

---

## Using a Professional Learning Community to Build Capacity for Teacher Leadership and Systemic Change

Penny Tenuto      Kathy Canfield-Davis      Russell A. Joki  
*University of Idaho, Boise      University of Idaho      University of Idaho, Boise*

---

**Abstract.** *The purpose of this case study was to consider using a professional learning community to help teachers build capacity for leadership and strategic change at a rural public high school. This article examines the experiences of 10 secondary teachers working to bring improvement from within a culture that had historically resisted change. Teachers participated in team-based learning while executing a more learning-centered schedule and improving the academic program. Participants reported deeper understanding of leading change, increased knowledge of teaching methods, and a sense of moral purpose as they worked toward a common goal. Findings from this study support the notion that allowing teachers to function as teacher leaders within a learning community can effectively advance the efforts of school reform.*

**Keywords:** *Professional Learning Community, School-centered Professional Development, Teacher Leadership, Team Learning, Continuous School Improvement, Block Scheduling*

n response to federal standards imposed by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), school administrators face innumerable challenges as they carry out leadership responsibilities. “If there ever was a time when the principal could ride in alone on a white horse, like John Wayne or Joan of Arc, and save a troubled school, those days are certainly over” (Barth, 2001, p. 447). However, school principals are not able to achieve school improvement alone; they need the support of their faculty and staff, including a constituency of teacher leaders.

A professional development plan, whereby teachers are provided opportunities to collaboratively build capacity as leaders and learn the change process holds promise as a practical solution for bringing requisite improvement and highlights the basis for this study. Furthermore, collaborating on a professional learning team could be a feasible way for teachers to enhance their knowledge of instruction and advance school improvement efforts.

Existing literature (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Schmoker, 2006) clearly supports teachers using collaboration and team-based learning as a means to improve the quality of instruction, but less

---

*Penny Tenuto can be reached at the Department of Leadership and Counseling; University of Idaho, Boise; 322 E. Front Street; Suite 440; Boise, Idaho 83702-7369; Phone: (208) 364-4099; Fax: (208) 364-4078; [ptenuto@uidaho.edu](mailto:ptenuto@uidaho.edu)*

*Kathy Canfield-Davis can be reached at the Department of Leadership and Counseling; University of Idaho, Coeur d’Alene; 1000 W. Hubbard Suite 242; Coeur d’Alene, ID 83814; Phone: (208) 292-1286; Fax: (208) 667-5275; [canfield@uidaho.edu](mailto:canfield@uidaho.edu)*

*Russell A. Joki can be reached at the Department of Leadership and Counseling; University of Idaho, Boise; 322 E. Front Street, Suite 440; Boise, Idaho 83702-7369; Phone: (208) 364-4099; Fax: (208) 364-4078; [rjoki@uidaho.edu](mailto:rjoki@uidaho.edu)*

is known about how a professional learning community (PLC) may contribute to preparing a school culture for large scale, systemic change.

A professional learning community (PLC), a forum that provides meaningful collaboration for educators, could prove helpful in accomplishing these goals. Researchers (Eaker et al., 2002, p. 9) claimed, "Professional learning communities are our best hope for reculturing our schools". Schmoker (2006) added, "Professional learning communities have emerged as arguably the best, most agreed upon means by which to continuously improve instruction and student performance" (p. 106).

More recently, researchers (Harris & Jones, 2010) presented evidence from a study in Wales suggesting professional learning communities have potential to advance large-scale or systemic reform efforts. Harris and Jones explained:

The model of professional learning communities being established in Wales is characterized by teachers participating in decision-making, having a sense of purpose, engaging in collaborative work and accepting joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work. (p. 174)

For nearly a decade, researchers (Barth, 2001; DuFour et al., 2004; Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 2003; Harris, 2003; Reeves, 2008; Schmoker, 2006) have recommended teacher leaders and teacher participation in leadership as ways to advance teaching and learning, but less has been written about how a PLC may contribute to building capacity for teacher leadership or preparing a school culture for large scale, systemic change. Proponents of shared or distributed leadership (Harris, 2003; Harris & Jones, 2010; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010) suggested leadership shared amongst teachers with the capacity to lead may be a key element for achieving school improvement goals.

