THIGPEN II, BENNY. Implementing Professional Learning Communities: The Challenge of Changing Culture. (Under the direction of Dr. Kenneth H. Brinson, Jnr.).

The purpose of this research is to provide an overview of one district’s efforts to implement the Professional Learning Communities at Work® model of professional learning communities in a particular school district in the Southeastern United States. The research effort should provide insights to the difficulties faced when school principals begin the implementation of professional learning communities within their schools. Using case study methodology and in depth interviews with principals who implemented professional learning communities, the researcher enlightens future administrators to the hazards of the implementation journey and makes administrators aware of the organizational, conceptual and tacit knowledge needed to successfully begin implementation.

Principals play a crucial role in any improvement efforts at the school level. Developing a professional learning community within a school is a powerful staff development approach and potent strategy for school change and improvement. It builds the capacity of the teaching staff, which should lead to improved student achievement for students. Nonetheless, principals must be aware of pitfalls and how to support the change effort. Principal's leadership and understanding of the concept of professional learning communities and how to lead organizational change is crucial to success. This research effort notes some of the difficulties faced when school leaders attempt to move forward with the implementation of professional learning communities at their schools. It includes descriptions of logistical hurdles, conceptual hurdles and adaptive challenges as defined by
Heifetz and Linsky (2002). This research provides insight as to how the implementation of professional learning communities contends with the current school culture and how principals navigate that contention.
Implementing Professional Learning Communities: The Challenge of Changing Culture

by

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DEDICATION

Although my mother died when I was sixteen years old, there was time enough in the short time that I spent with her for her to impart two important beliefs. Her first belief was in the primacy of being educated. She always wanted me to understand that education was the means to a better tomorrow and it was the most worthy pursuit. Although I was not a great student when she passed when I was sixteen, I remained persistent, and became a better and better student the longer I stayed with it. My mother’s second belief was that it was OK and sometimes necessary to march to the beat of a different drummer. She always did and somewhat enjoyed the march. Through the early years of adolescence and adulthood most of us spend our time trying to be like everyone else. Later we discover that we can only be what we truly are, and what we are is truly OK, even if it means we do indeed march to a different drumbeat. Those lessons have stuck with me from the age of sixteen to forty-seven. They are lessons I hope my children fully understand as they become adults.

My mother was significant in my past. The people of most significance and importance since her passing are my wife, Michelle and my two children, Kacey (14) and Trey (9). I dedicate this effort to them and acknowledge their importance to me. They are the ones who have learned with me, encouraged me, and believed in me and added the most value to my world. Their being has made it perfectly clear that they are indeed what is most important in my life. Michelle has been patient, kind, gentle and loving to me the entire length of the journey. She has shared her insights and deserves this degree as much as I.
For Kacey and Trey, I simply hope they understand the two conceptual understandings my mother taught me. Despite where they find themselves in the future, I hope they know their pursuit to become more learned is always worth the cost in time, resources and effort and it will always be worth the journey. Even when that journey leads you to march to the beat of a different drummer, down different paths, through unseen territory I hope that you will always march on to your own music. Enjoy the beat and be your own drum major. In the end, the journey leads you to deeper joys, insights and understandings of yourself. I simply hope that my story shows you the necessity of persistence on that march. Love always, your Dad.
BIOGRAPHY

Benny Thigpen II was born June 23, 1964 to Mrs. Ella Rose Mercer Thigpen and Benny Gene Thigpen of Beulaville, North Carolina. His mother, Ella Rose Mercer Thigpen, was an attorney in Kenansville, N.C. for the family law firm, Mercer, Thigpen & Mercer. Mrs. Thigpen was a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Law School and the first female inducted into the law fraternity at the University of North Carolina At Chapel Hill. Benny Gene Thigpen, his father, was a high school teacher at Jacksonville Senior High School in Jacksonville, N.C. His father taught marketing and business education courses for 34 years with North Carolina Public Schools and also farmed row crops and raised cattle as a second job. Ben has one sibling, Rose Thigpen-Williams who is a clinical psychologist in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Both Ben and his sister Rose now reside minutes from their father.

Ben Thigpen graduated from East Duplin High School in Beulaville, North Carolina in 1982. He was an average student who enjoyed athletics. He attended the University of North Carolina at Wilmington from 1982 until 1984 and then transferred to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After one and one-half years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ben left the University somewhat frustrated with his educational pursuits. After a few weeks at home, his father encouraged him to return to the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and finish his four-year degree, which he did and graduated in December of 1986 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and the intentions of becoming a Wildlife Resources Officer for the state of North Carolina.
While at home after graduation, and waiting for the selection process to become a wildlife office which began in May, Mr. Thigpen began substitute teaching business courses for a teacher on maternity leave at his former high school in February of 1987. He filled in until the end of the school year in June. At that point, he decided to become a teacher. He enrolled at East Carolina University to pursue teacher certification and a Master’s Degree in English Education.

In 1989, with the certification in hand and after an internship at Aurora High School beginning an Honors English Program, Mr. Thigpen returned to East Duplin High School as an English teacher and coach. He was a successful classroom teacher and coach. Mr. Thigpen’s English I students consistently scored well and his athletics teams were very successful and Mr. Thigpen greatly enjoyed his career as a teacher and coach. In 1995, he married Michelle Simpson, who was also a teacher. Mr. Thigpen continued to teach and coach until November of 1999, when he approached Dr. Tommy Benson, the Superintendent of Duplin County schools, about the possibility of becoming an administrator. Dr. Benson employed Mr. Thigpen within two months as assistant principal at Wallace-Rose Hill High School. Mr. Thigpen applied and was accepted as one of the seventy-seven Class Seven North Carolina Principal Fellows. He began his full-time enrollment as a Principal Fellow at N. C. State in August of 2000. He completed his Master of School Administration Program at North Carolina State University in 2002 and became the assistant principal at East Duplin High School. After one year as an assistant principal, Mr. Thigpen was named the Principal of Chinquapin Elementary School. For the next two years, from 2003 until 2005, Chinquapin Elementary was an Honor School of Excellence with over ninety percent of its
students at or above grade level. It was Duplin County’s first and only Honor School of Excellence to this point. In 2003, Mr. Thigpen also enrolled at North Carolina State University to begin his doctoral program. In 2005, Mr. Thigpen was named the principal of East Duplin High School. While at East Duplin, Mr. Thigpen began first computerized credit recovery/remediation system in Duplin County Schools via Nova NET, began the development of Personalized Education Plans and made efforts for the alignment of school improvement efforts with district level goals via extensive sharing, monitoring and using performance data to drive instructional decision making.

Mr. Thigpen has always used a team-based approach to leadership and believed in systematic approaches to management and leadership. East Duplin High School is also where Mr. Thigpen began the implementation of Professional Learning Communities and having remediation and acceleration built into the school day. This practice is now in place in all Duplin County High Schools and all high schools have experienced significant academic gains since implementation. In addition to the academic success, East Duplin High School claimed the Wachovia Cup in 2005, 2006 and repeated in 2007. It was the first time East Duplin had claimed the Wachovia Cup three years consecutively. There was also academic success. East Duplin High School’s Performance Composite grew from the 63rd percentile of all schools in North Carolina to the 70th percentile of all high schools in North Carolina during his tenure as a principal. East Duplin also earned High Growth in 2007 and met Expected Growth every year. In five years as a principal, Mr. Thigpen’s schools achieved High Growth two years and met expected growth every year.
In 2008, Mr. Thigpen was hired as the Secondary Director for Duplin County Schools and is currently in this position. Mr. Thigpen and his wife Michelle, who is a North Carolina State MSA Program Graduate and principal, have two children. Kacey was the North Carolina Beta Club President for 2010-11 and a ninth grader at East Duplin High School. Trey is a fourth grader and avid baseball player. Both children are successful students and also involved in athletics. The family attends Beulaville Baptist Church and lives on the family farm of Michelle’s parents just outside of Beulaville, N.C. They enjoy family time, athletics and the pace of a rural life in Eastern North Carolina.
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I would like to acknowledge those who have contributed to my growth and those who have been colleagues along this journey. First, I must acknowledge the faculty and staff of the Educational Leadership Department at North Carolina State University. They have been outstanding. From the first day I walked into the door and met Dr. Richard Haley, the entire department has worked to support my efforts. I appreciate greatly the experience to learn from Dr. Mike Ward, Dr. Peter Hessling, Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, Dr. Kevin Brady, Dr. Paul Bitting, Dr. Kenneth Brinson and Dr. Robert Serow. The entire faculty has provided great opportunities to learn and to lead for my wife and I, as we both are graduates of the Educational Leadership Program at North Carolina State.

I want to especially thank Dr. Kenneth Brinson. He has been my guide with this journey through the dissertation. He has been frank, insightful and positive throughout the whole experience. Without his help and direction, I would not have made it to this point. I appreciate greatly his patience, persistence and admire greatly his practical approach to the task. Thank you for your insightful guidance on this journey.

I also want to thank the many and countless fellow school administrators I have come into contact with over the years. Many of them have been my greatest inspiration and have provided the greatest insight. We continue to learn together throughout this journey. I thank each of you and I truly hope one day I can repay your support and contribution to my learning and wish each of you the very best as you seek to improve the lives of others.
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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the difficulty of change in organizations. There is also a great deal of literature that focuses on leadership and how leaders bring about or lead change efforts in their organizations. Most of this literature notes the difficulties, challenges and paradigm shifts that must occur to actuate change. Facilitating change in schools is difficult. Ted Sizer, after more than a decade of efforts to reform schools via the Essential Schools movement notes, “I was aware of that it would be hard, but I was not aware of how hard it would be” (Sizer, 1996, p.1). Many others have noted the difficulty of change within the context of schools and that it may even more difficult in schools than in other organizations (McCall, 1994; Kotter, 1996, DuFour, et al, 2010). DuFour (1998) notes that “change is a formidable task that is certain to be accompanied by pain and conflict (DuFour, 1998, p.50,). Fullan (1993) notes similar ideas, “Conflict is essential to any successful change effort” (p.27).

The Critical Role of the Principal

While change is difficult, most literature on change efforts in schools note the pivotal role principals play in leading that change(McCall, 1994; Tucker 2002). Many believe the principal is the key player to the success of any change effort within schools. If that is the case, the leadership skills required of the principal for successful implementation of a reform
or change effort is critical. Goodlad (1984) argued that schools have been unable to address their own problems in many reform efforts because principals lack the needed leadership skills for success. Not only is the principal be required to have knowledge of the needed reform, but must also have knowledge of the dynamics of change within an organization. This knowledge, in addition to the required skills in management, budgeting, instructional leadership, public relations and the daily decision making skills required of a principal is a vast span of knowledge the principal is required to have a command of to be successful.

In addition to the skills needed for implementation of a successful reform effort and the knowledge of bringing about change within an organization, the principal plays an important role in determining what reforms, if any, move forward within a school. Typically, the principal is regarded as the “gatekeeper.” Any improvement efforts at the school level must first clear the principal. As McCall (1994) notes, “Principals are the leaders who direct organizational changes that build the confidence and enable teachers, staff, students, and parents to seek new ways of doing things.” From the perspective of public administration, principals are “middle managers” in some sense, they are to go between or link from the central office and the teachers. They bring initiatives from the central office to the school and detail or explain initiatives to the teaching staff. Principals then enact protocols and practices to ensure implementation happens at the school level if there is an initiative from the district level. Principals are in a sense middle managers. They take the state and district level initiatives and then operationalize the incorporation of the effort into the daily practices at the building level. Middle managers are also the best “fighters” of change efforts (Swiss, 1994). Middle manager’s location in the organization gives them access to ample information
and enable them to insure change does not occur if they do not desire the change. (Swisss, 1997) But, principals and middle level managers are also influential in bringing about change when the change is desired. The research of Marzano (2003) indicates that principals and their leadership “could be considered the single most important aspect of school reform (Marzano, 2003, p.172). McCall echoes Marzano’s results to state, “I believe the 120,000 principals of our schools are the most influential gatekeepers in our society. They have the opportunity to influence the lives of our young people in K through 12 for more hours a week than any other agency except the family or (for some) the mass media” (McCall, 1994). DuFour also notes the principal’s influence in bringing about change by citing, “the general agreement in education research has been the best hope for school improvement is to be found in the principal’s office” (DuFour, 1998). More recently, Van Natter (2008) notes the “centrality” of the principal’s influence on climate, change within the school building and how important a role principals play in change efforts.

Professional Learning Communities for Improved Results

Most change efforts principals undertake at the school level are directed toward improved results in terms of student achievement. The accountability movement has generated a great deal of interest and focused improvement efforts toward garnering better results for students on end of year or end of course assessments. Those assessments in sum give an indicator of a school’s success in educating students. The “scoreboard mentality” and focus on achievement results earned on end of course or end of grade measures as a
indicator of a school’s success is often frustrating for teachers and administrators. Nonetheless, most educational experts argue that accountability is not going away in the near future and successful school leaders have to embrace the age of accountability for years to come. With that being said, the end purpose of the accountability effort is to improve student achievement, which if achievement measures are reliable and valid, measure at least to some extent student learning.

One of the means for garnering improved student achievement results is professional learning communities (DuFour, 1998; Toole, 2002; Hord, 2007; Schmoker, 2007; DuFour, 2010). Because of that, there is a growing interest in creating professional learning communities within our schools as means to improved achievement. In addition to improved achievement, professional learning communities tout improved collegiality among staff and a reduction in teacher/staff isolation, improved professional practice, and an improved school culture. Many educational writers, researchers and school leaders support professional learning communities as the most promising means to improved results for students.

Numerous researchers (Crow, Hausman & Scribner, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997, 2004; Toole & Louis, 2002) argue that nurturing a culture that supports staff in becoming a professional learning community is the most promising avenue for sustained, substantial school improvement. A few studies have demonstrated that schools with strong professional learning communities produce important outcomes for students and school professionals (Crow et al., 2002; Toole & Louis, 2002). Toole and Louis (2002) suggest that cross-cultural research findings indicate that professional learning communities lead to improved school functioning. Developing a
professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff development approach and potent strategy for school change and improvement (Hord, 1997, 2004). The impetus of developing professional learning communities is to insure that school improvement efforts require that, at the school level, staff work collaboratively to solve educational problems through the development of a robust community of learners who will to take responsibility for, and be committed to, achieving student outcomes (Blasé & Blase, 2003).

The Concept of Professional Learning Communities

Despite the growing interest in creating professional learning communities, there are a variety of conceptions of what a professional learning community is. Some would argue the term “professional learning community” is self-descriptive and each of the words, professional---learning---community, is carefully chosen and defines itself (DuFour, 1998, p. xi). From that definition, a professional learning community could be simply a group of professional educators who gather to discuss and improve practice and learn from each other. The focus of those collaborative discussions is improved learning for students. Yet, in other circles, the term professional learning community is not merely limited to dialogue among colleagues about instructional practice, but involves protocols such as building common assessments, developing SMART goals, and involves practices that may not exist in other’s conceptions of what a professional learning community is. Ken Williams (2009), a noted and nationally recognized speaker and trainer with Solution Tree and Professional Learning Communities at Work®, notes “that many schools claim the label of professional learning
community, but few actually have all the elements in place and are truly a professional learning community” (Williams, 2009, personal interview).

