyzed two schoolwide teacher communities in urban middle schools to gain insights into conflict, boundaries of community, and ideological stances. From the lens of organizational theory, she explored how conflict influences more fundamental change in organizations. Based on a comparison of their characteristics with key characteristics identified in the literature, the two sites chosen for investigation were recognized as strong PLCs. A case study approach was used to collect data at one site for 2 academic years and at the second site for 1 academic year.

Teachers working in PLCs report trusting their colleagues (e.g., Wood, 2007), openly discussing their classroom dilemmas and problems (e.g., Little, 2003), and engaging in cross-disciplinary discussions (e.g., Curry, 2008).

An analysis of interviews, observations, documents, and a teacher survey revealed a number of findings that were used by Achinstein to develop a continuum of micropolitical processes about conflict within PLCs. By using a continuum, Achinstein showed the variation in the ways that the communities in the two schools managed conflict, boundaries, and ideology. For example, her findings revealed that conflict can occur at any point along a continuum from groups of teachers who completely avoid conflict to those groups or communities who are capable of fully embracing conflict. How teachers identify with particular subgroups in a building is also a concern; Achinstein uses the term *border politics* to label how such subgroup identities can create boundaries that exclude or include others and that ideologies can clash over the purposes of schooling and help explain different stances on conflict. Repairing the breakdowns and disruptions that each of these processes creates can affect whether an organization will transform or change. These findings are similar to those of Dooner et al. (2008), who found that using strategies to manage conflict early in a community's development may help members learn to expect and deal with conflict.

In a related study, but one that was not focused on PLCs, Hargreaves (2001) explored teacher relationships with colleagues to gain more understanding about how emotions and adult relationships influence the work of teachers' professional development and educational change. Fifty-three teachers in elementary and secondary schools were surveyed and interviewed. Of particular interest were the findings that most teachers viewed conflict as something to avoid and was the source of many negative expressions toward other teachers. Conflict among teachers often centered on different philosophical orientations about schooling (e.g., fairness to students). Other sources of conflict included instances of particular classroom practices. One example that stands out is the existence of disagreements about whether students who have disabilities should be included or excluded from general education classrooms, a finding Achinstein (2002) also reported in both schools in her research. In addition, Achinstein noted that in one school in which teachers failed to engage openly in conflict about these issues, the special education teacher, who represented a different perspective, left the school at the end of 1 year. Such

philosophical differences among teachers in general and special education might be anticipated given the long-standing behaviorist traditions in special education in contrast to constructivist traditions in general education and the ways these traditions have influenced teacher preparation in the two fields (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). Even so, PLCs seem to offer a safe environment for addressing such differing philosophies and perspectives and may lead to actions that benefit students who have disabilities.

### Collaborating Requires Cultivation

These studies, as well as others that identified conflict in teacher communities, make clear that simply proclaiming the virtues of collaboration and collegiality as essential to school reform does not capture the complexity of the issue. Hargreaves (1991) cautioned about the "many faces of collegiality" when he used a micropolitical perspective to examine group differences in organizations. He illustrated this perspective by reporting the findings of an exploratory study in which principals and teachers in six schools were interviewed. Of particular interest was whether teachers' working arrangements were controlled administratively or whether they emerged from the teachers. Hargreaves refers to the latter as *collaborative cultures*, meaning that the working relationships of teachers are spontaneous, voluntary, development oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable. Findings also revealed examples of what Hargreaves referred to as *contrived collegiality* (e.g., requiring classroom teachers to consult with special education teachers) and how some administrators may use the rhetoric of collegiality when in reality collegiality is contrived via administrative mandate.

Contrived collegiality, however, can be "double edged," as noted by Fullan and Hargreaves (1996), when analyzing both the positive and the negative outcomes of the concept. Although the negative outcomes seem clear, Fullan and Hargreaves point out that when contrived collegiality is more facilitative than controlling, it can be a starting point toward greater collaboration. This point is amplified by Wenger and Snyder (2000) in their discussion about how vulnerable learning communities are because of their informal nature and the fact that they are not part of a formal organizational structure

operating with designated resources. These authors argue that administrators should provide the infrastructure needed to help communities thrive by, for example, making resources available in the form of time, money, and/or personnel and by recognizing and rewarding the work of those who participate actively in learning communities.

## Special Education Teachers and PLCs: Implications for Administrators

As pointed out by Grossman et al. (2001), “community has become an obligatory appendage to every education innovation” (p. 942). That is, although teacher groups might be described (or describe themselves) as a community, they may not be engaging in actions to suggest that they are actually functioning as such, which can sometimes make it difficult to distinguish between a *community* of teachers and a *group* of teachers. Findings from Grossman et al.’s (2001) study revealed four dimensions that distinguished a community of teachers from a group of teachers: (a) formation of group identity and norms of interaction, (b) navigating fault lines, (c) negotiating the essential tension, and (d) communal responsibility for individual growth. Grossman et al. used these markers of community formation to develop a model of emergent community to aid in understanding how communities form. In the schematic for the model, each of the four dimensions or markers of a PLC are placed on a continuum to demonstrate teacher interactions from the beginning stages of a PLC, to an evolving stage, to the stage where a PLC has achieved maturity. Understanding such complexities should aid administrators in fostering collaborative cultures in schools.