Danielson (2006) defined a teacher leader as an individual who continues to teach, and nonetheless has the ability and desire to influence others within the school and beyond school walls to achieve higher levels of performance. Danielson clarified:

Mobilizing and energizing does not occur because of the role of the leader as boss (as might be the case with a principal), but rather because the individual is informed and persuasive. Therefore, an important characteristic of a teacher leader is expertise and skill in engaging others in complex work. (p. 12)

Teacher leaders (Barth, 2001) take on the responsibility of sharing management within the school to strategically improve the quality of educational practice. Barth claimed teacher leaders "become owners and investors within the school, rather than mere tenants" (p. 444).

Danielson (2006) expounded the importance of assisting teachers to develop potential as teacher leaders because teachers often remain in their positions at a school longer than a principal. Although evidence confirmed the effectiveness of using teacher leaders to advance teaching and learning, Danielson (2006) did not recommend teacher leadership as a means to achieve systemic change.

Changed practice that results from teacher leadership is significant and can reach into the very crevices of a school's program. But it is very different from the large-scale implementation of new programs that is typically involved in systemic change. (p. 15)

Teachers need assistance from experienced leaders to help build capacity for becoming a teacher leader. Fullan (2001) emphasized five components of leadership that should be practiced on a continual basis to achieve the desired level of effectiveness: (1) pursue moral purpose, (2) understand the change process, (3) develop relationships, (4) foster knowledge building, and (5) strive for coherence "with energy, enthusiasm, and hopefulness" (p. 11).

School administrators can provide professional development opportunities for teachers to practice these skills associated with leadership.

The purpose of this inquiry was to describe the experiences and perceptions of secondary teachers as they piloted a specialized program of professional development. Specifically, this article explores answers to the following questions: (1) How does a professional learning community (PLC) serve as a means to build capacity for teachers as leaders and to implement a plan for alternative scheduling and continuous improvement in a large, rural high school; and (2) What are the implications of teacher leaders working collaboratively to help prepare the culture of a secondary school for sustainable, systemic change?

## METHOD

The premise of this study is: A program of professional development, whereby teachers assume teacher leadership responsibilities and function within a PLC, can result in a mutually respectful environment conducive to bringing sustainable, systemic change.

### *SETTING*

This research was conducted in a rural public high school (N = 1250) in the northwestern region of the United States. When the study commenced, the district enrolled 4,076 students who were predominantly white (96%). District wide, 42% of the students were eligible for free and reduced meals based upon the federally subsidized National School Lunch and Breakfast Program.

### *DATA COLLECTION*

Prior to collecting data, the first author obtained permission from the building principal, the school district Board of Trustees, and from a university endorsed Internal Review Board. The committee approved the request upon determining the research proposal bore no significant risks to the participants involved.

Yin's (2003) case study strategy was selected as a means to explore the concept of using a PLC to build capacity for leading overall improvement at a rural public high school. A case study strategy was selected because this article presents the experiences and reflections of 10 secondary teachers as they worked toward bringing lasting improvement to a culture that had historically resisted change.

To triangulate findings (Merriam, 1998), multiple data sources were compared. Data sources included formal and informal interviews, open-ended surveys, minutes from meetings, email exchanges, school documents, notes from field observations, and the first author's personal journal. Agreement among the data sources strengthened validation (Creswell, 2007) of the findings reported in this study.

Case studies involve a considerable amount of fieldwork. The first author facilitated weekly team meetings for one school year. These optional, yet well-attended meetings allowed her to observe participants as they worked collaboratively toward their goals. Team members were encouraged to communicate in an open, straightforward manner during meetings. For informal interviews, participants discussed the events from their individual perspectives of their lived experiences.