The definition of what a professional learning community is and what actions, dialogue and practices exist among teachers varies from school to school. This variance makes comprehending and defining the concept of what a professional learning community is more difficult for school leaders and teachers. While one school may label itself a professional learning community and exhibit only a few characteristics of a professional learning community depending on the definition of what a professional learning community is, another school across town may never claim the professional learning community label, and actually be doing more that is truly akin to what a professional learning community is. In short, what exists in the school leader or school’s conception of what a professional learning community is may vary from school to school.

This variance of conception, coupled with the fact that principals are the gatekeepers to change at the school level may cause quite a perplexing conundrum for the district or school principal seeking to implement professional learning communities. The variance in understanding and agreement on exactly what comprises a professional learning community is very important for a district or administrator trying to adopt and develop professional learning communities as a means to improved student achievement. This variance of understanding can create quite different organizational structures, practices, protocols and outcomes within a district seeking to create professional learning communities. In addition, the perception the principal has of what a professional learning community is or their “mental model” of the concept has profound implications upon the implementation at the school
Where some principals may regard the concept of professional learning communities as simply providing time for teachers to meet to discuss common assessments and instructional practices and promote a more collegial atmosphere within the school, others who have a more comprehensive or rigorous view may have greater expectations for their staff and outcomes provided by professional learning communities. Nonetheless, if Toole and Louis (2002) are correct in their conclusion that the research is clear, “professional learning communities can generally lead to improved school functioning in most settings,” (p. 274) then taking advantage of their potential usefulness as a means of improvement must come from an understanding of the complexity of the concept of professional learning communities. The understanding of what professional learning communities are and how to define them must be clearly understood by the principal and district leadership before embarking on the journey to create one. The principal’s conception or vision of what a professional learning community is influences the type of learning community that develops and evolves within the school or district. Most importantly, the principal's conceptualization, descriptors and understandings of what the components are in a professional learning community impacts implementation. These conceptualizations or "mental models" as Senge (1990) would describe them impacts what type of learning community evolves. As Stephen Covey (1996) often notes, "all things are created twice" and the mental model will precede the actual creation of the entity itself.

In addition to the initial conceptualizations and definitions of what comprises a professional learning community, North Carolina is somewhat of a unique system with
regards to the development of professional learning communities. The development of professional learning communities is in the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Instrument, the North Carolina Principal Evaluation Instrument as well as included in the North Carolina Standards for Superintendents (NCDPI, 2009). So, it is apparent that the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction is knowledgeable concerning the impact and positive results professional learning communities can bring, yet as a state department, they have yet to offer any staff development or training with principals, teachers or superintendents concerning the development of professional learning communities.

Furthermore, the principal already carries a great deal of legal responsibility in his role and has the opportunity to influence the direction and progress of the school. This influence coupled with the responsibility to conduct teacher evaluations gives school administrators even more latitude in developing an impetus to implementing professional learning communities. More specifically, the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Instrument includes participation in professional learning communities as an element of the teacher evaluation. "Teachers are expected to work collaboratively with other school personnel to create a professional learning community" in Standard One of the five standards for North Carolina teachers (NCDPI, 2009, p.13). This fact coupled with the formal and informal influence the principal typically has an influence the daily practices and protocols of teachers in an effort to establish professional learning communities. A key question for the future would be when the formal power of the principal is supported by an apparent state level initiative to develop professional learning communities, what impact will that have upon the implementation of professional learning communities throughout the state of North Carolina?
Defining a Professional Learning Community

For the purposes of this research, defining a professional learning community is crucial. In general, the term *professional learning community* describes a collegial group of teachers and administrators who are united in their commitment to student learning” (Hord, 2007). They engage in regular, consistent and focused dialogue to improve instructional practice, school processes and are bound by a collective vision that guides their work as they learn together and learn collaboratively from each other’s practice (Hord, 2008). In most professional learning communities, staff may visit and review other classrooms, and participate in decision-making (Hord, 1997b). The benefits to the staff and students include a reduced isolation of teachers, better-informed and committed teachers and academic gains for students. Hord (1997b) notes, "As an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff-development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement" (Hord, 13, 2008). DuFour (1998) defines professional learning communities by giving characteristics of what a professional learning community is. DuFour (1998) notes characteristics that professional learning communities have:

1. They have shared mission, vision, and values and what separates a learning community from an ordinary school is the collective commitment to the guiding principles that articulate what the people in a school believe and seek to create.

2. They practice collective inquiry. The engine of improvement, growth and renewal in a professional learning community is collective inquiry. The community is relentless in questioning the status quo, seeking new methods and testing those methods and reflecting on results.
3. They have collaborative teams that share a common purpose as the basic structure of the professional learning community. And, these collaborative teams build the school’s capacity to learn via collaborative team learning. They learn from one another creating momentum to fuel continued improvement.

4. They improve practice via an action orientation and via experimentation. The communities are action-oriented and members turn aspirations into action and visions into reality. Not only do they act, they are unwilling to tolerate inaction. They recognize that learning must be accompanied by doing and acting upon what is learned.

5. They seek continuous improvement. Professional learning communities share a discomfort with the status quo and maintain a constant search for improved results. This seek for improvement causes the professional learning community to ask itself the following questions:
   i. What is our fundamental purpose?
   ii. What do we hope to achieve?
   iii. What are our strategies for becoming better?
   iv. What criteria will we use to assess our improvement efforts?

6. Professional learning communities have a results orientation. The above characteristics noted in items 1 through 5 must be assessed by results instead of intentions.

   (DuFour, 2008, p. 17)

DuFour’s description of the characteristics of a professional learning community gives insight to the ideas, conceptions and fundamental thinking that lies behind what a professional learning community is. In addition, the vastness of his description of these characteristics of a professional learning community prove more illuminative to the concept of a professional learning community, but this description can prove somewhat daunting to the school leader focused on what specific process and steps need to be taken in order to transform a school into a professional learning community.
Agreeing upon the definition of what a professional learning community is and having a clear picture and understanding of what becoming a professional learning community involves is the first critical step for a school or district that intends to implement professional learning communities as a means of improvement. VanNatter (2008) notes the importance of clarity with goals when engaging in implementation at the school level. Williamson (2008) adds “teachers need to see the value of the collective learning to make it a part of their daily routine.” Change should occur concurrently with the change in vision (Williamson, 2008, p.38). Clarke (2009) denotes in her research that the teachers did not fully grasp the concept of the PLC model (p.84). Thus, the importance of clarity and understanding by administrators and teachers’ conceptual understanding of professional learning communities cannot be overemphasized. Ideally, this understanding grows collectively. The initiative whether at the school or district level must first begin with developing a clear, concise conceptual picture of the entity and that image must be well understood by all stakeholders involved in the venture. Vagueness about the concept and the accompanying protocols and practices may lead to further misapplications and misunderstandings of what is to be done by building level administrators and teachers hoping to become professional learning communities. Clarke (2010) notes that teachers rarely fully grasp the concept of professional learning communities and so any inconsistencies can lead to misperceptions. Williamson (2008) further notes the importance of teachers’ understanding because “the school level administrator may initiate change, but one should not expect a single individual to sustain change. The principal must be the leader who facilitates the change but the teachers themselves and their development will be what grows
Implementation and School Culture

Williamson (2009) notes, “The culture of the school displays what the faculty and staff value. The manner in which they spend their time reveals what is important to them. (p.39)” Implementing professional learning communities would be a significant change for any school and an investment in time. This change and investment of time would impact school’s culture. Many authors (Schlechty, 1997; DuFour, 1998; Sarason, 1996) have noted the complexity of creating cultural change in schools and the impact of school culture on school reform efforts. DuFour (1998) indicates that “changes in structure are tangible and can be announced with flourish,” but, “Cultural changes are less visible, more amorphous, and much more difficult to make” (p.133). Phil Schlechty (1997) notes that “structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability” (Schlechty, p. 136). Whether a school is seen as a successful school that is doing well at increasing student learning or whether the school is seen as a failing school due to measures on student’s achievement results, most note the culture of the school plays an important part. Many believe that culture may be the most important aspect and job of the leader (Schein, 2004).

As noted by Peterson (1999), “The culture of an enterprise plays the dominant role in exemplary performance” (p. 1). The everyday activity, behavior and protocols at a school
has underneath it an undercurrent of thoughts, values, beliefs and ideas about learning teaching and their role in that effort, and that culture almost silently pervades and guides the day to day efforts at a school. Numerous studies of school change have identified the organizational culture as critical to the successful improvement of teaching and learning (Fullan, 1998; Rossman, Corbett, and Firestone 1988). Peterson and Deal (1999) also note “In study after study, where the culture did not support and encourage reform that improvement did not occur (p.5). More recently, Van Natter (2008) echoes the aforementioned quite succinctly by simply stating, “Re-culturing is the name of the game.”

Most school improvement efforts note culture is a key factor in school improvement. School culture can foster school effectiveness and productivity (Purkey and Smith, 1983; Levine and Lezotte, 1990). Sarason (1996) notes, “To put it as succinctly as possible, if you want to change and improve the climate and outcomes of schooling both for students and teachers, there are features of the school culture that have to be changed, and if they are not changed, your well-intentioned efforts will be defeated” (p. 340). Edgar Schein (1985), an organizational psychologist, states the case for cultural leadership even more forcefully. He states, “there is a possibility underemphasized in leadership research, that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture and the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture” (p. 2).

School leaders who choose to implement professional learning communities are undertaking the implementation of a change to affect the school’s culture (DuFour, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2010). The change involves conveying the concepts of professional learning communities to the staff, and then asking that staff to begin to adopt those practices,
protocols and procedures in order to transform itself. It is a major undertaking that involves much work and a clear understanding of the concepts of professional learning communities by all the staff as well as the principal. But it also involves managing and leading the school’s culture. As Williamson (2008) notes, “It is ridiculous to believe that by merely placing adults in a room together that they will collaborate and learn from each other. It is only when they get to know and trust their colleagues that they can truly focus on agreed upon goals and all aim for the same targets.”

The challenge to become an authentic learning community is no small undertaking and requires a great deal of time, effort, patience and leadership. Even under the best conditions, the change effort evokes some resistance. Moore (2010) notes that the principal has to actively encourage participation in PLCs and the leadership skill of the principal affects the degree of implementation of professional learning communities. And, the leader(s) face at some degree conflict when implementing the change. Moreover, schools that have negative or toxic cultures resist change efforts to a greater extent and provide principals seeking to implement professional learning communities even greater challenges. Douglass Reeves (2009) provides insights for leaders seeking to implement changes:

In truth, any change will meet resistance, because change is loss. In fact, meaningful change is a particular kind of loss. Are the following states familiar to you: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance. These are of course, the stages of grief described by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969). Even the most productive and essential changes represent the death of past practice; therefore, for people to have genuine enthusiasm for change, we must believe they have enthusiasm for death and loss---a premise that demands challenge.  

(Reeves, 2009, p.45,6)
DuFour’s (2008) guidance is consistent with the other authors’ ideas on culture. DuFour notes “educators who cultivate PLCs must engage in an intentional process to impact the culture of their schools and districts. When they are successful, their organizations will undergo profound cultural shifts (p.21).” But, DuFour (2010) plainly notes that “the culture of your organization will be shaped, to a large extent, by the behavior you are willing to tolerate. An unwillingness to confront inappropriate or incongruent behavior sends the message to everyone in the organization that the behavior is acceptable” (p. 205).

An unwillingness to confront inappropriate or incongruent behavior also reduces levels of trust teachers express in their principals (Bryk& Schneider, 2004). Williamson (2008) notes the importance of cultural challenges of implementation with professional learning communities and advises district support of implementation. She further notes “until the potential influence culture has on a school is realized and understood, change cannot occur” (p. 37, 2008). Professional learning communities are not the norm and often misunderstood (Hord, 2007). And, school leaders must be explicit in their implementation efforts to accurately describe and communicate their vision of what professional learning communities are and what behaviors are required for participation in an authentic professional learning community.

The chief change will involve the changing of the culture of the school. On the surface level, the administrator will be asking for changes to protocols and practices that change the everyday or weekly behavior of the school staff. But at a deeper level, the
administrator is attempting to improve the culture of the school to one that indeed insures every student achieves academically and interventions are in place to insure they do. This will require teachers to learn new ways of operating on a day-to-day basis and week-to-week basis. It will also require that teachers learn and improve their professional capacity as educators.

The main effort of professional learning communities is to increase student achievement by improving the capacity of the staff. Improving student achievement by building the professional capacity of the staff is a strategy supported by several prominent educational researchers. Michael Fullan notes in Change Forces: Probing the depths of educational reform, “the critical need for investments in teacher learning has been made clear again and again in efforts at educational change. Those who have worked to improve schools have found every aspect of school reform—the creation of more challenging curriculum, the use of more thoughtful assessments, the implementation of decentralized management, the invention of new model schools and programs—depends on highly skilled teachers working in tandem with families” (Fullan, 2007). Linda Darling-Hammond further states that, “In the final analysis, there are no policies that can improve schools if the people in them are not armed with the knowledge and skills they need” (Darling-Hammond, p. 63, 2009).

The implementation of professional learning communities is a deep change that reaches the very core of what teachers do each day. It asks them to begin to change that and also asks teachers to expose themselves and their professional weaknesses in order to improve practice. It is indeed significant change and approach that is much deeper than traditional education change efforts.
Adaptive Challenges versus Technical Problems

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2002), as many other writers, note the necessity of conflict in creating change within an organization. Linsky and Heifetz explain “The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and, thus, the greater the danger to those who lead” (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, p.14). But, Heifetz and Linsky distinguish change and problems that accompany change into two distinct categories. Both note that leaders should be aware of the two categories of problems that accompany change. Those two areas are adaptive challenges and the technical problems. Technical problems are defined by Heifetz and Linsky “as having the necessary know-how and procedures” (p.13) and adaptive challenges are “the whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. (p.13)"

We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways---changing attitude, values, and behaviors---people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.” (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, p.13)

They further expound that technical problems are issues that need management skills applied to them and adaptive challenges are problems that require leadership. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) note that, “when people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, they end up with dysfunction” (p.14). Heifetz and Linsky (2002) go on to state that “Indeed, the single most common source of leadership failure we’ve been able to identify---in politics,
community life, business, or the nonprofit sector—is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems. (p.14)

**Distinguishing Technical from Adaptive Challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical</th>
<th>What’s the Work?</th>
<th>Who does the Work?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive</td>
<td>Learn new ways</td>
<td>The people with the problem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, Leadership on the Line, p. 14)

Figure 1.1: Adaptive Challenges versus Technical Problems

Later in their text Heifetz and Linsky (2002) offer suggestions for leaders implementing changes in organizations. They suggest leaders negotiate adaptive issues by first distinguishing between the adaptive issues and the technical problems by placing the work where it belongs. “To meet adaptive challenges, people must change their hearts as well as their behaviors” (p.127). The “solutions are achieved when “the people with the problem” go through a process to become “the people with the solution” (127).

