

# Teacher Learning Communities

A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English

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Research shows that teacher learning communities enhance teacher quality, and teacher quality is the most important factor in enhancing student achievement. Teacher learning communities can be defined as groups of teachers who “continually inquire into their practice and, as a result, discover, create, and negotiate new meanings that improve their practice.”<sup>1</sup> NCTE recognizes the importance of teacher learning communities by highlighting them in the professional development section of its 2010 Legislative Platform.<sup>2</sup> Among the specific ways that teacher learning communities enhance teacher quality are these:

- bridging the gap between research and practice;
- creating spaces for addressing problems of practice;
- increasing teacher retention;
- connecting pedagogical practice with disciplinary/content area knowledge;
- fostering transformative teaching; and
- improving student learning.

The potential of learning communities can be realized when they are not diminished by misrepresentations or misconceptions. For example, the term *communities of practice* is sometimes used to describe groups of teachers who share a common interest in classroom practices, but these communities should not be confused with teacher learning communities, which emphasize teacher learning. Furthermore, a number of misconceptions circulate around teacher learning communities. The following myths represent common misconceptions about these communities:

**Myth: Any gathering or meeting of teachers is a learning community that improves teacher practice and student learning.**

**Reality:** Teachers meet frequently for a variety of reasons, but learning communities depend upon participants who identify common goals and inquire into ways of addressing them. Many gatherings of teachers lack this emphasis on learning. Communities of practice, for example, bring together teachers who often share common practices, but such groups may not focus on learning.<sup>3</sup>

**Myth: The primary purpose of teacher learning communities is for experienced teachers to mentor novices.**

**Reality:** The goal is for teachers at all stages of their careers to learn from one another. Relatively new teachers can benefit from the knowledge and experience of their more seasoned colleagues, and novices, in turn, bring recent training in pedagogy and technology that can inform and reinvigorate long-time teachers.<sup>4</sup>

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**Myth: In a teacher learning community everyone agrees about each issue.**

**Reality:** The term “community” sometimes connotes an ideal of complete agreement, but effective learning communities encourage disagreement as a natural part of working in a group. These groups value what a diversity of perspectives contributes to ongoing conversations about instruction and student learning; they are intentional about structuring their activities so that all voices are heard and respected.<sup>5</sup>

**Myth: Effective teacher learning communities can be organized and managed by principals or other administrators.**

**Reality:** While teacher learning communities need the support of principals or other administrators, they cannot be mandated by non-teachers. Instead, they must be teacher-driven, tackling questions that emerge from authentic classroom concerns and motivated by a spirit of inquiry rather than simple compliance. Merely requiring teachers to spend time together will not create an effective learning community.<sup>6</sup>

**Myth: Teacher learning communities are always restricted to a single school.**

**Reality:** Effective learning communities can function in one school, but they can also work well in networks where teachers from several schools work together, discussing common teaching issues, sharing successful strategies, and developing new approaches to shared problems. Organizing such networks of English language arts teachers offers an effective way to share pedagogical and content knowledge. The specific school context, nonetheless, remains important because the social setting of the school influences and supports (or not) any change that teachers want to undertake.<sup>7</sup>

## Benefits of Teacher Learning Communities

### Linking Research and Practice

The much-lamented gap between educational research and instructional practice results in part from the fact that the presentation of research findings is rarely calibrated to the problems encountered by teachers. Accordingly, teachers often feel that research isn’t relevant to their practice. Participants in teacher learning communities actively seek and carry out research that addresses group concerns, reflect

deeply on research, and, not surprisingly, the research accessed or generated through this process is much more likely to have a direct effect on teacher practices.<sup>8</sup>

### Creating Space for Addressing Problems of Practice

Teacher learning communities are most successful when focused on participants’ inquiry into questions about instruction and students’ learning. When built on a foundation of trust and appreciation of difference, these communities can give participants a place to bring issues and concerns that emerge from their own classroom experience. These issues and concerns provide opportunities for participants to explore and think deeply about the inevitable challenges of teaching. This kind of exploration and thinking deepens teachers’ understanding of student learning and draws on the group’s collective capacity to generate responses to instructional dilemmas.<sup>9</sup>