### ***PARTICIPANTS***

This study focused on teachers' reflections of their attitudes toward change, their experiences on the team, and perceptions of themselves as leaders as they implemented a plan for block scheduling and overall school improvement. For this reason, the first author purposefully selected the 10 certified teaching members of the PLC who volunteered to participate in this study.

In addition to fulfilling their full-time teaching responsibilities and their commitments to the PLC, this group of teachers held an array of adjunct positions throughout the school; including coaching, advising extra-curricular clubs, supervising co-curricular activities, and serving as president of the local education association. Six of the ten participating teachers in the study were male and four were female. Eight of the ten participants chose to enroll in a corresponding university graduate level course designed to supplement the school improvement project.

Personal information was collected from the 10 teachers using an open-ended survey. Table 1 presents information about the 10 teachers who participated in the study. Pseudonyms were used to provide confidentiality for both the participants and the high school.

In addition to the 10 teachers, the school principal was asked to join the study to provide contextual information regarding the change. Before arriving at the school where the research took place, he worked eight years as a teacher, coach, and assistant principal. He had served as principal two years prior to when the study began.

### ***INTERVIEWS***

Two types of interviews, unstructured and semi-structured (Merriam, 1988) were selected for this investigation. Unstructured interviews and casual conversations occurred naturally throughout the duration of the study. Relevant discussions with members of the PLC were documented and transcribed into an electronic text within 48 hours of each event. Identities of all interviewees were kept confidential.

In addition to the unstructured interviews, a semi-structured, comprehensive interview format (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1988) was used with 10 teacher participants. These interviews were guided by a predetermined list of questions that emerged from observing team meetings and from the data collected during the preliminary stages of the study to develop the Interview Guide (see Appendix A). "As qualitative researchers, they become part of the process, continually making choices, testing assumptions, and reshaping their questions" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, pp. 4-5). All interviews were individually conducted, recorded, and transcribed by the first author.

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

Data obtained from school documents and memos, email communications, observational field notes, the first author's reflective journal, and interviews were organized and analyzed on a continual basis using a constant procedure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data were then classified into themes using a process of inductive analysis. After several readings, reoccurring themes and patterns were highlighted and labeled. Next, data were coded using a pattern-coding analysis (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994), and acronyms were used to identify codes. Miles and Huberman endorsed reducing sizable amounts of data into smaller units as an important function of pattern-coding.

Table 1. Description of Participants

Name	Total Years of Experience in Education	Total Years at Lake High	Gender	Age	Department or Discipline Adjunct Position(s) Held at Time of Study	Degree or Degrees Held	Enrolled in Three Credit Course?
Ben Parker	5	4	Male	28	History/Social Studies Coach, President of Local Education Association	B.S.	Yes
Vincent Rogers	8	2	Male	35	History/Social Studies Coach, Class Advisor	B.A.	Yes
Libby Hughes	12	12	Female	34	Foreign Languages Special Education	B.A. & M.A.	Yes
Max Lowery	18	8	Male	49	Mathematics Coach	B.A.S.	Yes
Clark Stephens	19	19	Male	41	Fine Arts Professional/Technical Education	B.S.	Yes
Paul Johnson	25	12	Male	54	Music Co-curricular Activities	B.F.A. & M.A.T	Yes
Betty Thompson	28	28	Female	51	English Club Advisor	B.S.	No
Rudy Mathews	30	1	Male	59	English Club Advisor	B.S. & M.A.	Yes
Helen James	32	17	Female	59	English Club Advisor	B.A.	Yes
Marie Wilson	33	29	Female	64	English	B.S.	No

Subsequently, the information was grouped into categories. As the process of analysis continued, the following themes became apparent: (a) Contextual history of advancing improvement at Lake High School; (b) Establishing a PLC and a plan for school improvement; and (c) Participants’ perceptions of their experiences and of themselves as leaders. Data relating to these categories were placed on index cards for further sorting and cross-referencing, which

allowed the researcher to compare and contrast data obtained from all sources. After coding and categorizing the data, an outline was created and presented to four other qualitative researchers for further analysis and interpretation. This process facilitated development of themes associated with the research questions and advanced the formation of theory essential to grounding the study.