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) suggest four types of interventions are necessary by leaders whose organizations face adaptive challenges. “Leaders must 1.) Make observations, 2.) Ask questions, 3.) Offer Interpretations and 4) Encourage taking action” (p. 134). In essence, Heifetz and Linsky’s strategies involve giving the work back to people who are responsible for it to avoid becoming the target of the frustrations of adaptive challenges.

To lead people, we suggest you build structures of relationships to work the tough issues, establishing norms that make passionate disagreement permissible. But keep your hands on the temperature controls. Don’t provoke people too much at any one time. Remember your job is to orchestrate the
conflict, not become it. You need to let people do the work that only they can do.”

(Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, p. 122)

Learning to understand people’s reaction to change is critical for successful implementation of change. Principals charged with implementing professional learning communities face reactions noted by Heifetz. Moreover, a principal with an understanding of the distinction between adaptive challenges and technical problems and how to respond to each is more likely to have a successful implementation process with professional learning communities. The voices of the community of learners must involve the voices from all stakeholder groups. It is indeed a tenuous balance for a school administrator to distinguish between the adaptive and technical issue. Williamson (2008) provides insight by noting the importance of the leader “encouraging teachers to be open, direct and honest during implementation” and further noting that “a key role of the administrator will be to evaluate routines and systems currently in place at the school to determine what needs to change to allow relationships and collaboration to develop.

Teachers will have to be empowered to take ownership of this change process. Numerous theorists note that collaborative environments “are not accomplished without teachers (Burnett, 2002, Hord, 2004). The school level administrator may initiate change, but one should not expect a single individual to sustain change. The principal must take the lead in the formation of teams within the buildings and informing the staff of the expectations (for those teams) (Hord, 2004).

Williamson (2008, p.32)

While creating a learning community is a desirable end for schools and offers promising results for students and staff, creating an authentic learning community is a
difficult task. It involves a wide span of skills for school administrators who embark on the journey. Principals have great influence on the quality of professional learning communities that emerge at their schools or if they emerge at all. The quality and skill of the leader in some sense determines the emergence of professional learning communities and the degree of implementation success or failure within a school.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research is to in part identify those difficulties school leaders face when charged with the challenge to implementing professional learning communities within their schools. This research first seeks to identify the conceptual understanding(s) of professional learning communities and what they are from the principal’s perspective. It focuses on the difficulties school leaders face in grasping the conceptual understandings and defining professional learning communities. The second aspect of this research effort notes the difficulties faced when school leaders attempt to move forward with the implementation of professional learning communities at their schools. It includes descriptions of logistical hurdles as well as cultural and conceptual hurdles or adaptive challenges and technical problems as defined by Heifetz and Linsky (2002). The researcher is hopeful the research provides insight as to how the implementation of professional learning communities contends with the current school culture and how principals navigate that contention. It should prove illuminative of conceptual misunderstandings with professional learning communities from the view of different stakeholders in the implementation process and the distinctions between adaptive challenges and technical challenges when seeking to implement professional
learning communities. It also provides insight for future implementation efforts and information needed by principals for successful implementation.

This research endeavor is a case study that is somewhat phenomenological in nature. Case studies are excellent methods to examine the “how” and “why” questions involved in implementation of professional learning communities (Yin, 2009). The focus of this research effort is to examine how best to support building level principals as they seek to implement professional learning communities in their schools. Yin (2009) notes that “how” and “why” questions are “more explanatory and likely to lead to the use of case studies, histories, and experiments as the preferred research method” (Yin, p.9). Case studies are excellent means of research when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated. This is the case with this effort in that building level principals moved forward with the implementation of professional learning communities at their own pace, via their own implementation plan or lack thereof, and with their own ends in mind when implementing professional learning communities at their schools. Nonetheless, the implementation of professional learning communities is the implementation of a concept that affects conditions that encompass conditions outside professional learning communities themselves. The implementation of professional learning communities connects to and is affected by school culture, leadership and a variety of other conditions. Case study methodology allows for this phenomenon.

A case study is an empirical inquiry that

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon in dept and within its real-life context, especially when
The boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. (Yin, 2008, p. 18)

This research effort has a phenomenological lens to it. "A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (Creswell, p. 51). In this research, the purpose is to understand what principals felt “the essence” of their successful or unsuccessful efforts were with implementation as well as gain an understanding of impediments to implementation. The purpose of this research is to describe and understand their experiences and the meanings they have assigned to that experience.

Phenomenology is a philosophy or method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness. A movement based on this philosophy was originated about 1905 by Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology is a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'" (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 356). Because of phenomenology's nature, where lived experience serves as the foundational structure under study, it is by definition a study where questions have no definitive answers. The data is not "of the ordinary kind" (Camara, 1996) and the understandings obtained from the phenomenological approach do not presuppose a full definitive explication is a possibility. The aim of a phenomenological study is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions of a
phenomenon, general or universal meanings are derived… and the essences or structures of
the experience” are described (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

Hopefully the research and the experience of these administrators who have sought to
implement professional learning communities in their schools sheds light for future efforts of
future school administrators who attempt to move forward in implementing professional
learning communities as a means of improvement. It should also be noted that the new North
Carolina Teacher Evaluation Instrument (2009) produced by
McREL(http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/profdev/training/teacher/teacher-eval.pdf) for
the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction advocates the development and
participation in professional learning communities for North Carolina Teachers. This new
evaluation tool has five standards whereby teachers are to be evaluated on:

Standard I: Teachers Demonstrate Leadership

Standard II: Teachers Establish a Respectful Environment for
a Diverse Population of students

Standard III: Teachers know the Content They Teach

Standard IV: Teachers Facilitate Learning for Their Students

Standard V: Teachers Reflect Upon Their Practice
(The North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process, 2009)

The reference to professional learning communities is noted in various places throughout the
new instrument’s standards and most prominently in the initial statement under the teacher leadership standard. That standard states:

“Teachers work collaboratively with school personnel to create a professional learning community. They analyze and use local, state, and national data to develop goals and strategies in the school improvement plan that enhances student learning and teacher working conditions.”

(The North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process, 2009)

This aspect or influence on implementation is also examined from the perspective of the principal to determine if it is seen as an effective tool to encourage participation in professional learning communities. It is apparent that school officials and leadership see the potential value of professional learning communities because of the inclusion of professional learning communities concepts in the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Instrument. In addition, teachers wanting to garner an accomplished or distinguished in the area of teacher leadership would “assume a leadership role in a professional learning community” and “collaborate with colleagues to improve the quality of learning at the school” (North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process, 2009). A larger question may be the ability of a state agency to legislate cultural change via professional learning communities. This aspect is also explored with this research effort. This example itself provides an example of organizational change reacting to a legislative change.

This research involves interviews with school administrators in an Eastern North Carolina School district. These administrators come from elementary, middle and high schools in that particular district. Implementation efforts and strategies for this particular district may prove insightful for other districts seeking the implementation of professional
learning communities. The researcher gives an overview of the implementation plan within this particular school district and allows principals and to reflect upon the implementation plan and these insights hopefully prove beneficial for the implementation efforts in other districts and in future implementation ventures.

The ultimate purpose or research question of this effort is while it has been suggested professional learning communities hold the best promise for sustaining school improvement efforts (Crow et al., 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997, 2004; Toole & Louis, 2002), the efforts associated with creating a professional learning community at the school level lacks results if a key figure in developing and nurturing the growth of professional learning communities lacks clarity on what a school as professional learning community is, and what their role requires for successful implementation. Moreover, principals with an understanding of adaptive challenges and technical problems should be better equipped to successfully navigate implementation of professional learning communities in their schools. Through interviews and dialogue with principals, questions, concerns and problems encountered while beginning to implement professional learning communities should prove illuminative for future implementation efforts with professional learning communities.

Definition of Terms

**Adaptive challenges**-Term defined by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky as problems faced by organizations or communities whereby new “knowledge” is needed or must be created for those in the community or organization to address the problem. Adaptive challenges require change to be successfully solved.(Linsky & Heifetz, 2002)
**Culture**-the everyday activity, behavior, protocols, a school exhibits as well as the underlying thoughts, values, beliefs that silently pervade the everyday behaviors at the school. (Deal & Peterson, 1995)

**Critical Friends Group(s) (CFG)**-school based professional community to allow teachers the opportunity to discuss teaching and student learning collectively to improve practice.

**Common Assessments**-assessments created by professional learning community team where by all members of a subject area or grade level team 1) agree on the essential knowledge students must learn for a particular course or grade, 2) predetermine the manner of the assessment and the grading rubric and time the assessment will be given and 3) review the assessment after given and analyze the data for ways to improve teaching methods for the future as well as remediate students prior to summative assessments. (DuFour, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2008)

**End of course (EOC’s) test** -a North Carolina’s accountability test delivered at the end of high school (grades 9-12) courses.

**End of grade (EOG’s) test**-a North Carolina accountability test delivered at the end of elementary (grades 3-5) and middle school (grades 6-8) courses in reading, math and science.

**Kaizen**-a concept from Total Quality Management involving the idea of continuous improvement. (Sallis, 2002)

**Mental models**-term made popular by Peter Senge in The Fifth Discipline which described "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures of images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action." (Senge, 1990, p. 8)

**Professional Learning Community (PLC)**-a collegial group of teachers and administrators who are united in their commitment to student learning. They engage in regular, consistent and focused dialogue to improve instructional practice, school processes and are bound by a collective vision that guides their work as they learn together and learn collaboratively from each other’s practice. (Hord, 2008, p. 12).

**Phenomenology**-qualitative method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are understood in human consciousness. Based on the work of Edmund Husserl in early 1900’s.

**Quality teams**-employees in TQM organizations who come together on a regular basis to study ways of improving their individual and collective efforts. It involved a personal and team commitment to helping others improve little by little, day by day through the use of TQM tools and processes. (Sallis, 2002)
SMART Goals- Goal setting strategy for schools and professional learning community teams. SMART is an acronym that stands for specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time bound. The SMART analogy also can be found in early Total Quality Management literature. A popular text, The Power of SMART Goals by Jan O’Neill, Anne Conzemius, Carol Commodore and Carol Pulsfus is used to train many PLCs at Work® teams on goal setting. (O’Neill & Conzemius, 2006)

Team Norms-Rules and protocols that will guide PLC team meetings that are established collaboratively by the group at the beginning of the school year. Usually established in written form by the team and turned in to the principal at the beginning of the year.

Technical problems-Term defined by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky as problems faced by organizations or communities whereby current know how and knowledge can be applied to solve the problem. (Linsky & Heifetz, 2002)

Total Quality Management(TQM)-Management philosophy that is attributed to W. Edwards Deming that focused on quality as the chief objective of the enterprise. Quality is achieved through examining processes and upstream efforts to create a quality end product. Quality teams examine and continuously improved processes and protocols while they seek to continually exceed expectations. (Sallis, 2002)

Total Quality Education (TQE)-Edward Sallis published Total Quality Management in Education in 1993. The work by Sallis attempted to take the philosophies of Deming’s TQM concepts and apply them to education. Total Quality Education was also published by Michael Smoker in Phi Delta Kappa in 1993. Smoker also advocated the adoption of Deming principles within education. (Sallis, 2002)

Whole Faculty Study Groups (WFSG)-a collaborative professional group that focus on student learning and includes every member of the staff in collaborative action research and reflection on one’s professional practice to improve upon their capacity as teachers.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to gain a more complete understanding of principals’ perceptions of schools as professional learning communities and the difficulties they face when implementing professional learning communities at the school level. The research
questions for this effort are:

1. What are principal’s conceptions of, or definitions of professional learning communities?
2. What are principal’s perceptions of a school’s culture that hinder or enhance the implementation of professional learning communities, and how can they be better equipped to address these perceived challenges?
3. How do professional learning communities being part of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Instrument, the North Carolina Principal Evaluation Instrument, and Standards for North Carolina Superintendents affect implementation efforts?

Toole and Louis (2002) argue that efforts to create a professional learning community will lack results if a key figure in developing and nurturing the growth of professional learning communities lacks clarity on what a school as professional learning community is, and what their role requires for successful implementation. Toole and Louis (2002) further add this is an “area ripe for additional research.”

This research effort involves going to the school and interviewing implementing principals. It is a case study with a phenomenological lens. It involves listening to school leaders’ “voices from the field” and discovering their concept of what a professional learning community is and what difficulties they faced when seeking to implement professional learning communities within a school. Case study research is effective in the exploratory phase of an investigation (Yin, 6, 2009) and also an effective methodology for answering “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 8, 2009) which this study attempts to explore. This study uses a naturalistic inquiry approach (Lincoln &Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) and thematic analysis (Boyatzsis, 1999) to shed light on this area of research concerning implementation
efforts with professional learning communities. "A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, p. 51). From individual descriptions of a phenomenon, “general or universal meanings are derived…and the essences or structures of the experience" are described (Moustakas, 1994, p.13). In essence, a phenomenological study attempts to look for the most fundamental features of a problem and attempts to discover and describe the lived experience as explained by the actor, or the person who has lived the phenomenon.

In this research my purpose is to understand the fundamental features of what a few principals feel are issues they face when they are charged with implementing professional learning communities within their schools. Hopefully this research proves illuminative should other researchers extend the research base by focusing on the principal's role with the implementation of professional learning communities.

Limitations of the Study

This is a case study of the implementation of professional learning communities by one school district in rural Eastern North Carolina. It involves interviews and analysis as it relates to the implementation endeavor with selected principals in this particular district. Therefore, the analysis of interview data represents the ideas of only these select individuals. Because of my position in the district, I have responsibility for the shape of the implementation within the district and am involved in many of the activities related to implementing professional learning communities within the district. I know well the
participants interviewed but have no supervisory authority over these individuals. I include some personal insights and reflections but monitor my own subjectivity and remain aware of my biases through the use of journals and notes. I bracket my subjectivity to truly reflect the concerns, successes, failures, problems and phenomena encountered via interviews with principals implementing professional learning communities. It is my desire to simply tell a story about the implementation of professional learning communities within this district as this endeavor unfolds and, in doing so, contribute to the educational literature on professional learning communities.