### Increasing Teacher Retention

Research shows that teachers often leave the profession because they feel professionally isolated, and the working conditions of most teachers are indeed lonely. In contrast, teachers who work collaboratively with colleagues are much more likely to remain in the profession. Participation in learning communities gives teachers an opportunity to work on a sustained basis with their colleagues, develop a sense of shared mission, and feel much more connected and committed to the school. These communities are especially good at helping beginning teachers build collegial relationships and navigate school norms and at reinvigorating and energizing more experienced teachers.<sup>10</sup>

### Uniting Pedagogical and Disciplinary Knowledge

Most forms of professional development foreground either pedagogy or disciplinary knowledge, but teacher learning communities promote the melding of the two. This is because considering issues of classroom practice raises questions about both the teacher’s content knowledge and approach to teaching. In order to think productively about ways to enhance student learning, English language arts teachers need to consider both the material they are teaching and the ways that they are presenting it. Teacher learning communities offer a place where teachers can consider both.

## Fostering Transformative Teaching

Because teacher learning communities include participants with varying backgrounds, expertise, and experience, they offer multiple perspectives on classroom practice. They also provide an alternative to the traditional mentor/apprentice relationship, which positions beginning teachers as having little to contribute. Teacher learning communities position all participants as contributors, thereby fostering “collaborative resonance” that enables teachers to work together toward transformative, against-the-grain teaching.<sup>11</sup>

## Enhancing Student Learning

One of the ways teacher learning communities enhance student learning is by demonstrating. Teachers who are engaged in this kind of professional development provide an example of the life-long learning that is desired for students.<sup>12</sup> Teachers in learning communities help to create norms for work within the given school district so that learning expectations are more explicit and clear for all students.<sup>13</sup> The self-consciousness about learning that comes with teacher learning communities also creates connections between assessment and instruction. Specifically, these groups support the use of formative assessment, thereby creating a classroom culture of assessment—as opposed to a testing culture—that shapes student learning, an attribute emphasized in the Principles for Learning adopted by NCTE and six other professional associations.<sup>14</sup>

# Research-Based Recommendations for Establishing Teacher Learning Communities

## Institutional Support

Successful teacher learning communities are most effectively organized and run by teachers but require institutional support that administrators can provide. Time for collaboration and adequate physical space, for example, are essential to these communities.<sup>15</sup> Teachers’ need for time to collaborate with one another may require adjusting the school schedule to create obligation-free time for learning community meetings. Administrators could, for instance add a few minutes to the Monday–Thursday school day, thereby allowing for early dismissal of students on Friday so that teachers have

time dedicated to learning community meetings. Similarly, administrators can assure that learning communities have accessible rooms in which to meet.

## Shared Goals

Research shows that the most productive and sustainable teacher learning communities are not mandated by someone outside the group or formed around imposed tasks. Rather, these communities develop best organically, motivated by both social and professional forces.<sup>16</sup> Participants can come from a range of grade levels and disciplines, but they share commonalities such as an interest in creating similar assignments or reaching similar goals. Furthermore, these learning communities involve teachers in authentic tasks and roles that are linked to the classroom.<sup>17</sup>

## Time for Reflection

Effective communities of practice offer teachers time to reflect on their development because focused and analytical reflection encourages teachers to reshape their classroom practices as well as draw upon imagination and action research to develop innovations. Reflection constructs and revises knowledge of teaching by making tacit assumptions conscious and by formulating explicit, public, and shared statements of belief.<sup>18</sup> In particular, when teacher learning communities set aside time at the end of meetings to reflect on decisions and practices they implemented recently or challenges they are experiencing, they develop ideas and beliefs they can carry into their next shared task.

## Endnotes

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