To enhance trustworthiness and dependability of the study, a variety of data collection methods, triangulation of findings, member checks, and thick, rich description were utilized (Merriam, 2002). In-depth interviews were conducted with the high school principal and 10 of the 15 members of the PLC in an effort “to capture the deep meaning of experience in their own words” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 61). Data were triangulated, or collected from a variety of sources using a variety of methods. The process of triangulation involves bearing out evidence from multiple and different sources to substantiate a theme or perspective (Creswell, 2007).

To uphold a high level of rigor in the findings and interpretations, member checks were conducted regularly with participants in the study. Creswell (2007) maintained member checks constitute a technique used by researchers to present rough drafts of the work to participants for examination of the accuracy and credibility of the account. Participants were asked to review drafted sections of the work pertinent to their contribution. In addition, they were encouraged to give feedback regarding interpretation of the context. Once again, the first author presented a draft of the study to four experienced researchers for additional recommendations. Feedback from participants and veteran researchers helped the first author to accurately interpret findings.

## RESULTS

In this study, high school teachers participated in a program of professional development designed intentionally to build capacity for teacher leadership and sustainable improvement to the school’s academic program. For the purpose of this article, results are reported in three parts: (a) Contextual history of advancing improvement at Lake High School; (b) Establishing a PLC and a plan for school improvement; and (c) Participants’ perceptions of their experiences and of themselves as leaders.

### *CONTEXTUAL HISTORY OF ADVANCING IMPROVEMENT AT LAKE HIGH SCHOOL*

Nine individuals had served as principal of Lake High School in the 25 years directly preceding this study. When asked to describe the culture of their school or to recall any incidents in the past where improvement was initiated, participants described what they perceived as excessive administrative turnover and unsuccessful attempts at change. Marie Wilson shared her views regarding turnover in leadership:

We’ve had superintendents coming and going. We’ve had principal problems. We had one year where we didn’t have a principal – we had two people who were assistant principals. We’ve actually done that more than once. There’s always something!

Betty Thompson added:

New administrators. Constant change. When I say that, I think we’ve had six different or seven different principals in 28 years, so I’ve had many administrators. Sometimes, that’s not healthy because it happens way too often and you just get settled into one, and then things change constantly. I don’t look at that as positive; I look at that as negative. Constant change.

Clark Stephens described one of the most school wide attempts at change he had witnessed – a site-based management and learning program whereby teachers would be involved in decision-making. He recounted:

Everything in the math department was going to be very organized and making those decisions on site, as far as what we needed for curriculum, et cetera. And then, it just kind of fizzled out – never did hear anything more about it.

Paul Johnson spoke briefly of one exception, an event that had occurred approximately 10 years previous to the study, where a grassroots project had resulted in funding and building the high school’s weight room facility. “That was pretty positive,” he said.

Excluding the grassroots construction of the weight room, participants relayed no examples of past change that could be categorized as having been fully executed. Although Lake High School educators experienced successes that resulted in improvement to their school, participants were inclined to share candid stories about failed attempts at change or to have no recollection of change whatsoever. Most teachers in the study associated excessive administrative turnover with untenable change. Max Lowery explained:

You get teachers that stay in this building – in this job – for decades and you get administrators who stay here for – four years is a long haul for an administrator. And consequently, I think that there tends to be some resentment sometimes by teachers that administrators feel they can create the culture for the building, when they really are short timers.

Every participant in this query recognized faculty members had been adversely affected, at some level, by the ongoing administrative turnover. Past failed attempts at change left many teachers with a sense of wariness regarding the issue of school improvement. One participant described how teachers would focus, instead, on their students and activities within their classrooms. This was a way of shutting out the constantly changing environment that churned around them.