Summary of Chapter One

The purpose of this study is to gain a more complete understanding of leadership role of principals and how critical it would be to implementing professional learning communities. Professional Learning Communities are seen as a viable means to improved results for students yet implementation of professional learning community components create conflict in some degree for principals who seek to implement PLCs because PLCs impact a school's culture. As Heifetz and Linsky (2002) point out, specific interventions are necessary by leaders who face adaptive challenges: 1.) Making observations, 2) Asking questions, 3.) Offering interpretations and 4.) Encouraging people taking action. Moreover, Heifetz and Linsky point out that "the people must change their hearts as well as their behaviors" (p.127) and go through a process whereby the people with the problem become the people with the solutions" (p.127). In this research effort, my
purpose is to simply better understand the fundamental features of what a few select principals feel are issues they face when they are charged with implementing professional learning communities within their schools. Hopefully this research proves illuminative should other researchers extend the effort as it relates to the principal's role with the implementation of professional learning communities. Chapter Two overviews the conceptual beginnings of professional learning communities and develops a working definition of professional learning communities. More specifically, it examines the components are of the Professional Learning Communities at Work© model of Richard DuFour.
Chapter Two

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

A review of the existing literature can provide the researcher with an idea of the knowledge that exists concerning their area of research interest. It also provides the researcher with an idea of what knowledge has been uncovered and what questions have been unaddressed.

For the purposes of this study, I show what knowledge and information currently exists concerning developing professional learning communities. The first section reviews information on the conceptual beginnings of professional learning communities. This section introduces readers to the development of professional learning communities via a discussion of the basic concepts of Total Quality Management and how the development of TQM contributed to the professional learning communities concept. The second section of the literature review highlights voices noting the phenomenon of teacher isolation and how those voices play into the development of professional learning communities. The third section of the literature review discusses the idea of “learning organizations” and how this conceptual development adds to the professional learning communities’ concept. Finally, the fourth and fifth sections reviews the DuFour model of professional learning communities, Professional Learning Communities at Work®, and conceptualizations of professional learning communities outside the DuFour model and the organizations who support the development of professional learning communities.
The Conceptual Beginnings of Teaming and TQM’s Contribution

It is hard to be certain when the actual coining of the term “Professional Learning Community” occurred. Perhaps the concept professional learning communities preceded the actual practice of developing professional learning communities within school buildings and school districts. Nonetheless, despite the uncertainty of the conceptual beginnings or the labeling of the concept as “professional learning communities,” professional learning communities themselves or at least the term is becoming more in vogue today than they have been in the past. In North Carolina, participating in professional learning communities became part of the new teacher evaluation process in 2009-10 (NCDPI, 2009). In addition, schools and school districts have and will spend thousands of dollars for training and staff development on how to implement professional learning communities.

The beginnings of the concept of professional learning communities may have been as early as 1960 in education research circles. The concept of teachers sharing expertise through regular planned meetings in order to improve their practice and share expertise was mentioned in those early research endeavors but offered as a means to alleviate the isolation associated with the teaching profession (http://www.allthingsplc.info/about/evolution.php). Nonetheless, the early research literature reviewed to reduce the isolation of teachers prior to the 1990’s does not seem to indicate a conceptualization of professional learning community. However, in the late 1980’s and 1990’s, the concept of a learning community began to take shape. While this concept was not yet developing in education circles, the concept of a
similar type was further along the way in other professions outside education.

W. Edwards Deming contributions to the development of Total Quality Management have had some influence in creating the concept of professional learning communities. While his contributions to education could be debated, Deming’s contribution to manufacturing is not. “Deming may have had the most influence of anyone in the manufacturing industry” (Sallis, 2002, p.6). His ideas along with those of Jung and Crosby are pervasive enough in business, management and industry that those three are considered pioneers of the Total Quality Movement (Swiss, 2002, p. 504). Deming’s ideas about TQM practices and controlling variance that were used to rebuild Japan after World War II and also used in the United States soon lent themselves to consideration in education circles. The philosophy of Deming can be summarized as follows:

Dr. W. Edwards Deming taught that by adopting appropriate principles of management, organizations could increase quality and simultaneously reduce costs (by reducing waste, rework, staff attrition and litigation while increasing customer loyalty). The key is to practice continual improvement and think of manufacturing as a system, not as bits and pieces


More importantly for the development of professional learning communities, Deming’s ideas on quality, quality circles and controlling variance are embedded in some sense in professional learning community practices. Most overtly embedded in professional learning communities are Deming’s ideas on quality teams and quality circles.

Deming’s TQM philosophy advocated for “Quality Teams” and held a strong belief
that eighty-five percent of the problems faced are due to systematic problems and not worker incompetence. Deming also believed that front line workers, engaged in a collaborative effort, could address the systematic flaws. With that effort must come measures and controlling variance, but the bottom line was that the front line worker knew and could see and solve the problem much faster than the executive in the corporate office. As Stephen Covey (1996) puts it in his *4 Disciplines of Execution*, which builds on many of the Deming principles, “the front line is the bottom line” (Covey, 2002, *4 Disciplines of Execution*).

Deming’s work in industry in the 1950’s and 60’s influenced work in education, although at a later date than they began to influence business and industry. Deming returned to the United States in 1960 virtually unnoticed after his efforts in rebuilding and restructuring industry and manufacturing in Japan (Swiss, 2002, p.504). Deming’s ideas in business and industry and manufacturing were slow to take hold in industry. It wasn’t until 1981, when Deming was asked to help rebuild and restructure Ford Motor Company that his concepts of Total Quality Management began to grow popular in the United States manufacturing (Sallis, 1993, p.8). As his ideas became popular in business and manufacturing throughout the eighties, analogies to TQM principles in business began to be considered in education circles. Edward Sallis published *Total Quality Management in Education* in 1993. The work by Sallis attempted to take the philosophies of Deming’s TQM concepts and apply them to education. Sallis argued that the quality movement “had a lot to teach education” (ii).

Total Quality Management is both a philosophy and a methodology. It can assist institutions to manage change and set their own agendas for dealing with a plethora of new external pressures. Considerable claims are made for
TQM. There are those in education who believe that TQM properly applied to it can complete a similar transformation. However, TQM does not and will not bring results overnight; neither is it a panacea for all the problems that beset education. Rather it is an important set of tools that can be employed in the management of educational institutions.

(Sallis, 1993, p.3)

Sallis notes the need for education to develop a quality oriented culture, much like we see in manufacturing and industry (p.10) but also notes the “reluctance in some areas of education to embrace what many traditionalists see as industrial management methodologies” (1993, p.10). Additionally, Sallis notes “TQM is hard work, It takes time to develop a quality culture” (1993, p. 30). As with TQM, there are levels of development. TQM or TQE proponents note the stages to be formation, growth, maturity and a last stage that can lead to decline and decay or renewal and revitalization (Sallis, 1993, p.57). With TQM or TQE, the leader facilitates the growth of the vision and team building. He or she provides process tools, reflection upon processes and protocols and in the evaluation of processes and procedures to evaluate their effectiveness in contributing to quality (p. 67, 1993, Sallis).

Michael Schmoker, a tremendously popular education writer today, himself published a work that attempted to translate TQM principles from the world of business and industry and practice them in field of education. Schmoker’s earliest work, Total Quality Education was published by Phi Delta Kappa in 1993, and advocates the adoption of Deming principles within education. Schmoker agreed with Deming’s 85-15 rule: That 85% of the responsibility for quality lies within the system. Only 15% of quality hinges on individuals working within that system.

“For us, Deming’s philosophy makes apparent we can do much better at
educating our children with the resources we already have; but if we want to provide a world-class education for our least-advantaged children it will require additional resources….but Deming’s methods would ensure the elimination of the feckless remedial and other special programs, which are so costly and wasteful of resources.

(Schmoker, 1993, p.6)

The popularity of Total Quality Education faced the same fate many education reforms have faced over the years. There was an initial surge for TQE practices but the popularity was relatively short lived. Moreover, the move for TQE was fairly quiet compared to the Professional Learning Community movement today. Only a few TQE texts were ever published. Nonetheless, the Professional Learning Community movement of today has some distinct connections to the Total Quality Movement in Education in the early 1990’s. Many of the early components or practices of Total Quality Education are present in the PLC concepts and practices today. The most prominent being the following belief:

“An ethos prevails that we tend to resist: the notion that ordinary employees, not just managers and engineers, are the richest repository of improvement; and that every process and product can be made better if we let them help us and continually train them to improve themselves.”

(Schmoker, 1993, p.7)

This is the main carry over from Deming’s TQM concepts to the TQE practices. It is also the premise behind the development of professional learning communities. Many of the tools, processes and practices utilized by professional learning communities today are process tools developed with the initial TQE efforts. And, these tools, protocols and process tools are attempting to control variance and improve quality in much the same manner that
Deming’s TQM tools were to improve manufacturing efforts. Where TQM tools in business in industry were to control variance and serve teams to insure they developed quality statistical measures to lessen variance to aid production, the tools for professional learning communities attempt to give teams indicators of how well they were doing in achieving educational outcomes for all students. The tools, protocols and processes give teams in both fields means and methodology to continue to systematically improve. The birthplace of these ideas and concepts had their beginnings with Deming and Total Quality Management.

The Concept of Teacher Isolation

Much has been written about the solitary nature of the teaching profession. When this phenomenon is examined in view of TQM and business practices and protocols, we see much incongruence about how we have designed the professional nature of teaching. The isolated nature of the teaching profession is incongruent with improvement concepts from Deming, TQM and other business improvement models such as SixSigma, ISO9000, GXP, business process reengineering and the like.

Dan Lortie wrote a significant text that provided insight into the teaching profession in 1975. In Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study, Lortie noted the extreme isolation that prevailed in the teaching profession. Lortie’s voice was heard by others and the phenomenon of teacher isolation was noted by other researchers.

This isolation was so complete that teachers quickly learned that they could teach whatever they liked (or did not like) however they liked (Berlin, 1984; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). There was almost no real risk of criticism or consequences. Tenure was virtually guaranteed (Hess, 2004).
Unlike other professions, no one would ever monitor the quality of their work or, very importantly, its impact on student learning. Teachers saw that the system readily accommodated even their least effective colleagues, despite the dire consequences this had for generations of students (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Sanders & Horn, 1994).

The devastating implications of such privacy and isolation were seldom uttered, but were nonetheless quite clear: differences in teaching did not matter much; outcomes were irrelevant until recently.

Teachers were carefully protected from ever having to examine even the most obvious evidence that challenged these assumptions, such as student work or achievement data. Parents and communities never saw this evidence either, as the system managed to “buffer” them from the realities of schooling or from any close outside inspection (Elmore, 2000).

This isolation reflected a profound indifference to instruction and gave teachers tacit, near-total autonomy—permission to teach as well or poorly as they wished. Curriculum anarchy prevailed. Some teachers taught writing, but most did not. Some classes finished the math text, while others did not even cover half of it (Berliner, 1984; Little, 1990; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). None of this was monitored or corrected.

(Schmoker, “No Turning Back,” Uncommon Ground, 2005, p138,

This idea of the isolated nature of the teaching profession plays a great part into the development of the professional learning community concept. To improve practice, TQM management principles would advocate a team based, collaborative problem solving effort by teams of workers. This is certainly juxtaposed to the individualized nature of a teacher’s practice that Lortie and others make note of.

With Total Quality Management principles, improvement of the teacher’s practice would be improved upon by making the instructional practice public and having elements of the practice discussed, evaluated and improved upon by the team. This making of the teacher’s practice public would resonate with the term “kaizen” which is often used in TQM circles. Kaizen involves the idea of continuous improvement. This is most easily translated
as ‘step-by-step improvement’ where by each element of a process or practice is examined and evaluated in hopes of improving the process or practice. “The philosophy of TQM is large-scale inspirational and all embracing, but its practical implementation is small-scale, highly practical and incremental. Drastic intervention is not the means of change in TQM. Grandiose schemes are not the way forward, because they flounder for lack of resources, and their demise can breed cynicism and discontent” (Sallis, 25). The essence of kaizen is a small project that seeks to build success and confidence, and develop a base for further ventures in improvement. The TQM means of improvement would be incongruent with the nature of the teaching profession that Lortie describes. Lortie describes a profession whereby teachers are isolated and improvement is basically a result of one’s own efforts.

More recently, Jon Saphier notes the “dysfunctional systems” embedded in teacher preparation and the practice of teaching. Saphier’s John Adams’ Promise: How to Have Good Schools for All Our Children, Not Just for Some (2005) further notes that, “Everything hinges on the teaching expertise of the individual teachers” (Saphier, 10). Saphier believes systems to improve our current educational system must 1) build teacher expertise and make practice public, 2) build strong organizational cultures and 3) provide higher salaries and differentiated pathways for teachers. Saphier’s ideas resonate with many because he recognizes the pivotal role teachers play in the equation of improving the educational system. Teachers are the key to improving the system because they directly connect to students. And in essence, they are the frontline in education and their expertise, effort and knowledge base and skills greatly affect the bottom line in education if the bottom line is to be measured via state and national performance assessments.
The concept of professional learning communities fits well with the current education culture, which is focused on improving achievement as measured on standardized tests. The professional learning community concept recognizes teachers and their skill, expertise and efforts are the bottom line when it comes to improved results with the current system.

Lortie’s (1975) note of the isolated nature of teaching and Saphier’s ideas of a collaborative process to improve practice and expertise in the field of education sound similar to the work of Susan Rosenholtz in late 1989. Rosenholtz published ideas from her research that described a workplace for teachers that encouraged collaboration, an environment in which teachers shared ideas and solutions to problems, and shared learning about educational practice. Most importantly, Rosenholtz found teachers learning and improved practice led to increases in student’s achievement. (Rosenholtz, 1989, 352-388)

The Learning Organization and Senge’s Influence

Rosenholtz’s ideas came forth in 1989, almost concurrently with Peter Senge’s publication of *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990. *The Fifth Discipline* encouraged the following:

1. Systems Thinking
2. Personal Mastery
3. Mental Models
4. Shared Vision
5. Team Learning

Senge’s premise was that successful organizations of the future would be learning organizations that mastered these five capacities. These organizations would be
organizations where people continued to expand their capacities and where people continually learn how to learn together. The five disciplines and the development of those disciplines were the means to creating a learning organization. Senge specifically addressed educational improvement efforts in *Schools That Learn* (2000). Senge called for schools to abandon Industrial Age assumptions and center our focus on student learning instead of the teacher. In short, Senge asked educational administrators to see schools as living systems instead of machines. This shift of focus is apparent in the professional learning community precepts.

Rosenholtz’s, Senge’s, Saphier’s and Deming’s ideas seem to carry a common theme. To improve an organization, the organization must learn how to collaborate, share and grow the expertise and improve its current practices within itself. The teaching profession and education would be no different than manufacturing organizations whereby improvement came via implementation of Deming’s principles.

