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An Overview

Collaborative Curriculum Design as Professional Learning

Traditional models and traditional perceptions get in the way of our seeing things differently.

—Thomasina D. Piercy, *Compelling Conversations*

We live our lives and do our jobs based on a huge internal data base of assumptions and ideas, but we usually aren't very aware of what they are or how they shape our behavior. As artisans and practitioners, we have not taken the time and discipline to examine the underlying principles that guide our success.

—Noel Tichy, *The Cycle of Leadership*

Throughout the many shifts in purposes of education and legislation, national, state, and local, as well as the deeply embedded historical discourse, educators are challenged to sift through all of the assumptions and ideas that impact teaching and learning and to call into question those assumptions that are barriers to student and staff learning. Throughout this chapter and those that follow, my wish is that teaching teams spend significant time surfacing unquestioned principles and assumptions that are deeply rooted in the culture of the school and reevaluate those that are impeding the progress of the community.

ASSUMPTIONS

Assumptions, undergirding principles, or beliefs held by individuals and communities are either generative or barriers. These deeply held beliefs often

prevent us from seeing with new eyes and being different observers of the world. If educators view curriculum design processes as professional learning, they hold the following assumptions:

- As all teachers and administrators in a school engage in meaningful conversations about their work and the work of their students, they journey into purposeful, powerful professional learning.
- Professional learning communities that are successful with all students engage everyone in the school in working on developing common curriculum, common assessment strategies, and high-yield instructional practices to ensure that they are clear about what students are to learn and how well students are learning.
- They believe that the quality of their work and their learning together directly impacts student learning. They never give up on any student. Students know it because the staff members are continuously, skillfully adopting new instructional strategies to extended opportunities for them to learn. They are purposefully engaging their students in conversations about the quality of their work.
- These professional learning teams are in continuous inquiry and are persistent about reflecting on their practice. They are purposefully engaged in continuous study together to make precise, thoughtful modifications in their work.

THE CHALLENGE OF DEVELOPING A SHARED VISION OF CURRICULUM DESIGN AS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Many educators have a very distinct assumption that professional development is attending a workshop, going to a conference, or taking training from an outside expert. Because this vision of professional development is so deeply ingrained, educators are challenged to see differently. School communities are challenged to understand that daily collaborative work to educate all children is professional learning. If teams would seek those organizations that exhibit positive deviance in their community, they would discover healthy organizations whose members work closely together and who sense not only their control but also their power in educating all students well.

Professional learning communities have been the subject of much research over the past few decades (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hall & Hord, 2001; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Pervasive throughout the literature is the concept that professional learning communities that develop a sense of internal control over their own learning achieve greater success with all students. These communities engage in collective inquiry and continuous collaboration. They have an intense focus on student outcomes, are data driven, share common visions and values, and are intensely focused on those systems that they control: curriculum, assessment, instruction, and extended learning opportunities for students. These communities value and are skilled in collaboration and celebrations. They are self-sustaining, energized, and generative organizations.

The principals, the school leadership team, and teacher leaders in these communities skillfully nurture and sustain the community by leading all in the school to

stay focused on student outcomes and the role they play in impacting student learning. They work diligently to ensure that the norms and values of the community are lived by all, foster collaboration, and embed professional learning. They guide the community to share stories of successes and celebrate their efforts. They understand change theory, manage time and resources to support the community, build alliances, are persistent, and remove barriers. They model what they want to see in others (Blankstein, 2004; Glatthorn, 2000; Hirsh & Killion, 2007; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

The challenge for those wishing to shift their school to one of collaboration and student success is to find schools that are honestly on a pathway to becoming powerful professional learning communities—the positive deviance. Educational researchers and leaders, such as Gene Hall, Shirley Hord (2001), Shirley Hord and Bill Sommers (2008), Dennis Sparks (2006), and Mike Schmoker (2006), all reference the discrepancy between what educators know to do and what they are actually doing. And yet, educators are still challenged to close the knowing/doing gap—knowing what high-quality professional development really is and actually ensuring that every day, every staff member in the school is meaningfully engaged in it. Though educators know that teaching teams who work collaboratively on the essential curriculum increase student achievement and staff learning, many schools leave curriculum work to district-level leaders or focus on using textbooks as their curriculum. Though educators know that teaching teams who use common assessments make better decisions about instruction, many school leaders allow teachers to work in isolation and develop individual assessment strategies. Though educators know that teaching teams who analyze student work and monitor student progress regularly are more successful with all children, many schools provide little or no time for such daily community study and work, collaboration, and reflection on their practices.