#### *ESTABLISHING THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AND DESIGNING THE PLAN FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT*

Change was imminent and the high school principal, Mr. Owens, had a vision for school reform that would facilitate higher standards of teaching and learning. He was in favor of employing a more learning-centered schedule and facilitating advancement of programs for students performing at all levels of academic achievement. Mr. Owens understood the importance of the high school schedule and its role in providing a quality academic program (Glatthorn, 2000).

Principal Owens proposed to address the needs of upper quartile students by increasing the number of Advanced Placement courses. CollegeBoard (2009) offered opportunities to earn college credit through Advanced Placement at the high school level. Students voluntarily take end-of-course exams that measure their proficiency in over 30 subjects. He also envisioned continued support for a solid career and technical program that emphasized work-based learning and dual enrollment opportunities to accommodate students in the two middle quartiles of achievement. Finally, Mr. Owens planned to improve the school’s remediation and credit recovery program to increase achievement for students performing in the lower quartile.

At the onset of fall semester, Principal Owens began recruiting at least one representative from each department to participate on the school improvement project. The only condition was Department Chairs were not allowed to volunteer to be on the team. Mr. Owens wanted to provide leadership opportunities to an additional tier of teachers on staff. Within two days, 15

individuals with diverse backgrounds and varied years of experience had volunteered to work on the initiative.

In addition to empowering teachers, Mr. Owens believed in creating opportunities for novice administrators to hone their leadership skills. He selected one of the school's assistant principals and first author of this article to facilitate the project. The role of the assistant principal was multifaceted; she embedded the following objectives into the teachers' program of professional development: (1) To design lessons and activities to increase members' understanding of the change process, (2) to structure opportunities for increasing knowledge about school scheduling and improved teaching and learning, (3) to encourage teachers to discover their own talents as leaders and agents of change, and (4) to create an environment that fostered healthy relationships.

Members of the newly formed PLC met for two full days in October to begin planning a more learning-centered schedule and ways to improve the academic program. Throughout the two-day session, numerous types of schedules were considered. The team-based structure of the meetings encouraged research, problem solving, and grassroots decision-making.

Members of the PLC reviewed professional literature and expressed openly their opinions of which practices were most applicable to their school. Ben Parker described team members' involvement in completing research assignments associated with the project:

Early on, there was quite a bit of reading of professional literature as we were trying to decide, "Do we want to make this switch? Do we have other options? If we do make the switch, what kind of other options do we have?" So we were doing a fair amount of just researching the literature that's out there.

After much deliberation, the team adopted an eight period A-B alternating block schedule that incorporates one 90-minute teacher preparatory period each day. An A-B block schedule, also called a Day 1, Day 2 block schedule is described by Canady and Rettig (1995) as a plan where students and teachers meet for half of their classes one day and the other half the next day for extended periods or blocks of time. When fully executed, the schedule would offer 64 total credits with 45 total credits required for graduation.

After finalizing details associated with the design of the new block schedule, the team moved forward in conjunction with a three credit, graduate level course. Linking the school improvement project to the graduate level course resulted in new opportunities for growth. In the new schedule, teachers would be faced with 90-minute class periods, which would require employing different methods of teaching. To teach effectively in the block schedule, new and experienced teachers would have to reassess their pedagogies, learn new strategies, and revise course curricula. One teacher observed:

Really, there are 70 teachers in this building - and some of us have been here for 30 years.

But we're all going to be brand new next year when we teach in the block because it's a whole new style, a whole new way of teaching, a whole new way of thinking about it.

While most team members agreed with the fundamental reasons for switching to the block schedule, many were concerned over the possibility of teachers on the faculty disputing details of the proposed change. Despite reservations, team members moved forward and proposed their initiative to the superintendent and to the school's department chairs in November. The plan was unveiled to the entire faculty in December. According to an entry in the first author's journal, the presentation provoked a heated discussion where some teachers aired their concerns over facility use, hiring additional teachers to maintain lower class size, providing quality teacher training, and ensuring daily 90-minute preparatory periods. Team members listened to their colleagues' concerns and methodically adjusted their proposal.