The call for collaborative, team-based approaches to improvement is common in popular books on leadership. Kouzes and Posner’s *The Leadership Challenge* (1995) became a best seller and was influential on leadership practices. Kouzes and Posner’s outline for leaders involves having leaders 1) challenge the current process, 2) inspire a shared vision, 3) enable others to act, 4) model the way, and 5) encourage the heart. The fourth step of the theory, model the way basically centers upon developing teams. “In more than 550 cases we studied, we didn’t encounter a single example of extraordinary achievement that occurred without the active involvement and support of many people. And this hasn’t changed with our subsequent research. In thousands of additional stories from all professions
around the globe, people continue to tell us, ‘You can’t do it alone, it’s a team effort.’ (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, p151)” Kouzes and Posner argue that collaboration improves performance and leaders are well served by fostering a culture that sustains ongoing interaction among team members (157) and these interactions involve sharing information and resources (161) and fosters trusting relationships within the organization (163). “Fostering collaboration begins with creating and sustaining cooperative goals. The best incentive for others to help you is knowing that you’ll reciprocate, helping them in return. Help begets help, trust begets trust” (Kouzes and Posner, 171, 1995).

Kouzes and Posner’s *The Leadership Challenge* followed an earlier work by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman entitled *In Search of Excellence*. Peter and Waterman’s text gave added strength and credence to the value of team based learning communities. Peters and Waterman touted the value of effective teams that focused on collective effort and measurement of success. Peter’s and Waterman’s book was a bestseller and impacted greatly the world of business and industry and the idea that a self managing team could be the building block of an organization. *In Search of Excellence* in some sense paved the way for *The Leadership Challenge* but both works impacted and promoted the concept of the value of teams to an organization in much the same fashion as the earlier work of Deming valued teams and their effect on quality. Peter Drucker, a noted voice in business and organizational leadership also echoes similar thoughts, “Every enterprise has to become a learning institution [and] a teaching institution. Organizations that build in continuous learning in jobs will dominate the twenty-first century” (Drucker, 1992, p. 108). The conclusions of Drucker, Peter’s and Waterman, Kouzes and Posner are also echoed by Stephen Covey in *First Things*
First: To live, to love, to learn and to Leave a Legacy. Covey states, “only the organizations that have a passion for learning will have an enduring influence (Covey, 1994, p.149, First Things First).”

Jim Collins’ Good to Great (2001) was another major influential text from a leadership perspective. Most are well aware of Collins’ theory of management and leadership and “getting the right people on the bus in the right seats.” But, as Collins speaks of the importance of the right people his purpose in selecting the right people is because the interactions between and among these people are what propel the organization forward. “Indeed, one of the crucial elements in taking a company from good to great is somewhat paradoxical. You need executives, on the one hand, who argue and debate—sometimes violently—in pursuit of the best answers, yet, on the other hand, who fully unify behind a decision, regardless of parochial interests (p. 60).” An article on Philip Morris said of the Joe Cullman era, who was the CEO at Phillip Morris, ‘These guys never agreed on anything and would argue about everything, and they would kill each other and involve everyone, high and low, talented people. But when they had to make a decision, the decision would emerge…they were always in search of the best answer. In the end, everybody stood behind the decision. All of the debates were for the common good of the company, not your own interests.’ ” (Collins, p. 60). Collins argues that good to great leaders understood that people do not fall in love with the organization, but with whom they work within the organization. And, once the ‘who is on the bus?’ question is answered, the organization can more easily adapt to a changing world. “If people join the bus primarily because of where the bus is going, what happens if you get ten miles down the road and you need to change direction?
You’ve got a problem. But if people are on the bus because of who else is on the bus, then it’s much easier to change direction: ‘Hey, I got on this bus because of who else is on it; if we need to change direction to be more successful, fine with me’” (Collins, p. 42). Collins work emphasizes that productivity is the result of focused effort on a few simple, well-defined goals and a commitment to those “big, hairy, audacious goals” by everyone on the bus.

The works in business, industry and manufacturing all stem from the earlier concepts Deming introduced in with his Total Quality Management principles. The later texts perhaps carry Deming’s ideas further and enhance elements of his overall concept. Nonetheless, these concepts add to the knowledge base when it comes to management, leadership and improvement and contribute to the development and support for professional learning communities. DuFour’s premise for professional learning communities is based on the idea that if teachers make time to collaborate and learn from each other to improve their practice, student learning will be enhanced. DuFour’s premise seems well supported from literature outside the realm of educational literature as well as from insights inside the bounds of education. DuFour and professional learning community supporters recognize the congruence from all these voices and capitalize on this congruence. They use this as support for the idea and the promise developing professional learning communities within schools may offer.
Professional Learning Communities at Work©: The DuFour Model

The most popular and well-known conceptual model of professional learning communities is the PLCs at Work© version attributed to Rick and Becky DuFour and Robert Eaker. The DuFour and Eaker model and language associated with their version of professional learning communities is the most prevalent and popular of professional learning community literature. The popularity of the DuFour and Eaker model has turned into a business that is headquartered with Solution Tree (formerly National Education Associates).

DuFour’s most popular and descriptive work of professional learning communities was *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for enhancing Student Achievement*, which was published in 1998. DuFour outlines what a professional learning community is by outlining the three big ideas of a professional learning community:

**Big Idea 1: Ensuring That Students Learn**
Schools address this big idea by addressing three critical questions: 1) What do we want each student to learn? 2) How will we know when each student has learned it? 3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty? The answers to these questions are what define the practices and protocols in schools that become professional learning communities (33).

**Big Idea 2: A Culture of Collaboration**
Collaboration that is characteristic of a professional learning community is collaboration for the purpose of analyzing and improving classroom practice (36).

**Big Idea 3: A Focus on Results**
Working together to improve the student achievement results becomes the routine work of the school (38). The development of common formative assessments and adjusting teaching practice as a result of assessment outcomes drives the system. Teachers use common assessment results as a means to explore practice and evaluate their personal practice and the results produced by those practices.

(DuFour, May 2004, What is a Professional Learning Community?)
This initial effort by DuFour was followed by *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities* which was published in 2002 and *Whatever It Takes*, published by DuFour and Eaker in 2004. All three of the works introduce readers to the big ideas behind DuFour’s conception of Professional Learning Communities. *Whatever It Takes* (2004) provides examples of PLC implementation at Adlai Stevenson High School in suburban Chicago, Freeport Intermediate School near Houston, Texas and Boones Mill Elementary School in Franklin County, Virginia and a Title I elementary school in Southern California. The main focus of the text is to identify intervention strategies implemented in each of the four exemplars of professional learning communities. It also identifies the common elements of the reform effort at each school and the commonalities in approaches to leadership at each of the schools and recounts some of the hurdles in the transformation of these schools to professional learning communities. The text also ends with a focus on cultural aspects of the reformation effort at each of the four schools. Noting specifically the structural changes to become a professional learning community must be accompanied by cultural change (p.172). The major cultural shifts as described by DuFour are:

1. A shift from a focus on teaching to learning.
2. A shift from working in isolation to working collaboratively.
3. A shift from focusing on activities to a focus on results.
4. A shift from fixed to flexible time.
5. A shift from a focus on average learning to individual learning.
6. A shift from a focus on the punitive to the positive.
7. A shift from “teacher tell/student listen” to “teacher coaching/student practice.”
8. A shift from recognizing the elite to creating opportunity for many winners.


DuFour also made his initial case for professional learning communities in a 2002 article in *Educational Leadership* entitled “The Learning Principal.”
He spoke for the administrators whose attempts to become the consummate “instructional leader” by attempting to “mass inspect” every aspect of instruction had ended in frustration. He found that his time and effort had far more impact when he primarily focused on learning—on assessment results—rather than on instruction.

(DuFour, 2002, The Learning Principal, p.12-15)

The first book to have others specifically focus on professional learning communities was *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities* (2005). The text was published in 2005 by Roland Barth, Robert Eaker, Mike Schmoker, Michael Fullan, Becky DuFour, Barbra Eason-Watkins, Lawrence Lezotte, Dennis Sparks, Johnathon Saphier and edited by Richard DuFour (Solution Tree Press, 2005). It coalesced some of the most prominent educational thinkers and writers in one volume, and these writers in turn and in unison spoke of the value of developing professional learning communities and the ideas of DuFour. It brought some of education’s most respected voices together in one volume to endorse the professional learning community concept.

Dr. Robert Eaker was respected and the former Dean of the College of Education at Middle Tennessee State University and a former Fellow with the National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development. Lezotte was head of the Effective Schools movement that permeated many North Carolina school systems throughout the 1990’s. Fullan was a noted and respected author who is currently the Professor Emeritus of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto and was the author of *Change Forces* (1993). All of these respected educational authorities supported the concept of professional learning communities.
In 1993, Fullan’s *Change Forces* advocates for a collaborative staff able to respond to the environment. He further speaks of this collaboration to be combined with individuality for a school staff to work effectively through change. More recently, Fullan’s efforts with school change continue. *The Six Secrets of Change* (Fullan, 2008) continues to advocate for the collaborative nature of professional learning communities. DuFour’s efforts at developing professional learning communities are also supported by Mike Schmoker, a prominent educational author who earlier authored on Total Quality Education, who cites, “developing the capacity of educators to function as members of professional learning communities is the best known means by which we might achieve truly historic, wide-scale improvements in teaching and learning (Schmoker, *The Tipping Point*, Phi Delta Kappa, p. 432).” In addition to these voices are the voices of Rick Stiggins, the director of Educational Testing Services and considered an authority on assessment. Roland Barth, the founder and director of the Harvard University Principals’ Centers and a prolific educational author; Dennis Sparks, the executive director of the National Staff Development Council; Douglass Reeves, the founder and chairman of the Center for Performance Assessment and a member of the Harvard graduate faculty as well as a prolific and influential educational author. All of their voices, in unison support and endorse the concept of professional learning communities.

*On Common Ground* (2005) was premised on a simple powerful concept. “It starts with a group of teachers who meet regularly as a team to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals, share strategies, and then create lessons to improve upon those levels. Picture these teams of teachers implementing these new lessons, continuously assessing their
results, and then adjusting their lessons in light of those results. Importantly, there must be the expectation that this collaborative effort will produce ongoing improvement and gains in achievement” (DuFour, 2005, On Common Ground, xii). The premise of this collaborative meeting of teams is based on the findings by Darling-Hammond, Little (1990) that “when teachers engage regularly in authentic joint work focused on explicit, common learning goals, their collaboration pays off richly in the form of high quality solutions to instructional problems, increased teacher confidence and, not surprisingly, remarkable gains in achievement” (DuFour, 2005, On Common Ground, xiii).

In *On Common Ground*, DuFour uses the voices of these prominent educational leaders and authors to support the development of professional learning communities. Each of the contributors to the work does indeed endorse the concept of professional learning communities and sees them as a mean to improved student achievement.

The earlier work of *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (1998) was supported by *Learning by Doing* (2006), which was published in 2006 by DuFour. *Learning by Doing*in some sense was a handbook for school leaders seeking to implement DuFour’s model of professional learning communities. The text gives teams templates and protocols whereby to operate. Each chapter of the handbook includes a case study, an explanation of how to implement each element of the DuFour model and how to assess your progress on implementation. It is in this text DuFour provides templates and explanations of each element as well as goes into more detail about his model. It is more specific and usable for most school leaders because it provides tools that are applicable to assist school leaders with implementation. Where previous texts focused mostly on theory and philosophy, *Learning*
By Doing (2006) gave school administrators a clearer picture of processes and protocols to develop each element.

Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work: New Insights for Improving Schools (2008) is the 10th anniversary sequel to the author’s best-selling book Professional Learning Communities at Work®: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work is a merger of the initial philosophy and research behind the original Professional Learning Communities at Work® (1994) and practice employed in many districts and school to implement professional learning communities. While providing the core information on professional learning communities, the text additionally draws from the tacit experiential knowledge base of school leaders who have implemented professional learning communities from the school and district level. While the text includes research on professional learning communities by far the most effective evidence is in the practices employed in many schools to aid the successful implementation of professional learning communities. It offers specific, practical recommendations to school leaders in how other school leaders have transformed their schools into professional learning communities. This information is the greatest addition to the previous work by DuFour

In essence a multitude of literature exists to support the concept of developing professional learning communities within the school building. After a review of the literature, Professional Learning Communities at Work® appears to be supported conceptually on many fronts. Fundamentally, business leadership concepts appear to be in support of and congruent with developing the means to become a learning organization and the development
of quality circles via the professional learning community teams. In addition, the leading voices in the academic world such as Douglass Reeves, Thomas Sergiovanni, Linda Darling-Hammond, Robert Marzano, Mike Schmoker, Rick Stiggins and others appear to support the concept of professional learning communities. And, in DuFour’s latest book, Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work (2008), we have the day-to-day experiences of school leaders and district leaders on the ground who have implemented professional learning communities. Support for the professional learning communities effort appears to be ample from a conceptual perspective. However, in reviewing the literature of DuFour there is not a prescriptive, exact implementation model. School administrators wishing to implement PLCs must create their own implementation plan which is daunting, especially for administrators still coming to understand the concept of professional learning communities.

Models of Professional Learning Communities Outside the DuFour Model

Other writers and researchers have embraced and supported the idea of professional learning communities and the value of creating them in our schools to improve student achievement. One of those voices is Dr. Shirley M. Hord and Dr. William Sommers. Hord is the scholar emeriti at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin, Texas (Leading Professional Learning Communities, p. xix, 2008) and Sommers a program associate with SEDL and former principal of Chaska High School in Chaska, Minnesota (Leading Professional Learning Communities, p. xx, 2008). Both authored Leading Professional Learning Communities in 2008 and have authored articles through the
years in support of developing PLCs. Hord and Sommers identify five characteristics of professional learning communities that are similar to characteristics touted by DuFour in Professional Learning Communities at Work.

1. Shared Beliefs, Values and Vision
2. Shared and Supportive Leadership
3. Collective Learning and its Application
4. Supportive Conditions
5. Shared Personal Practice

(Hord and Sommers, 2008)

Nonetheless, Hord and Sommers do differ from DuFour in that they note more specific requirements demanded of functioning professional learning communities:

“In many schools, staff learning together is a very new endeavor. Some schools schedule time for grade level or subject matter teams to meet, assuming they are then a professional learning community. The majority of these meetings focus on management, a very legitimate purpose. These meetings are useful and necessary. But they are not typically characterized by professionals meeting together to learn deeper content knowledge, more powerful instructional strategies, or investigating the differentiated and sometimes unique ways students learn. Unstructured time for human interaction does not assure learning or productivity to result. The professional learning community label has preceded its concept. As it has spread across the nation and around the globe, the idea has been translated into a wide array of definitions and descriptions—most of which miss the mark of educators in a school coming together to learn in order to become more effective so that students learn more effectively”

(Hord and Sommers, 2, 2008)

Hord and Sommers attempt to warn that in many instances, professional learning community development in a school amounts to little more than throw together teams performing hurried tasks together. They further note that
“the worst proponents of PLCs avoid such controversy and stick only to the
generalities and technicalities of specifying goals, defining a focus, examining
data, and establishing teams—in ways that give no offense to their clients and
that do not jeopardize their own commercial prospects.
(Hord and Sommers, p. x, 2008)

Hord and Sommers also layout a general framework for implementation, which is at times
vague with the work of DuFour.

