Small Learning Communities That Actually Learn:
Lessons for School Leaders

Collaborative communities of teachers have great potential for bringing about improvements in teaching and learning. But, as Mr. Supovitz and Ms. Christman found in their study of teacher communities in Cincinnati and Philadelphia, simply creating a community structure is not enough to change practice significantly.

BY JONATHAN A. SUPOVITZ AND JOLLEY BRUCE CHRISTMAN

EDUCATION reformers have increasingly invested in developing collaborative communities within schools as a central strategy for improving teaching and student learning. This strategy comes in various guises, including small schools, small learning communities, and teacher teams. Several assumptions about how these communities will enhance instruction underlie the push for these more collaborative learning environments. Supporters assume that teachers will get to know their students and respond to their needs better. There is also the expectation that small communities will make it easier for teachers to share practices and will encourage them to create a culture for sustained instructional improvement, which will in turn enhance student learning.

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Are these hopeful assumptions warranted? Our work evaluating small community initiatives during the late 1990s in two urban districts, Philadelphia and Cincinnati, suggests that the key to widespread improvement in student learning through teacher collaboration is the formation of *communities of instructional practice* that are focused on improving the instructional core of schooling. District and school leaders must provide these communities with the necessary structures, strategies, and support to help teachers hone their instructional craft knowledge.

The *structures* of the reforms in Philadelphia and Cincinnati were different, but their *purposes* were similar. Participating schools in Cincinnati featured small teams of three to five teachers working with students over multiple years. Small learning communities in Philadelphia, essentially schools within schools, consisted of larger groups of teachers working with students over several years. In both cases, reform leaders believed that teachers would benefit from the collective knowledge of their peers and form deeper, sustained relationships with students and their parents,

thus becoming better equipped to meet students' learning needs. Furthermore, while reform leaders in both cities recognized that the new learning communities would need support, they believed that the new structures could flourish within existing school and district organizations. Our examination of the reforms showed these beliefs, typical of advocates for small communities, to be largely invalid.

Both reforms did influence school environments positively. In Philadelphia, teachers felt their schools to be safer work produced significant gains in student learning. In Cincinnati, teams that used such structured instructional improvement programs as the Education Trust's Standards in Practice, which is based on analysis of assignments and student work, showed greater student performance gains than other teams. Philadelphia elementary schools showed test-score gains that were attributable to the district's literacy initiative, which trained community teachers in the use of particular instructional strategies for developing literacy and

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and more orderly, partly because learning community coordinators monitored student behavior and followed up with parents. In addition, students felt more connected to their learning communities and wanted to "show respect." Because of these improvements in the working environment, the reforms were extremely popular with teachers in both cities.

Yet in neither locale did these improvements alone translate into greater instructional focus. In Philadelphia, each learning community had a unifying theme that provided opportunities for its teachers to plan and teach intellectually engaging units of study together. However, themes were most often addressed through isolated events, such as field trips and special assemblies, that did nothing to promote the intended collaboration around instruction. In Cincinnati, no significant differences in instructional practices appeared between team-based schools and other schools in the district. The reforms in these two cities failed to increase instructional focus, largely because the learning communities did not spend enough time discussing instruction. As one Cincinnati team member put it, "Team issues are administrative, not academic. It has nothing to do with planning instruction." When instructional topics were the focus, the communities lacked the skills to engage deeply enough to change instructional practice. In few cases did communities move to sophisticated group practices, such as collective analysis of teaching or review of student work.

In both cities, small communities that engaged in structured, sustained, and supported discussions as they investigated the relationships between practices and student gave them a shared focus for collaboration.

School and district leaders can learn from the successes and failures of these reforms. We recommend that the following steps be taken by leaders who want to build communities of instructional practice.
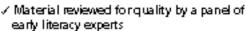
• *Focus communities around instruction.* Creating small communities involves more than just making instructional issues a priority. District and school leaders need to emphasize those issues by providing communities with tools for systematic inquiry into the relationships between teaching and student learning. Leaders themselves need a firm knowledge base about how effective instructional communities work — including some understanding of the types of collegial relationships that sustain them and the kinds of group practices that result in improved teaching and learning. Leaders should also provide the logistical arrangements necessary for such activities as team teaching and visiting other schools, and they should share meaningful data related to instruction with members of their communities. To sustain the focus on instructional improvement, administrators need to establish assessment processes that give teachers in communities constructive feedback about their instructional endeavors and about students' progress. By taking these measures, leaders will send a clear message that improving instruction is the primary purpose of communities within schools.

• *Diversify communities.* Administrators must undertake the difficult work of organizing communities that balance teacher choice, which encourages teacher ownership and engagement, with an equitable distribution of teacher

expertise and diversity, which ensures that students do not receive unequal learning opportunities over time. The organization of a learning community must also include both horizontal relationships that allow collaboration with peers at the same grade level and vertical relationships that promote articulation across grade levels and sustained relationships with students.

• *Support communities.* To support communities of instructional practice, leaders need to provide blocks of protected time in which collaborating teachers can discuss student performance standards and consider how their instruction produces learning. Too often, team meetings in Cincinnati and Philadelphia were dominated by procedural issues generated by administrators. Supportive administrators can make sure that such issues do not monopolize the time available for collaboration. Moreover, they can provide structures, such as "standards in practice" and "lesson study," that promote conversations about instructional strategies. Teams are more successful when they have specific, practice-related work to discuss. At the same time, central administrators and principals need to rethink their responsibilities and learn new skills that support communities within schools. For example, the central office should report data by community, as well as by individual student and school.

• *Legitimize communities.* District and school leaders also need to clarify the authority of community leaders and distinguish it clearly from that of principals. Community leaders must have legitimate authority to produce consensus about team decisions and to require team members to participate. Further, even as they provide guidance about instructional priorities, administrators must allow communities as much autonomy as possible in their decisions about curriculum, staffing, scheduling, and budgets. Autonomy can enhance community identity and distinctiveness, as teachers decide what matters to their community and their shared students. When autonomy is promised but undermined by district policies, teachers doubt the possibility of meaningful community. Another way to legitimize and sharpen the intentions of instructional communities is to provide them with discretionary funds that can be used to pay for materials that support their customized instructional focus and for community events that help to build group identity.

• *Create professional learning opportunities for communities.* Communities of instructional practice require new forms of collaboration, and teachers need professional development experiences that help them learn to work together better. System leaders should provide learning experiences that are connected to teachers' content areas and that capitalize on the social arrangements inherent in com-

munities of practice. Practitioners working in communities need ongoing opportunities to reflect on and analyze their teaching as well as strategies that will help them plan, assess, and revise their individual and collaborative efforts. District and school leaders must broker opportunities for professional development that are customized to the needs of particular communities.

In conclusion, district and school leaders engaged in forming communities within schools need to take specific measures to learn about instructional communities themselves so that they can then focus the work of these communities on instructional practice. This focus is necessary if communities are not only to reduce teacher isolation but also to improve teaching and learning. The failure of leaders to create communities that emphasize instructional change has much to do with the weak effects on student performance seen in most communities within schools. If, as Thomas Sergiovanni has argued, schools should constitute a "community of mind," then all members of the school community, not just teachers, must put their minds to fostering a culture of instructional improvement in which everyone learns. **K**