In January, the team formally presented their recommendations for block scheduling and school improvement to the district's Board of Trustees at a regular school board meeting. School board trustees and community patrons commended the team for their enthusiasm and their commitment to students. One participant recalled:

I think they saw – as we had talked about before – that passion and that excitement about it, and I think that kind of made an impact on them. And they eventually wanted to get involved because they saw that we were so excited about it and that we had put all this work into it.

The team was asked to hold additional informational meetings with parents and community members. In anticipation of board approval, team members forged ahead with their plan to pre-register students for the following school year. The trustees officially adopted the team's proposal for block scheduling and school improvement at their board meeting in March.

#### *PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES AND OF THEMSELVES AS LEADERS*

While many teachers came to the project harboring feelings of uncertainty and hopes of achieving goals specific to their own departments, they worked as a team to create a unified vision and a plan to conceivably benefit the entire school. By the end of the school year, participants conveyed positive feelings about their experiences and about their cohorts within the PLC. In their interviews, teachers spoke of making a difference for students, as though they understood their primary function was to serve a higher purpose. Ben Parker expressed:

I think, as teachers, you're always looking at what can make a difference for students, and I think we saw that. We saw that this [block schedule] is going to give kids more opportunities to take the classes they want to take. This is going to give them more flexibility. This is going to prevent them from making some of those tough choices.

Even during complex and sometimes heated discussions, team members displayed collegial attitudes toward one another and communicated professionally. Betty Thompson observed:

I felt this staff that I worked with, this group of people, are very creative, and not thinking just of themselves – thinking of the whole school. They weren't there for, "Well, this is best for me. *This is best for us.*" And I liked that attitude. That doesn't happen here a lot.

Max Lowery added:

It was a much better process – a process that not just the [PLC] bought into, but that the whole building bought into. I think, because their peers were involved in the decision-making more than the administration, and because real decision-making authority was granted to the [PLC].

The PLC served as a conduit for educators to develop a sense of camaraderie and coherence, allowing ample time and opportunity to share in a practical experience of moral purpose, collegiality, and shared decision-making. Opportunities for shared learning allowed members of the PLC to emerge as teacher leaders within the school, which proved instrumental in designing and implementing a plan for needed change.

Team members demonstrated a noticeable interest in styles of leadership capable of bringing change. Their attention increased during discussions about transformational leadership, organizational culture, and strategic change. They were especially interested in the concepts of building capacity, communicating vision, and creating a learning organization (Senge, 1990) as essential elements in the process of change. In subsequent meetings and presentations, team members demonstrated a strong sense of moral purpose for increasing learning opportunities for students and for making decisions based on the good of the entire school.

Participants' initial reasons for joining the team varied. The diversity of their responses speaks to the degree of honesty in their answers and to their motivation at the time. When asked later in their interviews to describe their roles in the PLC, members never used the following terms to describe themselves: *Leaders, teacher leaders, or agents of change*. Nonetheless, they referred to themselves in terms characteristic of effective leadership: *Spokesman, presenter, guide, liaison, communicator, listener, anchor, and motivator*.

Clark Stephens, who had been through many changes at the school, felt he could represent the math department and add valuable input to the process. He said, "My role kind of became a little bit viewed as that of a spokesperson. The more seasoned I've become as an educator, the more I feel that I need to voice my opinion."

While he had initially volunteered for the credits, Max Lowery revealed his strengths as the team rehearsed their formal presentation to the board. He humbly stated in his interview what others had already observed, "I know as it progressed, other people asked me to take a little bit stronger role in the presentation of it, because they thought I could speak lucidly".