1. Articulate a shared vision
2. Develop a plan to realize the vision
3. Provision of professional development
4. Check progress
5. Provide assistance based on each individual’s progress
6. Nurture the culture or context for the change
(Hord and Sommers, p. 22, 2008)

Hord and Sommers see “the roles and behavior of the principal as critical elements in
how the school operates as a professional learning community (PLC) (2008, p.27). They
further note “the principal’s actions, not just his or her words, make believers out of
teachers” (2008, p. 29). Thus, the walk and not the talk of the principal is what staff use to
judge the legitimacy of the concept. Sommers and Hord (2008) are explicit that one of the
roles of the principal is that of change agent and to “change how we do business takes
committed staff and a principal who is willing to provide support to those helping implement
the change” (2008, p.38).

Moreover, Hord and Sommers (2008) are clear that the expectations for the time
given for teachers to operate in professional learning communities must be explicit with a
clear picture of how the process is evaluated and the desired results for these sessions
understood by all” (2008, p.38). They also note the implications for changes in school
culture and the implementations impact on school culture. “Creating the PLC requires a great deal of energy, commitment, and elbow grease” (2008, p. 46). It is the role of the principal to maintain the focus, the flow of information and build trust for such a cultural transformation to occur. The pitfalls for principals attempting to create PLCs range from maintaining the focus, information flow and trust building to also managing the time and space issues that are also implicit in creating professional learning communities (Hord and Sommers, 2008, p. 54) to personal skills that must be developed by the principal themselves to facilitate such a move. These personal skills include conversational skills, listening (p. 97), setting aside judgment, questioning and observation and being open-minded when new ideas are brought forth. Hord and Sommers clearly note the effort will involve conflict and that a conflict management process must be in place if the effort is to be successful (p. 107).

It is clear to this researcher that the role of the principal is critical to the development of professional learning communities within the building. Building level administrators must be able to create space for conversations to take place and change the direction of “downward spiraling” of conversations (Hord and Sommers, 2008, p. 108) when new ideas are brought forth.

What is assessed, monitored and focused on by the principal and other leaders is given attention to by the remainder in the organization (2008, p. 114). The principal has to continually monitor the progress of the development and provide assistance where needed as well as insure the linkage of the efforts of the professional learning community to student learning. And, with the daily demands upon school administrators, making such a
commitment requires a shift of the principal’s focus from daily “firefighting” to the development of the professional learning community and its connection to student learning.

Again, there are other concepts that have similarities to professional learning communities. Critical Friends Groups (CFG’s) and Whole Faculty Study Groups (WFSG’s) are concepts that allow for teachers to collaborate and share ideas and in some way share to improve personal practice. Nonetheless, these concepts do not involve the overt cultural changes that are necessitated with creating professional learning communities. While CFG’s and WFSG’s may impact school culture over time, PLCs are an overt attempt to change a school’s culture and focus. Moreover, the management and leadership skills demanded of the school administrator are far less than those demanded of PLCs.

Critical Friends Groups (CFG’s) are a “particular type of school based professional community aimed at fostering members’ capacities to undertake instructional improvement and school wide reform. CFG members seek to increase student learning and achievement via ongoing practice-centered collegial conversations about teaching and learning” (Curry, 2008, p. 2). The idea behind CFG’s is that inquiry based learning by staff results in increased student achievement, which is similar to the premise behind DuFour’s model of PLCs. Nonetheless, it has been noted that “very little is known empirically about how the talk, reflection, and practices undertaken by CFG’s might create the kinds of conditions necessary to carry over into actual and salutary changes in classroom teaching and/or school policy” (Curry, 2008, p. 2). Curry’s research is important because it notes the following:
Protocols as enacted at Revere (high school) enabled CFG members to engage in focused conversations about practice that ran counter to traditional occupations norms of teaching, like privacy, noninterference, conservatism, and congeniality. Specifically the protocols encouraged the deprivitization of practice by requiring CFG members to bring artifacts of their teaching or of their student’s learning for collective and public review. Protocols (established by CFG’s) gave CFG members permission to ask challenging questions, critique the practice of their peers, and offer explicit instructional advice. The majority of my interviewees (18 of 25) agreed that the use of protocols significantly enhanced the level of discourse and meaning constructed in CFG meetings.

(Curry, Teacher’s College Record, 2008)

The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) has published the National School Reform Faculty Resource Book which shows various protocols and notes that having a resource of such protocols are “powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community such as a Critical Friends Group and facilitated by a skilled coach” (NSRF, 2001, p.3). The purpose of NSRF which began in the fall of 1995 at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University is to provide resources to develop collegial relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and rethinking leadership in restructuring schools—all in support of increased student achievement. School administrators would be well served to review resources and publications by this and other entities on Critical Friends Groups and Professional Learning Communities prior to engaging in an effort to implement either entity.

Whole-Faculty Study Groups (WFSGs) are similar to PLCs and CFG’s. WFSG focus on student learning as the key to drive professional development. It embeds every member of the staff being a member of a study group and action oriented research to improve student
outcomes. Its premise and concept is very similar to professional learning communities. Practitioners deepen their own knowledge and understanding of what is taught, reflect on their practices, sharpen their skills, and take joint responsibility for the students they teach.

'Whole-Faculty' means that every faculty member at a school is a member of a study group focusing on data-based student instructional needs. In such a context, a study group is a small number of individuals joining together to increase their capacities to enable students to reach higher levels of performance. The premise is that the collective synergy of all the study groups advance the whole school which is similar to the premise of DuFour, et al.

Table 1.1: Professional Learning Communities and WFSG’s

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<tr>
<th>Professional Learning Community</th>
<th>Whole-Faculty Study Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared mission, vision, values</td>
<td>The WFSG principles are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Students first</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Leadership is shared</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The work is public</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Everyone participates</td>
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<td>• Responsibility is equal</td>
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<tr>
<td>The focus-instruction, curriculum, assessment practices, and strategies for improving the effectiveness of schools</td>
<td>WFSG study groups address “how and what” staff teach (instruction, curriculum and assessment practices) to improve student learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The question that drives change must be enhanced student achievement</td>
<td>The WFSG Guiding Question is “What are students learning and achieving as a result of what teachers are learning and doing ir. Study Groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Inquiry</td>
<td>Every study group engages in cycles of action research to improve student performance in its chosen student needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative teams</td>
<td>In WFSG Schools, all certified staff organize themselves into study groups of 3-5 members.</td>
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</table>
In WFSG Schools provide time within the school day for study groups to meet weekly for 45-60 minutes or biweekly for 90-120 minutes. Most schools average 3-4 weekly meetings per month over 8 months.

Highly structured meetings

Each study group plans meetings in advance, rotates leadership at each meeting, prepares and public posts meeting logs, and uses protocols for examining student work.

High levels of trust

Group norms and shared leadership help each study group develop trust. Group size is limited to 5 members to ensure work is shared and trust develops.

Moreover, the Nebraska Department of Education has adopted an effort to support the development of WFSG’s. They make the statement below to delineate their effort from those of DuFour:

Many educators in Nebraska have received training about Professional Learning Communities as developed by Rick DuFour and are interested in creating PLCs in their school system. In response to their interest, we wanted to support this effort. Rather than duplicating training, we decided to offer an opportunity to learn about Whole Faculty Study Groups. There are many common threads which will validate Rick DuFour's information. However, the Whole Faculty Study Group approach, developed by Carlene Murphy who is a former teacher and staff developer, will offer some new ideas to strengthen groups you may have started or be a starting point for schools beginning the process. WFSGs are a type of Professional Learning Community.

(http://www.nde.state.ne.us/WFSG/ProfessionalLearningCommunities.htm, accessed October 19, 2009)

(http://www.nde.state.ne.us/wfsg/ProfessionalLearningCommunities.htm, accessed Sept 30, 2009)
The WFSG practices were originally developed by Carlene Murphy in the late 1980's with assistance from Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, authors of, "Student Achievement through Staff Development." This book details the results of Murphy's work with early WFSGs in public schools in Augusta, Georgia. This landmark research in professional development demonstrates how study groups were used to translate training into professional practice that improves student achievement. Over the past twenty years the WFSG system has continually improved to reflect the latest research on the change process and teacher collaboration.

School administrators and superintendents would be well served to investigate information from all of these areas before embarking on the journey of implementation of professional learning communities of any type. There is great similarity in the premise behind each of these entities, yet differing literature and different types of support literature for each endeavor. Each of the varieties of the entity would provide different insights to school administrators about different aspects of the phenomenon and developing such communities. This information would well serve and better educate the prospective school leaders when creating an implementation plan and process.

Support from Leading Educational Organizations

The concept of professional learning communities is also supported from the leading teacher organizations. The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) was created by the Council of Chief State School Officers to develop a common
core of teaching knowledge that would clarify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions all
teachers should demonstrate to be considered “professional.” The standards included the
following statements:

“Professional teachers assume roles that extend beyond the classroom and
include responsibilities for developing the school as a learning organization. . .
. Professional teachers are responsible for planning and pursuing their ongoing
learning, for reflecting with colleagues on their practice, and for contributing
to the profession’s knowledge base.” (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and
Support Consortium, 1992, p. 13)

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), The National Science Teachers
(NSTA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) have all supported via
position statements the development of professional learning communities as key component
of professional support for teachers.

Effective professional development fosters collegial relationships, creating
professional communities where teachers share knowledge and treat each
other with respect. Within such communities teacher inquiry and reflection
can flourish, and research shows that teachers who engage in collaborative
professional development feel confident and well prepared to
meet the demands of teaching. . . .” (National Council of Teachers
of English, 2006, p. 10)

Also in support of the development of professional learning communities are administrator
organizations such as the National Middle School Association (NMSA), the National
Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of
Secondary School Principals (NASSP). It appears almost every organizational base in the
field of education supports the development of professional learning communities. Perhaps
the statement from the National Education Association (NEA), the largest educational
organization with approximately 2.7 million members best sums up the beliefs of the
education community when it comes to professional learning communities:

“High performing schools tend to promote collaborative cultures, support professional communities and exchanges among all staff and cultivate strong ties among the school, parents, and community. . . . Teachers and staff collaborate to remove barriers to student learning. . . . Teachers communicate regularly with each other about effective teaching and learning strategies.” (National Education Association, 2006)

Summary of Information on Professional Learning Communities and Similar Entities

There exists an abundance of literature on entities such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Whole Faculty Study Groups (WFSG’s) and Critical Friends Groups (CFG’s). Each effort promotes the idea of teachers working collaboratively and critically to examine and make public classroom practices with the premise being such an examination will bring about improved results for students. These organizations, when viewed from a TQM perspective, are designed to improve results for customers. Moreover, TQM well denotes the role of the leader in such an effort to improve quality. “They need to communicate the mission of the organization and cascade it throughout the institution. Many managers, especially middle managers, may find total quality difficult to accept and implement” (Sallis, 1993, p.66). The role of the leader becomes to enhance the quality of learning and support the staff who delivers it. A key aspect of such a movement is to empower teachers and shed the traditional management roles. It involves a change in the
mindset and practice of school leaders from their traditional roles to roles where they create a sense of community and sense the whole of the organization and its efforts. Principals also have to be adept with process tools, protocols and managing the dynamics of team processes. These skills are atypical of the traditional roles of educational leaders. Moreover, if teachers are to have such influence and power in the educational efforts of the organization, “the price of such freedom is transparency” (Reeves, 2003, The 21st Century Principal, p. 22).

Cultural Change, Trust and Leadership

Many authors (Schlechty, 1997; DuFour, 1998; Sarason, 1996) have noted the complexity of creating cultural change in schools and the impact of school culture on school reform efforts. DuFour (1998) indicates that “changes in structure are tangible and can be announced with flourish,” but, “Cultural changes are less visible, more amorphous, and much more difficult to make” (p.133). Phil Schlechty (1997) notes that “structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability” (Schlechty, p. 136). Whether a school is seen as a successful school that is doing well at increasing student learning or whether the school is seen as a failing school due to measures on student’s achievement results, most note the culture of the school plays an important part. Many believe that culture may be the most important aspect and job of the leader (Schein, 2004).

As noted by Peterson (1999), “The culture of an enterprise plays the dominant role in exemplary performance” (p. 1). The everyday activity, behavior and protocols at a school
has underneath it an undercurrent of thoughts, values, beliefs and ideas about learning teaching and their role in that effort, and that culture almost silently pervades and guides the day to day efforts at a school. Numerous studies of school change have identified the organizational culture as critical to the successful improvement of teaching and learning (Fullan, 1998; Rossman, Corbett, and Firestone 1988). Peterson and Deal (1999) also note “In study after study, where the culture did not support and encourage reform that improvement did not occur (p.5). More recently, Van Natter (2008) echoes the aforementioned quite succinctly by simply stating, “Re-culturing is the name of the game.”

Most school improvement efforts note culture is a key factor in school improvement. School culture can foster school effectiveness and productivity (Purkey and Smith, 1983; Levine and Lezotte, 1990). Sarason (1996) notes, “To put it as succinctly as possible, if you want to change and improve the climate and outcomes of schooling both for students and teachers, there are features of the school culture that have to be changed, and if they are not changed, your well-intentioned efforts will be defeated” (p. 340). Edgar Schein (1985), an organizational psychologist, states the case for cultural leadership even more forcefully. He states, “there is a possibility underemphasized in leadership research, that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture and the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture” (p. 2).

The implementation of professional learning communities is the implementation of a cultural change. Although new processes, procedures and protocols will be involved, PLCs at the core involve changing the isolated nature of the act of teaching to an endeavor where there is a great degree of trust, enough so, that teachers can expose personal practice,
recognize weaknesses, and seek insights for improvement of practice from fellow teachers.

It involves a great deal of exposure for staff and requires a great deal of trust among colleagues, leadership and among the professional learning team. Megan Tschannen-Moran (2004) specifically notes that:

Professional learning communities share three important features: the adults in them act and are treated as professionals, there is a focus on learning, and there is a strong sense of community. For these three features to characterize a school’s culture, trust is required. In turn, the culture of a school plays a significant role in supporting and sustaining trust. The actions of the principal play an important role in setting the general tone of school trust, but teacher behavior has a more direct impact on student learning. Teachers are more likely to be innovative and effective in an atmosphere of trust.