Those communities that are most successful at professional learning do not focus their attention on taking training, going to workshops and conferences, or adding a few new strategies to their instructional tool kit. These communities regularly see themselves as continuous learners who learn through the thoughtful work of shaping and redesigning all of the systems that impact student learning: curriculum, assessment, instruction, and extended learning opportunities for students.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- How do school leadership teams capture a vision of all teaching teams in the school engaged daily in curriculum design, as they are engaged in professional learning?
- How do school leadership teams facilitate the community of learners to focus on the essential work that increases student learning?

A VISION

Powerful professional learning communities have clarity about who they are and their roles and responsibilities for increasing student learning. They view themselves as eager and aggressive learners who

- share the responsibilities of leadership;
- hold high expectations for all staff to engage in the community and gently confront lack of commitment to the vision;
- intensely focus on student outcomes and use multiple sources of data to drive community decisions;
- develop shared values and vision about the work of the professional learning community;
- assess regularly their strengths and weaknesses, their assets and challenges, in successfully moving toward their vision;
- systematically, purposefully
 - study state and national content standards and establish targeted, complex standards for their grade level or course of study;
 - establish grade-level or course curriculum maps or annual work plans that determine the pacing of those targeted standards;
 - determine the undergirding principles or concepts that make those standards essential learnings for all students;
 - select content and instructional materials that are intriguing to students and assist them in learning those standards and concepts;
 - design common formal and informal assessment strategies;
 - develop task analyses and rubrics or scoring guides to assess student work;
 - select anchor works or exemplars for students to use to assess the quality of their own work;
 - regularly monitor the progress of their students in learning the standards and concepts; and
 - design instruction and extended learning opportunities to ensure students are learning what is essential to learn; and
- they take full responsibility for the quality of their work and the work of their students. They reflect on their own work continuously to modify their practice and determine areas for team learning.

Figure 1.1 Comparing Traditional Approaches to Professional Development With the Professional Learning Community

<i>Traditional Perspectives</i>	<i>Professional Learning Communities</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff members are in isolation or in small teams that focus predominately on student behavior. • The staff views itself as only loosely responsible for student outcomes and often believes that the reason students are not successful is result of a lack of student effort. • Teachers often work in isolation to plan their instruction and rarely participate in study, discovery, or planning with others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff members are continuously engaged in systematic, meaningful conversations and share ideas and strategies with each other to enhance the quality of teaching of everyone in every classroom. • The community anchors itself in a culture of high expectations and high performance for themselves and for their students. They hold constant a norm that learning together strengthens everyone in the community. • Each team member makes significant contributions to the success of all. They honor individual student and team needs, interests and goals, and engage purposefully

<i>Traditional Perspectives</i>	<i>Professional Learning Communities</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teachers look to the textbooks, district-developed curriculum documents, or state documents to guide their work. • There is no coherence or alignment of the curriculum or instructional practices from classroom to classroom, course to course. Even though many individual teachers value real-life connections and global perspectives for their students, they often stand out among their peers as either master teachers or zealots. • Teachers assign work, grade the work, and prepare for the next unit. There is very little thought about what concepts or competencies students are failing to understand and little thought of designing extended strategies for ensuring students become proficient in what they are missing. Though the individual teachers often reflect on their units and lessons and make modifications in them, they rarely discuss their ideas with anyone else. • The stress level of all staff may be high. The common conversation is about low morale. Fear exists among staff members about their future in the organization, and people are reluctant to share formally anything with anyone in the school or ask for help when they feel unsuccessful. • Staff members view the principal as the leader and look to this person for answers and directions. 	<p>in problem solving, experimentation, observation, study, and planning to nurture and sustain conceptual learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The community focuses on the essential work: curriculum, assessment, instruction, and student outcomes. • The team designs challenging, complex curricula together that engages students in exploring a global perspective, makes real-life connections, and creates responsible citizens. They use multiple resources to assist them in this study and design: state curriculum, national content standards, needs of their community, state, and nation. They capitalize on the expertise and deep understanding of the concepts and principles of their content areas, and the thinking and expertise of others in the field. • The team systematically monitors student learning and explores ways to ensure the success of every person. They are continuously reflecting on their work, making modifications, and exploring areas of study to assist them in increasing the effectiveness of their practice. • Knowing the power of social and emotional well-being in any community, the professional learning community nurtures the physical, mental, emotional, nutritional, and social facets of life that undergird and nurture success for all. They develop personal relationships with students to know them well and to support and strengthen their total well-being. • The learning community assumes a vital responsibility for building and inspiring skillful leadership throughout the organization, among students, staff, parents, and community. The principals play a key role in being the model learners. They value learning and the contributions of all in the school. They build alliances with students, the school leadership team, the leadership of teacher organizations, key informal leaders in the school, and parents and community to sustain the vision and to understand the progress of the learning community. • The central office support staff members, including the superintendent, are focused on nurturing principals to lead professional learning communities. They, too, establish systems for learning in which they engage collaboratively with principals, facilitate principals working with each other, engage in study together, and apply strategies that develop and sustain change.