Rudy Mathews felt his experience of having taught in a block schedule, would allow him to contribute something to the committee. He would later describe his role as a guide to others. "I kind of viewed my role as a person who has experienced this change before, and more as a person who could say a few guiding words, and back up and let people think about what I had to say".

Ben Parker had also experienced teaching in the block schedule when he worked in another state. "I thought my experience could be an important part of that process – that I could help assist in that, and bring up some of the concerns, and make sure that those concerns and views could be alleviated". Ben Parker would later describe his role as a liaison between the teachers on the committee and other teachers in the district.

Marie Wilson had initially joined the team because she was curious about the entire process. She later saw herself as a resource for other teachers to acquire information. Ms. Wilson stated that she had never been in favor of "secret societies," and she felt part of her job was to communicate to others what was going on.

Betty Thompson became a team member by replacing another teacher who had been unable to fulfill his obligations as a delegate. Ms. Thompson later recalled positive feelings about her capacity to listen effectively to teachers who were not part of the PLC. "They come to you for feedback because they're not there, and they use you as a sounding board".

Paul Johnson admitted he had originally joined the team so he could advocate for an additional teacher in the art department. "Sometimes, I felt like I was – I don't know if this is a good term, but an anchor to bring people back to reality a little bit".

Helen James disclosed she was against block scheduling when she joined the PLC. At the end of the school year, her reservations about block scheduling had been replaced by feelings of enthusiasm and team spirit. She said,

After a while, I think we all felt it was all of ours. It's really hard to say which part I did...I've changed. I really want something different, and I'm pretty enthusiastic about it!

Ms. James and her colleagues participated in an empowering, transformational process by which they achieved remarkable success. She had witnessed the school's tumultuous past as it evolved into an isolated culture, skeptical and resistant to change. With the assistance of her peers she became a promoter of shared vision and moral purpose, a teacher leader, and a purveyor of hope for improvement at Lake High School.

## DISCUSSION

In response to increased federal standards of accountability, state education officials require individual schools in each district to submit a plan for the implementation of continuous school improvement. Replication of the process for school improvement used in this study is encouraged at state and national levels.

Several leadership and procedural lessons can be learned from this study. Lake High School teachers' tendency to practice in isolation sustained a compartmentalized culture, impeding their ability to achieve necessary improvement. Elmore (2000) addressed this phenomenon when he wrote, "Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement" (p. 20). Providing opportunities for teachers to participate collegially within a PLC was a powerful way to help prepare the culture of a secondary school for change. Teachers were granted genuine decision-making authority as they designed a plan for overall school improvement.

Encouraging teachers to conduct their own research, as they sought to understand concepts of change management and advance their teaching practices, helped them to make more concrete meaning of theories. While it is not being suggested that PLCs are the absolute solution to effective school reform, elements of professional learning and collaboration in Lake High School's program of professional development provided opportunities for team members to develop relationships, moral purpose, and increased levels of understanding.

Barth (2001) added:

Rather than remain passive recipients - even victims - of what their institutions deal to them, teachers who lead help to shape their own schools and, thereby, their own destinies as educators (p. 444).

Lake High School teachers participated in a process of authentic collaborative leadership and implemented a plan for large scale improvement from within a culture that had historically resisted change. Well-balanced elements of practice and theory may provide a feasible approach to building capacity for teacher leadership and for implementing programs of continuous improvement in our nations' schools.

Though findings in this case study are significant to the future success of continuous improvement at this school, we do not know whether the results of this study pertaining to teacher leadership will be applicable to a similar project in another school. For example, results of a study conducted in a large urban district (Scribner & Bradley-Levine, 2010) suggested the meaning of the teachers' empowerment seemed less authentic in a larger, more bureaucratic culture. Scribner and Bradley-Levine reported that "teachers did not know the procedures, recommended timelines, or processes for making sure their plans were realized" (p. 515).