(Tschannen-Moran, 2007, p. 107)

The Current Literature Base

This research effort seeks to add to the current research base by giving some voice to the principal’s perspective. Since principal leadership is central to the change effort at the school level (McCall, 1994; Tucker 2002; Marzano, 2003) it is important that their voice is heard among the voices who speak about implementing professional learning communities. Primarily, this research effort attempts to denote the cultural challenges faced by building level administrators as they attempt such a profound change within their buildings and hopefully delineate between the technical challenges from the adaptive challenges as defined by Heifetz and Linsky (2002). The purpose of this effort is to provide insight and literature concerning implementation for future building level administrators.
Summary of Chapter Two

Many ideas and concepts have emerged in the business and education world prior to the conception of professional learning communities. In the 1960’s the emergence of W. Edwards Deming’s Quality Teams and Total Quality Management practices became successful and heralded by many as innovations in business and industry. These innovations and tools made their way into the field of education in the form of the Total Quality Education movement in the early 1990’s. The idea of a quality oriented culture and the necessity of teaming and working collaboratively was no new idea to the world of business and industry but new to education. Collaboration and a team oriented process was a stark contrast to the typical isolation faced by teachers and noted by Lortie and Rosenholtz. Rosenholtz (1989) began to note and describe ideas from her research to describe a better workplace for teachers that was more collaborative and an environment where teachers shared ideas and solutions. These ideas slowly took root as Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) and the idea of creating a learning organization was emerging. Educational writers such as Fullan and Rosenholtz began to advocate for a more collaborative approach in education in the 1990’s. Shortly thereafter, after an amalgamation of prior mentioned concepts came to birth of the idea of professional learning communities. The idea of professional learning communities as a means to improvement in academic results has begun to grow to a greater degree. Many states mention the term in their school improvement plan literature and see it as a means to better results. There are many variations of the concept of learning communities or professional learning teams. Richard DuFour and Professional
Learning Communities at Work® is the most popular and commercially available. Nonetheless, implementation of professional learning communities creates cultural and adaptive challenges for school leaders. New organizational and structural arrangements and protocols affect school climate and culture and create tension for school leaders. Principals and administrators must become proficient at the adaptive challenges with implementation and gain organizational expertise to successfully implement professional learning communities. In addition, navigation of this cultural movement will require a great deal of trust among teachers, teachers and administrators, and among professional learning community itself. This trust must be created, understood and is necessary for the concept of professional learning communities to move forward in the building. More importantly, the principal is critical to its development. The next chapter describes the methodology whereby the researcher can discover implementation hurdles faced by school administrators who choose to implement professional learning communities in their schools.
Chapter Three

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to gain a more complete understanding of principal’s efforts to implement professional learning communities and provide a view of what a few select principals feel are major challenges when they are charged with implementing professional learning communities in their schools. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the individual aspects of this particular research effort. This chapter begins with an overview of the theoretical framework and delineation of technical and adaptive challenges as described by Heifetz and Linsky (2002). The chapter outlines the qualitative nature of the inquiry as well as the theory behind this particular case study. It then addresses the development of a preliminary theory (Yin, 2009). Sampling rationale, interview methodology, interview questions as well as ethical considerations are noted. Most importantly, the elements of trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability and data dependability, which are crucial in qualitative case studies, are addressed as they relate the ideas of construct, internal and external reliability and validity.
The Theoretical Framework

It is the job of school leaders to bring about change that moves the school forward academically as well as to manage the day-to-day aspects of the job as principal. Professional learning communities would be a choice school leaders undertake to bring about improved results academically. In order to successfully implement professional learning communities a principal has to have a working knowledge and an understanding of the concepts and components of professional learning communities but must also have knowledge of change dynamics within organizations and impediments faced when attempting to change a school’s culture. DuFour well notes that “implementing professional learning communities involves a shift of culture” (Whatever It Takes, 2002, p. 173-8). He also notes that the structural changes of becoming a professional learning community, noting specifically that structural change to become a professional learning community must be accompanied by cultural change (p.172). And, as Fullan (2007) notes, change can be led, and leadership does make a difference.

Although many principals may have an understanding of the structural shifts necessary, undertaking and making cultural changes are of great magnitude and require patience, persistence and leadership. To gain a better understanding of the nature of cultural changes when implementing professional learning communities, this researchnotes and explores challenges administrators face when attempting to implement professional learning communities in a rural Southeastern school district. In evaluating the implementation efforts, the researcher explores the structural, conceptual and component knowledge of
professional learning communities, but more emphasis is placed on exploring the cultural
differences inherent in attempting to implement professional learning communities within the
school setting.

Adaptive challenges and technical problems

To frame the distinction between phenomena associated with implementing professional learning communities this research uses the distinction noted by Ronald Heifetz (2002) between adaptive challenges and technical change. Heifetz distinguishes change and problems that accompany change into two distinct categories and Heifetz notes that leaders should be adeptly aware of the two categories of problems that accompany change. Those two areas are adaptive challenges and the technical problems. Heifetz defines technical problems “as having the necessary know-how and procedures” (p.13) and adaptive challenges are “the whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures” (p.13).

We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways---changing attitude, values, and behaviors---people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.”

(Heifetz, 2002, p.13)

Heifetz (2002) further expounds that technical problems are issues that need management skills applied to them and adaptive challenges are problems that require leadership. He further notes that, “when people look to authorities for easy answers to
adaptive challenges, they end up with dysfunction” (p.14). He further states that “Indeed, the single most common source of leadership failure we’ve been able to identify---in politics, community life, business, or the nonprofit sector---is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems” (2002, p.14).

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**Distinguishing Technical from Adaptive Challenges**

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<tr>
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<th>What’s the Work?</th>
<th>Who does the Work?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technical</strong></td>
<td>Apply current know-how</td>
<td>Authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adaptive</strong></td>
<td>Learn new ways</td>
<td>The people with the problem</td>
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(Heifetz, 2002, Leadership on the Line, p. 14)

Figure 3.1: Adaptive Challenges versus Technical Problems

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Distinguishing Adaptive Challenges and Technical Problems

Later in his text, Heifetz offers suggestions for leaders implementing changes in organizations. Heifetz suggests leaders negotiate adaptive issues by first distinguishing between the adaptive issues and the technical problems by placing the work where it belongs (p.127). “To meet adaptive challenges, people must change their hearts as well as their behaviors” (p.127). The “solutions are achieved when “the people with the problem” go through a process to become “the people with the solution” (Heifetz, 2002).
Heifetz(2002) notes that four types of interventions are necessary by leaders whose organizations face adaptive challenges. “Leaders must 1.) Make observations, 2.) Ask questions, 3.) Offer Interpretations and 4) Encourage taking action” (p. 134). In essence, Heifetz’s strategies involve giving the work back to people who are responsible for it to avoid becoming the target.

To lead people, we suggest you build structures of relationships to work the tough issues, establishing norms that make passionate disagreement permissible. But keep your hands on the temperature controls. Don’t provoke people too much at any one time. Remember your job is to orchestrate the conflict, not become it. You need to let people do the work that only they can do.”

(Heifetz, 2002, p. 122)

Learning to understand people’s reaction to change is critical for successful implementation of change. Principals charged with implementing professional learning communities face negative reactions noted by Heifetz and others. Moreover, this researcher believes a principal’s understanding the distinction between the adaptive challenges and technical problems and how to respond to each are more likely to have a successful implementation process with professional learning communities. This research notes how they respond and react to those challenges and hopefully provide insight for future school leaders seeking to implement professional learning communities.
Figure 3.2: Diagram of Leadership for PLC Development

The diagram above paints a visual picture of what the researcher believes to be the necessary knowledge to successfully implement professional learning communities. Principals need knowledge of professional learning communities and implementation, but they also need knowledge of how to discern adaptive and technical challenges and also need to know how to respond to them as a school leader. Based on this framework, the primary understandings and skills necessary for successful implementation of professional learning communities relies not only on knowledge of professional learning communities, but also knowledge of how to respond to technical and adaptive challenges that schools face when attempting to implement professional learning communities. This hypothesis and implementation approach was learned by the researcher as a school administrator who had begun the implementation process as a high school principal and quickly recognized the cultural aspects were far more challenging than the technical changes. It is my hope that the discoveries and recommendations from this research provides future school administrators with more awareness and comfort when facing such challenges as implementing professional learning communities within a school.
Behaviors that Assist Leaders Navigating Adaptive Challenges

Heifetz (2002) also notes that to successfully implement change, the leader’s first skill is distinguishing between the technical change and adaptive challenges. Heifetz advocates two solutions for those navigating adaptive challenges.

1. Place the Work Where It Belongs

2. Make Your Interventions Short and Simple by offering:

   - **Observations**—statements that reflect back to people their behavior or attempt to describe current conditions
   - **Questions**—when making an observation you can either let it rest, letting the group fill the void, or go a step further with a question
   - **Interpretations**—a bolder and more useful alternative is to follow an observation with an interpretation
   - **Actions**—every action has an immediate effect but sends a message as well. Actions communicate.

Heifetz (2002) also notes:

“You stay alive in the practice of leadership by reducing the extent to which you become the target of people’s frustrations. The best way to stay out of range is to think constantly about giving the work to the people who need to take responsibility. Place the work within and between the factions faced with the challenge, and tailor your interventions so they are unambiguous and have a context. Assess, take corrective actions, reassess, and intervene again. You never know how the intervention is received until you listen over time. Hold
steady in the aftermath!‖  

(Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, p139)

It is anticipated that many of the administrators may face difficulty when navigating the cultural aspects of implementing professional learning communities and insight and knowledge to Heifetz or others insights to cultural change may prove useful in future implementation efforts.

Preliminary Theory

The above section outlines the preliminary theory that guides this work. Implementing professional learning communities requires that school leaders understand the components of professional learning communities, but it also necessitates the understanding of navigating technical and adaptive challenges as a school and its staff responds to the cultural shifts necessary to undergo the transformation to a professional learning community. School leaders must have a wide range of leadership skills to navigate this change effort and display a great deal of commitment to see the effort through to fruition. And, although there is little training in navigating cultural change in administrator’s formal education, many are called to navigate such change. School leaders must first delineate between technical and adaptive challenges and then know how to respond to the adaptive challenges, which are the largest impediments to the cultural shift required to implement professional learning communities. Heifetz (2002) notes that four types of interventions are necessary by leaders whose organizations face adaptive challenges. “Leaders must 1.) Make observations, 2.)
Ask questions, 3.) Offer Interpretations and 4) Encourage taking action” (p. 134). In essence, Heifetz’s strategies involve giving the work back to people who are responsible for it to avoid becoming the target.

This is the preliminary theory that undergirds this research effort. Moreover, it is practice that a theory be developed prior to the beginning of a case study research effort. “This role of theory development, prior to the conduct of any data collection, is one point of difference between case studies and related methods such as ethnography” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; VanMaanen, 1988). “For case studies, theory development as part of the design phase is essential, whether the ensuing case student’s purpose is to develop or test theory” (Yin, p. 36, 2009).

Qualitative Research

The nature of qualitative research centers on the premise that “meaning” is socially constructed by individuals as they interact with their world and that the world is not a single, fixed or agreed upon phenomenon that is assumed to be the case with positivist research. Qualitative inquiry allows for multiple views and interpretations of social contexts and phenomenon through the eyes of those participating, living and interacting in those contexts each and everyday. Qualitative inquiry values the multiple perceptions and attempts to interpret those perceptions and understandings.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as “multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to subject matter. Qualitative researchers
study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (2). Because qualitative research allows for individual interpretation and individual understandings of events and phenomenon, it also makes room for these multiple interpretations and understandings. Qualitative inquiry illuminates these varied perceptions and understandings and attempts to make sense of them by analyzing the varied interpretations to develop themes and an understanding of the varied interpretations that may exist. Creswell (1998) states that qualitative research is an “inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, p. 15).

Thus, qualitative researchers attempt to accurately paint pictures of individuals’ understandings and mental models through dialogue, interview, document analysis, observation and extensive reflection. These pictures and descriptions help the researcher gain a greater understanding of phenomenon and potentially establish an aggregate of the understandings that lead to the development of themes or concepts that allow greater understanding of phenomenon.

While understanding an individual’s interpretation of phenomena is the ultimate goal of qualitative inquiry, each tradition of qualitative inquiry brings with it certain expectations and measures. Whether the researcher chooses to conduct a biography, ethnography, grounded theory research or a case study investigation, the researcher must meet the rigor
and expectations demanded of a particular qualitative endeavor. While these qualitative approaches may share common characteristics such as a search for meaning, an understanding that the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and an inductive investigation of a topic, each approach also lends itself to types of investigations.

**Case Study Research**

Traditionally, case study research has been viewed as solid methodology for the exploratory phase of an investigation (Yin, 2009, p. 6) and allows the researcher to address the “how” and “why” questions (Yin, p. 8, 2009). Although case study research can come under fire if the researcher lacks rigor by failing to follow a systematic procedure and many times is criticized for its lack of generalizability (Yin, 2009, p. 15) it also provides a complement to traditional qualitative research approaches. The purpose of this particular research effort is to understand the implementation of professional learning communities in-dept from the perspective of the building level principal. Its purpose is to gain insight and understanding of the successes and challenges faced by building level principals in a particular rural Southeastern school district and then assess if there are there means to support these or similar efforts of this nature in the future.

Case study methodology fits well with this type of effort. By definition,

> A case study is an empirical inquiry that
> i. Investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when
ii. The boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident

(Yin, 2009, p. 18)

The purpose in this effort is to understand the implementation phenomenon in depth from and through the eyes of the building level administrator. The case study approach allows the researcher to “cope with technically distinctive situations in which there will be multiple variables of interest with multiple sources of evidence with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, p. 18). The investigation of implementation involves many variables from leadership ability, school culture, central office support and leadership, teacher leadership, staff development and other variables. Because of the complexity, this exploratory effort attempts to bring some semblance of insight to how the building level administrator navigates the effort while taking into consideration the multivariate task. It is an exploratory effort that should contribute to the knowledge base for future and further endeavors. Hopefully, this effort can contribute to future efforts to generate theory.

Phenomenology

This study employs a phenomenological lens because my intentions are to gain an understanding of the administrators’ reflections in a Southeastern school district that has chosen to implement professional learning communities at a district wide level. The purpose of this research is to describe and understand their experiences and the meanings they have assigned to that experience. "A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (Creswell, p. 51). In
this research, my purpose is to understand what they feel “the essence” of their successful efforts were with implementation as well as gain an understanding of impediments to implementation.

Phenomenology is a philosophy or method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness. A movement based on this philosophy was originated about 1905 by Edmund Husserl (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 356). Because of phenomenology's nature, where lived experience serves as the foundational structure under study, it is by definition a study where questions have no definitive answers. The data are not of the ordinary kind and the understandings obtained from phenomenological approach do not assume a full definitive explication is a possibility. The aim of a phenomenological study is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions of a phenomenon, general or universal meanings are derived… and the essences or structures of the experience are described (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). In essence, a phenomenological study attempts to look for the most fundamental features of a problem and attempts to discover and describe the lived experience as explained by the actor, or the person who has lived that phenomenon.
Because of the uniqueness of individuality, what is reality and truth to one individual may not be the reality and truth that another individual possesses. Thus, truth and reality are relative perceptions. Intuition according to Moustakas (1994) is the beginning place in deriving knowledge of human experiences that are, “free of everyday sense impressions and the natural attitude” (p. 32). Moustakas (1994) confirmed his belief by citing the work of Descartes (1977), which indicates that intuition is the “primary and inborn talent directed toward providing solid and true judgments concerning everything that presents itself” using ‘presents itself’ as a starting point” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32). This research is totally embedded in human self, human interpretation and those experiences. It is premised on the belief that one’s perception is one’s reality. These beliefs lend themselves to qualitative research efforts and this type of investigation should best illuminate the phenomenon of implementation of professional learning communities within the school from the school principal’s perspective.