CHALLENGE STRATEGIES

Throughout the rest of this book, each chapter will include challenge strategies to guide professional learning communities on their “learning by doing” journey. The strategies themselves are designed to be simple and easy to use. The challenge for any community is to commit to deep reflective thought, to work diligently together, and to change the practices of the team in their school and in all classrooms—to engage in the practice of authentic, powerful professional learning.

The Challenge Strategy for the Book

1. Explore, as a community, each of the assumptions at the beginning of each chapter. Question them. Debate them. Come to your own assumptions and write them down clearly. If desired, use Resource A, Generating Assumptions, and see an example of the assumptions or principles of the National Staff Development Council in Resource B to guide others through the process. Ask staff members to write their assumptions before coming to an initial session to discover commonalities and to debate differences. Seek common ground on generative assumptions to guide the work of the community.

2. Discuss the community’s assumptions regularly and make changes or additions to them as the community continues its work on its learning journey. By doing so, the community begins its journey in building a shared vision of itself as a learning team.

3. Establish a system for the professional community members to reflect individually on their new practices, their work, and their learnings throughout the journey. Consider providing a journal for each member, a diary board, a blog, a common community journal, or a reflecting box for individual responses kept in the teaching workroom area or in the professional library area. Share these reflections on a regular basis during staff meetings or during common planning and collaboration time.

4. As a community, consider the essential questions at the beginning of each chapter. Add your own questions. Delay the answering of them until after the team has conducted research and study, worked through the suggested challenge strategies, and reflected on what they are learning and doing. Respond to the questions as a community and record reflections and comments. Keep a running chart. Select any of the following reflective questions, or design your own. *What did we know? What do we know now? and, What we are exploring and hoping to learn? What implications does this have for our practice? How will our practice change? What visible evidence would an outsider identify as the changes we have made in our practices?*

5. Review the suggested challenge strategies. Analyze the team’s strengths and weaknesses based on the assumptions and essential questions. Determine the most effective strategies that best meet the needs of the team. Modify the challenge strategies suggested, or design your own.

6. Monitor the progress of the teams regularly to celebrate successes, make modifications in the strategies, and reflect on what the community is learning. Record the reflections and begin to gather data about changes in the team: new assumptions that we are adopting, new strategies we are using, and new attitudes that we have developed. Authentically celebrate these shifts. Celebrations build energy for learning and risk taking.

7. Review the assumptions and make revisions before proceeding to the next chapter. Begin to declare the vision that is emerging of the team as a professional learning community. See an example of a school's vision of itself as a professional learning community in the Resource C.

8. Celebrate the work and successes of the team; challenge everyone to engage energetically in the next chapter.

Until these eight challenge strategies become a new practice or habit, review them prior to beginning each new chapter.

A STORY

Heritage Elementary is a large elementary school with a very diverse student and staff population in Woodburn, Oregon, just outside of Portland in the heart of the Willamette Valley. Their student population is approximately 42% Hispanic, 33% Russian immigrant, 25% Anglo and Other. Annually, approximately 90% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Far more students' first language is Russian or Spanish than English. After several years of poor performance on state assessments, the school leadership team began to shape a vision for their school. They worked with their district's mission and core values to establish high expectations for their students and to embrace the diversity in the school. They committed to establishing a professional learning community to take responsibility for the success of every child and to learn what they needed to learn to increase student performance on standardized tests. The leadership team applied for a state grant to achieve their goals. Their school leadership team challenged itself to facilitate the learning of everyone in the school and to monitor the progress of each grade level. They established a clear vision of the transformation. The school would develop and continuously work on

- common curriculum that was meaningful and challenging to the students;
- common assessments that expected students to show what they were learning in real world applications;
- informal assessments to check progress on skills acquisition tested on the state test;
- instruction that was literacy based, regardless of the content, and mindful of the second language learner; and
- engaging the students' parents as partners in their children's learning.