In addition to the issue of distinguishing a *community* from a *group*, PLCs may share common characteristics (e.g., shared vision or forums for participation) but focus on different actions (e.g., shared vision for a curriculum that is interdisciplinary or one that is not) in different school settings. As Westheimer (1999) put it, promoting a shared vision or belief as a criterion for PLCs still ignores the “thorny question” about “what beliefs should be shared” (p. 97). For example, a school may have a shared vision—a characteristic of

PLCs—but that shared vision may fail to address students who have disabilities and, in so doing, exclude them from consideration as the school moves forward.

Even in the face of issues such as these and the limitations of research (e.g., sufficiently describing the makeup of a school PLC) that have been elaborated elsewhere (Pugach, Blanton, Correa, McLeskey, & Langley, 2009), we find the research on PLCs compelling and strong with several implications for special education. For administrators who seek to support the development of collegial forms of school improvement and to marry the collegial and bureaucratic forms of school improvement, we offer the following recommendations.

1. Research shows that student learning improves when their teachers are part of PLCs, including those students who struggle most in classrooms (e.g., Vescio et al., 2008). This may compel some administrators to mandate collaboration among their teachers. Encouraging collaboration among faculty is a step in the right direction; however, it is important for administrators to facilitate the development of a collaborative culture within their school that supports open dialogue and debate among all members of the teaching community. DuFour and Eaker (1998) offer numerous suggestions for how administrators can nurture such cultures. These include (a) defending and raising tough questions about whether the established vision and mission of a school are being followed, (b) monitoring both the school’s vision and specific priorities established by a learning community, (c) allowing time for tasks that support the learning community, (d) celebrating the outcomes that are achieved through learning communities, and (e) modeling collaborative activities by engaging teachers in decision-making and other collaborative activities. DuFour and Eaker (1998), Wenger (1998), and Wenger and Synder (2000) all note the importance of making resources (e.g., meeting space, external experts, technology, travel) available to sustain learning communities.
2. The dialogue within PLCs in a collaborative culture needs to focus on student learning. Administrators should focus energy and discussion on how assessment data improve instruction for every student in a school,

- including students who have disabilities. This sends a strong message to both general and special education teachers that all persons in the school are responsible for the improved performance of every student. In addition, DuFour and Eaker (1998) point out that principals must go beyond the rhetoric of a results-oriented stance and take action to use assessment results to engage regularly with school personnel to examine data for the purposes of identifying successes and challenges, setting measureable goals for action, and monitoring progress.
3. To encourage spontaneous, voluntary, and development-oriented working relationships among teachers, it is important for administrators to support a safe, nonthreatening environment where teachers can talk openly and honestly regarding their classroom practices and student learning (e.g., Wood, 2007). Time allocated to the discussion of problems encountered in teaching, exploration of strategies and solutions to challenges, and the sharing of specific classroom materials (Little, 2003) promotes increased collaboration and enhances trust among members. It is also important for administrators to openly accept and acknowledge the contribution and knowledge of all teachers in learning communities in schools, including the expertise from those teachers who are single representatives of an area such as special education. This can be done by involving all teachers in decision making and by also providing them with the information and guidelines they need to stay focused on the organization's vision and values (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).
  4. Research findings reveal that teachers' classroom practices improve when they work in PLCs (e.g., Vescio et al., 2008). Administrators can play an important role in supporting teachers' classroom practices by encouraging them to actively engage in self-assessment and reflection and to maintain the highest of expectations for themselves and their students. As noted by Eaker and Keating (2008), administrators must be specific about the standards expected in a classroom and in a school and never settle for less simply because school personnel are collaborating on activities (e.g., working together on a school newsletter) that do not achieve the standards expected in the school.
  5. As with every organization or community, PLCs will go through both smooth and rough stages (e.g., Achinstein, 2002). It is important for administrators to understand that conflicts may arise in the collaborative process. In fact, research shows that conflicts will inevitably occur (e.g., Dooner et al., 2008); therefore, administrators should accept this inevitability and anticipate how to manage conflict early. Furthermore, administrators must be willing to defend the organization's vision and to confront those who may work against the vision and organizational values (Eaker & Keating, 2008). To do this, Eaker and Keating (2008) urge administrators to leverage these commitments. In short, these authors suggest to administrators that "they can refer to the commitments ('here are the promises we have made to one another, I need you to honor them')" ("The Expectations-Acceptance Gap," para. 3).

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