Further research is also needed using a professional learning community to build capacity for teacher leadership and change within a secondary school. It will be especially helpful to know whether a professional learning community can serve as a vehicle for building capacity for reform in other large, rural, secondary schools. In order to increase understanding of this phenomenon and to assure external validity of this study, it is recommended further comparative empirical studies on this topic be conducted in public and private schools, at the secondary and elementary levels, and in rural areas and urban areas.

Finally, a viable program of professional development that promotes strategies for building capacity for teacher leadership and change management has potential for school leaders to successfully address federal and state expectations and standards for school improvement. The

idea of using a PLC as a vehicle to build capacity for teacher leadership and large scale, sustainable change holds promise.

## REFERENCES

- Barth, R. S. (2001). Teacher leader. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(6), 443-449.
- Canady, R. L., & Rettig, M. D. (1995) *Block scheduling: A catalyst for change in high schools*. Princeton, NJ: Eye on Education.
- College Board. (2009). Retrieved from <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/about.html>.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Danielson, C. (2006). *Teacher leadership that strengthens professional practice*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Alexandria, VA.
- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Eaker, R., DuFour, R., & DuFour, R. (2002). *Getting started: Reculturing schools to become professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Elmore, R. F. (2000, Winter). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. New York: Paper presented for The Albert Shanker Institute, Washington, DC. Retrieved from <http://www.shankerinstitute.org/education.html>.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Glatthorn, A. A. (2000). *The principal as curriculum leader: Shaping what is taught and tested* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The development of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading educational change: Reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3), 329-351.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. (2010). Leadership for learning: Does collaborative leadership make a difference in school improvement? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(6), 654-678. doi: 10.1177/1741143210379060
- Harris, A. (2003). Teacher leadership as distributed leadership: Heresy, fantasy or possibility? *School Leadership & Management*, 23(3), 313-324.
- Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2010). Professional learning communities and system improvement. *Improving Schools*, 13(2), 172-181. doi: 10.1177/1365480210376487
- Lieberman, A., & Mace, D. (2008). Teacher learning: the key to educational reform. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(3), 226-234. doi: 10.1177/0022487108317020.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. & Associates (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, M. A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Public Law 107-110.

- Reeves, D. (2008). Reframing teacher leadership to improve your school. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Scribner, S., & Bradley-Levine, J. (2010). The meaning(s) of teacher leadership in an urban high school reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(4), 491-522. doi: 10.1177/0013161X10383831
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Schmoker, M. (2006). *Results now: How we can achieve unprecedented improvements in teaching and learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand, Oaks, CA: Sage.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions: Perspectives on School-Centered Professional Development and Organizational Change

Topic: School-centered professional development as a vehicle to implement change at a rural secondary school.

Purpose: To find out how educators feel about participating in a professional development [program] to bring about overall reform at their school.

I understand that you have been involved in a study with a group of teachers and staff members piloting a school-centered professional development program in your school. You refer to this working group as the block schedule team.

1. Can you describe for me some of your in-service or professional development experiences you have had since you were first employed here?
2. Can you describe for me any incidents in the past where change or improvement was initiated at your school? Can you describe the process? Can you describe the outcome?
3. How did you become a member of the block schedule team?
4. Can you describe for me your current school-centered professional development experience so far? (1) embedded course, (2) workshops, and (3) professional teaching portfolio.
  - a. How does it compare to your other professional development experiences?
5. Can you describe what it has been like for you working with this group of teachers and staff members on the block schedule team?
6. How do you view your role on the block schedule team?
7. How do you think other teachers in the school view your role on the block schedule team?
8. Can you describe for me what the culture of your school has been like since you were first employed here? Is the culture of the school ready to accept this change?
9. How will you know when this particular change has been effective?
10. Is there anything more you would like to add that we may have left out?

*All information you provide is completely confidential. Your actual name will never be used in writings or in conversations with others. A pseudonym will be assigned to you, your town, and your place of employment. All data will be stored in a secure area. All artifacts, documentation, field notes, and audiotapes will be destroyed as soon as they are no longer needed.*