In addition, the leadership team established a curriculum articulation/alignment K–5 team that would ensure high standards and expectations for every child, curriculum articulation from grade level to grade level, and elimination of curriculum gaps and overlaps between units of study and between grade levels.

They began their work with an extensive analysis of their state's curriculum and assessment targets. Each grade-level team established common curriculum maps, common assessments, and common units of study. They hired an outside consultant to facilitate them through the process. She worked with each grade-level team for several years, several times a year. The curriculum articulation

committee, representing each grade level, shared each grade level's map and discussed whether or not expectations for each grade level were high enough, whether there was enough emphasis on writing across the curriculum, whether or not the mathematics and science curriculum standards were sufficiently integrated with language arts, and any curriculum issue that would ensure high expectations for all students. They also analyzed whether or not assessment strategies were aligned with the standards. They explored whether or not curriculum expectations and assessment strategies were meaningful to students. They gave students multiple opportunities to show what they knew as well as what they did not know. The team made recommendations regularly for changes in the work of each grade level.

As the grade-level teams worked several years on their annual work plans or curriculum maps, they developed essential questions to guide the inquiry of students each trimester. These teams designed and used common culminating demonstrations for each unit of study that led students to answer the essential questions. In addition, they designed informal, statelike assessment instruments, became effective users of the state's test specifications and online assessments, and used their teacher-designed assessments to monitor the progress of their students on state test targeted standards.

As they studied together, they became more concerned about their instruction. In their learning communities, they determined a need for and engaged in long-term, extensive training from national leaders in literacy development and second-language acquisition. These training programs offered extensive follow-up. The leadership team continued to access these resources for several years until the entire staff had competence using the strategies in their classrooms. They conducted walk-throughs regularly to check their progress in implementing these new strategies in all classrooms. In addition, they established literacy and second-language-learner coaches to assist teachers in using these strategies effectively and to continue their own study. These coaches began their own learning journey. Currently, they meet regularly to support each other, to study together, to practice coaching others, to seek training when needed, and to develop coaching strategies for assisting teachers in using the agreed-upon strategies. They became a community of learners.

As they felt more confident about their curriculum, and with the support of their coaches, grade-level teams began to plan instruction together. The teams were often challenged by their own work. The old assumption that doing things together killed individual teacher creativity kept interfering. The assumption was often discussed in team meetings:

We do not have to do the same things together. It doesn't matter how we each teach; just that our students achieve the same outcomes. But Routman does say that there are certain strategies that develop better literacy skills in students. So does Harwayne and Miller.

Teams had to constantly remind themselves that the research they were doing clearly stated, "We are better, more creative, when we work together. We are most systematic in implementing the strategies that we are learning when we design lessons together. We learn exponentially when we share with each other."

They started their instructional design with their curriculum maps and common assessment strategies. They designed instructional plans that they would all follow week by week, day by day. They debated with each other about the most effective instructional strategies for each unit to achieve the expected outcomes for students. To determine the most powerful strategies for their students, they studied authors'

works together, such as *Conversations* by Regie Routman (2000), *Going Public* by Shelley Harwayne (1999), *Subject Matters* by Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman (2004), *Mosaic of Thought* by Keene and Zimmerman (1997), *Reading with Meaning* by Debbie Miller (2002), *Significant Studies for Second Grade* by Karen Ruzzo and Mary Anne Sacco (2004), and many more. As they studied, they applied what they were learning through their readings, and they revised their instructional plans. They intentionally tried new strategies together that they were learning from their readings and reflected on the impact of that work on student learning. I will always remember overhearing kindergarten teachers who had been reading about strategies to increase silent reading time for first graders. They decided they wanted their kindergarten students to begin using the same skills. As they planned their lessons together, implemented them, and reflected on their work, they shared what they were learning:

We need to slow down. Kindergarten students can spend time reading silently, but we need to give them more time at the start to explore the books together. We just need to persist. Each time we have students use this strategy, they get better! We just need to be patient and give them more opportunities to practice. They are really becoming readers. Let's redesign next week to allow for more exploration of books by the students first.

The principal played a significant role in all their team meetings. She often was a participant. Her questions would generate new ideas, move a strategy along, or lead the team to think more deeply about their work. Once, when I was in her office, she could not wait to tell me about her plan. The team was learning a new instructional strategy, and she was to try out the strategy first in the classroom. She had found several great poetry selections that she was going to use, and she and the teaching team had designed a lesson together that she thought really applied the strategy well. She would take the risk first.

Since all in the community truly believed parents were essential partners with them in the success of their children, all grade-level teams began hosting regular parent nights for students to share what they were learning. Students shared their writings, their scientific inquiries, their learnings about Oregon history, and their love of art. And, of course, all these parent nights were in three languages. At one such parent night, I had the opportunity to sit with a young first-grade student who enthusiastically was explaining to me what she was learning about the habitats of ocean mammals. The book that she had written was in a mixture of Spanish and English. I was struggling with the Spanish, so she took on the responsibility of teaching me the Spanish vocabulary so that I would understand. A first grader!

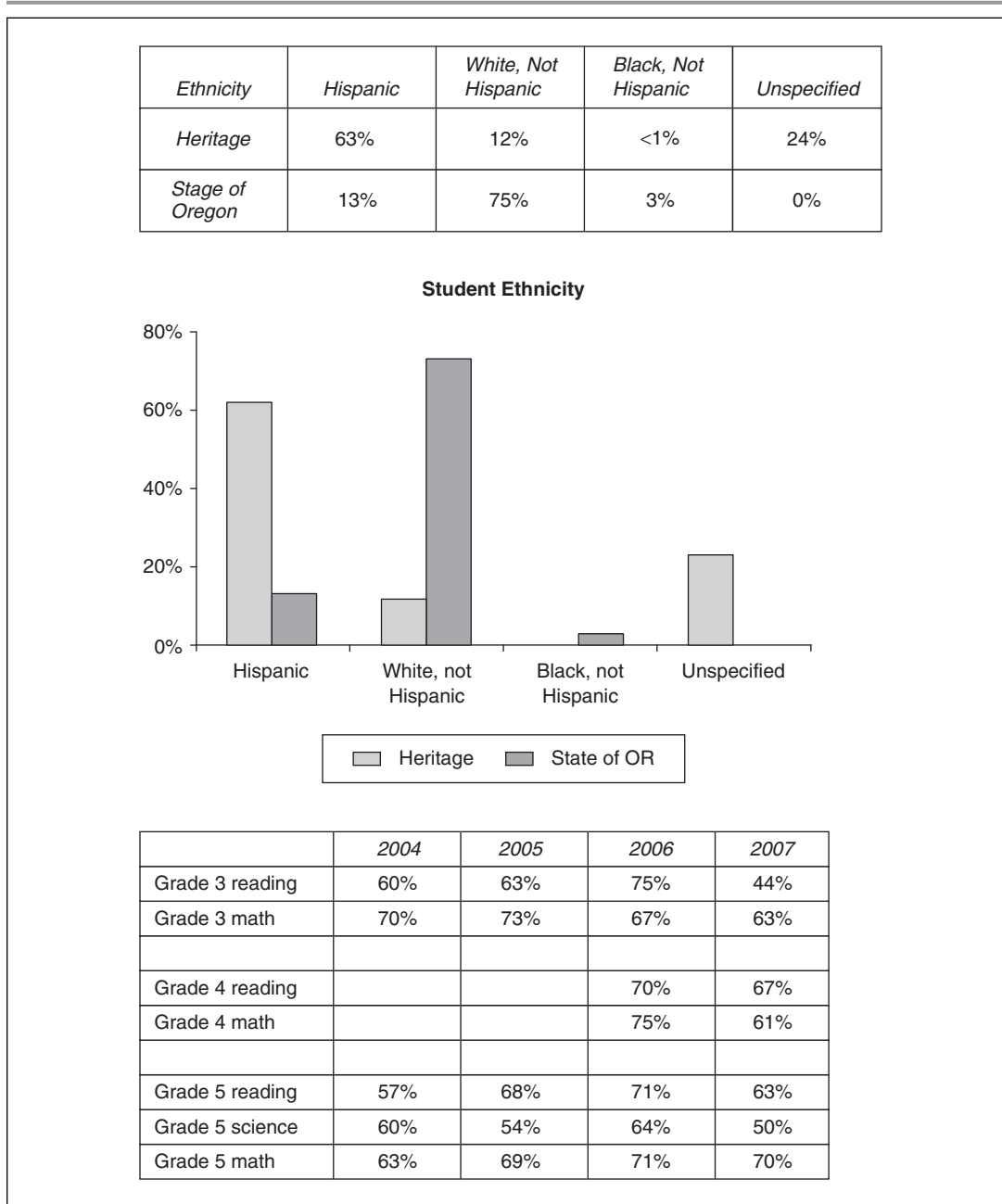
As all of the teams in the school became more and more systematic and purposeful in their work, they began to assess how well they were doing in achieving their vision. They began to post their students' work, pictures of parent nights and student productions, and their progress on achieving their goals in the hallways and around the media center in the middle of the school. All who were in the school or visited it could see the students' work and progress.

The journey was not, nor is it now, an easy one. The teams often struggled with many issues. Sometimes they worked on getting along with each other. When they felt that they were not accomplishing what they set out to achieve fast enough, they sometimes lost energy. Sometimes they pushed back when they felt too much administrative pressure to work harder and move faster. Of course, there were and still are the constant changes in expectations and assessment strategies by their state.

Not only did they experience imposed changes from outside of the school but also from within. Frequently, there were changes in team members from grade level to grade level, in growing numbers of students, and in new strategies and programs adopted by their school district. The school leadership team persisted!

What was the outcome of all this work? They were recognized nationally for their efforts in raising the achievement of second-language learners. They moved off their state’s low-performing list after two years of extensive work, and they continue to meet the state’s expectations.

Figure 1.2 Heritage Elementary Demographic and Student Performance Data, Woodburn, Oregon, 2004–2007



Note: There was a new principal in the school in 2007.

Their journey will never be complete. The challenges will continue to grow, but the professional learning community that has developed will work together to ensure that they and their students are engaged in purposeful work and meaningful learning.

IN SUMMARY

High-quality professional learning communities increase the success of their students as they engage in purposeful study and learning while developing and implementing high-yield strategies to ensure

- high-quality curriculum for every child,
- a curriculum commonly used by all teaching teams at a grade level or course of study,
- aligned assessment strategies,
- meaningful, intriguing instructional strategies, and
- extended opportunities for students to learn.

The community nurtures and cares for each member to support high-quality instruction in every classroom. They are in continuous study and reflection and convinced that their efforts directly impact the learning of each and every student. Everyone assumes responsibility for student learning and takes ownership and leadership responsibilities for achieving the school's goals for all students. The school principal and the school leadership team play an integral role in orchestrating the sometimes harmonious, sometimes cacophonous, symphony of learning.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What are the big ideas or concepts that you are taking away from reading Chapter 1? What are the possible implications of these ideas for your team?
- What challenge strategies have you and your team used? What assumptions did you hold that facilitated collaboration and community learning? What assumptions are barriers?
- As you were reading the chapter, what celebrations are in order for your learning community?
- What are your team's greatest challenges in embedding daily conversations and professional learning about curriculum systems?
- What learning do you as a team want to do to explore these concepts deeper?
- What next steps will you take? Why? What hopes and aspirations do you have for your team if you take these steps?

EXTENDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

1. Research other schools in your own district, schools inside the United States, or around the world that are very successful professional learning communities. Visit with them about the strategies that work best for them. Explore with

them how they became a professional learning community, what barriers they overcame, and how they overcame them. Ask them to share with you what barriers they are still facing and what strategies are essential for them to continue to sustain their energy and work. Reflect on this research and what everyone in the community is learning. Determine possible implications for your team and next steps. Then act!

2. Conduct a walk through in your school. Consider the vision you and your leadership team have of your professional learning community. Use this vision to establish what you will look for as you walk. What strengths did you find that connect to that vision? What challenges do you see? What surprised you? What next steps might you wish to explore? (See Resource D, *A Learning Walk*.)
3. Survey your staff or host focus group meetings to uncover the staff's assumptions about professional learning, about their assessments of their strengths and their challenges related to professional development, and their attitudes toward charting and establishing a long-term, sustained learning journey. Consider their responses and your possible next steps in moving your school to daily-embedded professional learning for every one.