Sampling Rationale

In a case study research effort, especially one of a phenomenological nature, the participants must experience the phenomenon. Hence purposeful sampling is used for this study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Patton, 2001; Creswell, 1997). The administrators were selected for this study via purposeful sampling because they have attempted to implement professional learning communities within their schools (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2001). Administrators were asked to be participants in this research effort at a district level principal’s meeting and if they indicated interest this was followed up
by a phone call explaining the research and their commitment to the process. Their selection has been of their choosing and proper steps were taken to insure access was completely of their choosing.

Research Protocol

My first point of contact was with the Superintendent of the district. Permission for interviews of the school administrators and an explanation of the research effort was explained to the Superintendent. It was also explained that if approved, it should only take from ten to fifteen minutes of a principal’s meeting to seek the contact of administrators for participation in the interviews. The purpose of the interviews and time and place of interviews are also explained. It was also explained that interviews would take between forty-five and ninety minutes.

Once access to participants was granted, the principal’s meeting was the first point of contact with administrators concerning the research. This meeting had a brief presentation that explained the scope and intent of the research effort and asked for their participation in the effort. An overview of the presentation for the principals and an explanation of the research was submitted in writing to the Superintendent for review prior to this meeting. At the meeting to recruit administrators to participate, the research effort was explained and school administrators insured their participation was completely voluntary and they could end the process and involvement at any time and that complete anonymity was assured during the endeavor.
There were no questions of the research or the logistics of the research effort by principals other than the timeline the researcher had to complete the interviews. The researcher noted there was no timeline and he would be flexible with principals to find a time that suited their schedules. No principals were asked to volunteer at this time and were told the researcher would contact them by phone at a later time.

The researcher contacted potential participants by phone the following day to see if they were willing to participate and to answer any questions concerning the research or the researcher. After they decided upon participation, the researcher determined a time and place to conduct interviews with participants over the next two weeks. The researcher did not divulge which administrators did or did not agree to participate to anyone in the central office, other principals participating in the study or to the superintendent. A total of twelve principals agreed to participate. Due to the researcher’s prior experience in the district and because of past work with the administrators, it was anticipated that enough participants (between four and eight) would be available as participants. The researcher was hopeful that administrators who volunteered represented a reasonable cross-section of grade levels and experience levels to provide fruitful and diverse perspectives in terms of the research. The number of principals, who agreed to participate in the research, considering it was the final few weeks of the school year, pleased the researcher.

The researcher established times and places to interview eleven of twelve who agreed to participate and conducted interviews with the eleven participants. One of the participants was unable to find a time that worked for their schedule. The interviews were conducted and the researcher was comfortable conducting interviews with participants and they were
comfortable with the interviews as well. Based on the prior experience in working with these administrators a rapport had been established and the researcher and principals had a collegial relationship.

Interviews were frank, honest, insightful and most participants indicated they enjoyed discussion and were comfortable interviewing with the researcher. They researcher recorded the interviews and focused on listening to the participants during the interview. Each participant was asked the same questions for the interview session. After interviews, the participants were thanked for their time and the researcher indicated he would bring back a transcript for their review once transcribed. All eleven interviews were transcribed and returned to participants to remove names, any information they were uncomfortable with and any information the participants felt were not reflective of their thoughts, beliefs or expressions concerning professional learning communities. In the end, very little information was excluded from interviews other than a specific reference to a school’s name, teacher’s name. Once participants verified transcripts, only then did the researcher then began to analyze transcripts as data.

Interview Focus

Interviews were done with the administrators to shed insight on the following questions:

1. What is your conception of a professional learning community as a school principal?
2. Which concepts or components of professional learning communities are difficult to understand?
3. What protocols and practices accompany the implementation of professional learning communities and which were easy to understand and implement with staff and which were difficult to understand and implement at the school level?
4. What steps by district level staff could aid in the implementation of professional learning communities within your school?
5. Which concepts or components related to professional learning communities are difficult to convey to teachers?
6. What elements of professional learning communities should be or are clearly understood by all?
7. What action steps in terms of an implementation plan did you develop?
8. What are the expectations principals have of the superintendent and central office staff with regard to assisting in the school level implementation and how can principals best be supported by central office staff?
9. What training, texts, staff development and materials are vital to implementation success?
10. What does the principal perceive their role to be in implementing PLCs?
11. How important was trust and how do school leaders build trust to enable implementation?
12. What aspects of a school’s culture hinder or enhance the implementation?
13. How do teachers’ attitudes affect implementation?
14. How does PLCs being part of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Instrument affect or aid implementation?

These questions were developed based on the researcher’s experience from two areas. The first experience was in beginning the implementation process of Professional Learning Communities as a rural high school principal in the Southeastern United States. The next endeavor was as a district level central office director in charge of Professional Learning Community implementation for a rural school district in the Southeastern United States. These questions were questions the researcher had as he began the implementation process as a principal, but also questions that arose from the experiences with other principals as the implementation process was at a district level.
The initial conceptualization of these questions and what may be answered was very broad. As the research progressed it proved more illuminative to focus on a few of the above questions. Nonetheless, the beginnings of the research proceeded with an eye open to all possibilities and through interviews with principals implementing professional learning communities. As new questions or new topics arose, the researcher took the opportunity to let those topics emerge or narrow the focus if needed. This is the norm with most phenomenological research endeavors. With the phenomenological approach, the researcher brackets his or her preconceived ideas about the phenomenon to understand it through the voices of the informants (Field & Morse, 1985). Through the interviews, the researcher transforms the experiences into clusters of meanings (Creswell, 1998) and should the research need narrowing or to be broadened, the research can use his or her judgment to do so. The researcher was confident that common themes, concerns, and problems that surfaced could provide insight in future implementation efforts.

Interview Methods and Procedures

In-person interviews were used to collect the data from the selected participants. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes and a digital tape recorder was used to record the interviews. A digital tape helped in downloading the verbatim excerpts into the computer and taping them allowed the researcher to capture verbatim conversations. Apart from that, using a tape recorder allowed flexibility to replay the tape to make sure that the typewritten transcriptions were correct, as well as provided another opportunity to study what
the respondents said and edit the transcripts accordingly. In addition, typewritten transcripts were provided to the respondents for their review to insure accuracy in interpretation and understanding of their responses. The demographics, experience level, school size and experience level of administrators interviewed is noted in the table below.

Table 3.1: Demographics of Administrators Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male/Female</th>
<th>Elementary/Middle/High</th>
<th>Years Experience</th>
<th>School size</th>
<th>Minority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male/Female</td>
<td>6 Male</td>
<td>4 High School</td>
<td>5 with 1-5 years experience</td>
<td>1 with approximately 150 students</td>
<td>2 African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Female</td>
<td>4 Elementary</td>
<td>5 with 6-10 years experience</td>
<td>1 with approximately 300 students</td>
<td>9 Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Middle School</td>
<td>1 with 15-30 years experience</td>
<td>5 with approximately 500 – 600 students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Kindergarten through 8th grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 with 900 approximately students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews and Interview Questions

As Seidman (2006) cites, “the purpose of interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to evaluate as the term is normally used. At the root of the in-depth interview is an interest in understanding the lived experience of another” (Seidman, 2006, p.9). He further cites that, “at the heart of interviewing research is interest
in other individual’s stories because they are of worth” (Seidman, 2006, p.9). At the heart of interviewing research is an effort to understand the context of people’s behavior and a meaning of that behavior. In this research endeavor, we examined the steps, processes and actions principals take to implement professional learning communities at their schools. This research endeavor attempts to determine the reasons for their behaviors, their understandings and skills in leading such a change effort and how future efforts to implement professional learning communities may be improved from the experiences of these school administrators in one rural Southeastern school district. As anticipated the interviews provided access to the context of school administrators’ behavior when charged with implementing professional learning communities.

The participants were involved in one interview with the opportunity to follow up on the interview via a transcript. The interviews were phenomenological in nature. The interview concentrated on the specifics of implementing professional learning communities within their schools. It involved questions about their understanding of the concept of professional learning communities and the components of the process. It involved questions about the nature of the relationship with the teachers in moving forward with the initiative, impediments or challenges faced, how they would “begin again” if given the opportunity, and how they could have been better supported in such an endeavor by central office.

The latter part of the interview was more reflective and concentrated on the participant’s meaning of their experience.
Ethical Considerations

Adequate procedures were in place to ensure that the confidentiality of participating individuals and organizations. These procedures were maintained before, during, and after the study. For example, pseudonyms were used to conceal the identities of the participants during the analysis and reporting stage. Data and transcripts were securely stored and destroyed upon completion of the research. Additionally, interviewees were allowed a chance to review the transcripts of their interviews for accuracy. Accordingly, Moustakas (1994) states “verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants, sharing with them the meanings and essences of the phenomenon as derived from reflection on an analysis of the verbatim transcribed interviews and other materials, and seeking their assessment for comprehensiveness and accuracy” (p.18).

Prior to participation, permission was secured from the participants prior to their involvement in the research via a consent form and an explanation of the process provided before allowing them to participate. All participants were told they could exit the study at any point in the process. Once interviews were verified, thank you notes were provided to the participants for their willingness and participation in the study.

Peer debriefing involves an external check of the research process. The debriefer plays a “devil’s advocate” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308 & Creswell, 1998, p. 202) by being the person who keeps the researcher honest, asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations. The debriefer’s duty is to probe the inquirer’s biases, explore meanings, and clarify the basis for interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An independent person who
is an educator and administrator and currently holds a doctorate was sought to serve in this role for the researcher. However, the logistics of securing this person did not materialize as personnel shifts within the district occurred. Thus, no peer debriefer was secured nor used in this research effort.

Subjectivity Statement

Phenomenological analysis occurs in the mind of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore the researcher should provide information to help the reader understand the truthfulness and any potential bias of the research and assess the researcher’s ability to bracket their personal beliefs, attitudes, theories, or philosophy. In essence, the phenomenological researcher should set aside all preconceived opinions about the phenomenon at hand to the greatest extent possible. A phenomenological investigation involves four stages. The first step or stage of phenomenological research is what Husserl called the “freedom from suppositions, the Epoche” (Moustakas, p. 85). Epoche comes from the Greek and means to refrain from judgment. The researcher sets aside, or brackets, all preconceived notions about the phenomenon at hand to the greatest extent possible. By removing suppositions that pre-exist, the researcher hopes to more fully understand the experience from the participant's own point of view. In Moustakas eyes, “it is a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter
anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again….for the first time” (Moustakas, p. 85).

It is important to note that the researcher was familiar with the district and the interview subjects. He has been employed in the district for over twenty years and has familiarity with the schools and their leadership. The researcher was also the main person responsible for the implementation of professional learning communities in the district. Although he was responsible for the efforts that were made by the district to implement professional learning communities, the researcher fully understands those efforts were by no means the model or template for other districts to follow. In fact, at the conclusion of this researcher endeavor, the purpose or results will in no way elicit a model of implementation or method by which to begin implementation in a school district. It will simply inform the readers of the efforts taken in this particular school district and to examine what was successful and what principals recommend and saw as potential hurdles and areas for improvement with future efforts to implement professional learning communities. In essence, this is somewhat of an action research endeavor.

The researcher understands the potential reward offered academically if professional learning communities evolve, and has an interest in improving education and believes that building the capacity of staff is important for improvement efforts. These are all ends of professional learning communities. Nonetheless, he also understands the importance of the principal in making those things happen. True implementation of professional learning communities will require great leadership by the principal, and the focus of this effort is to
better understand how to equip school leaders in ensuring the development of professional learning communities.

It should be noted the researcher has been a former principal in the district where he conducts the research. The researcher does know the principals and does not come in as an unknown researcher with no connection to the school’s principal. There is a trade off that is exchanged: the level of connection and rapport with principals that exists with the researcher versus the complete objectivity offered via an outsider with no connections to the school and the district. The researcher believes the familiarity will allow for in depth discussions between the researcher and principals will be frank, straightforward and insightful due to the relationship the researcher has in the district and the administrators.

It should also be noted the researcher in no way evaluates the principals in the district. The evaluation is the job of the superintendent and assistant superintendent. The researcher supports the development of the curricular efforts and programs at the high school level in the district. The principals are not judged on the degree of implementation of professional learning communities and the researcher does not report to the superintendent or assistant superintendent the degree of implementation, leadership quality or efforts of the principals or things of that nature. The researcher’s role in the district is to be supportive of high school principals and secondary programs and athletics at the middle and high school level. Given the nature of the relationship and familiarity with the district and the principals, the researcher feels this rapport and connection was advantageous for honest, direct and interviews with research subjects that indeed paints a picture of their understanding of the phenomenon of implementing professional learning communities. He further believes the
familiarity was advantageous to the research endeavor and not an impediment to objectivity.

Internal, External, Construct Validity and Reliability

Quantitative researchers concern for validity emphasizes the importance of measuring what is intended to be measured. The researcher is seeking assurance that the independent variable is truly what is being measured when he is concerned with validity in quantitative endeavors. The degree to which this is done equates to a higher level of validity.

Reliability assures similar results would be generated via other samplings of the population studied. Quantitative studies with a high degree of reliability equates to the understanding that given another population sample, similar results would be generated. Quantitative studies with a high degree of reliability and validity give researchers greater confidence in their results.

Because case studies are a form of empirical social research, case study researchers concern themselves with four concepts to assure quality (2009, p. 40, Yin). Construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability are important to the case study research effort and must be prominent when conducting the case study inquiry. Yin (2009) outlines steps the case study researcher can take to maintain the integrity of the case study research effort.

**Construct validity**—1. Use multiple sources of evidence. 2. Establish a reliable chain of evidence
Internal validity—1. Pattern matching. 2. Explanation building. 3. Addressing rival explanations.

External validity—1. Case studies rely on analytic generation, Case study researchers are seeking to generalize a particular set of results to a broader theory. This theory must be replicated in further studies in order to be generalized to a more universal population (Yin, p. 45, 2009).

Reliability—“The objective is to be sure that if a later investigator followed the same procedures as described by an earlier investigator and conducted the same case study all over again, the later investigator should arrive at the same findings and conclusions. (Yin, p. 45, 2009) This necessitates the prior investigator be explicit and detailed when documenting the procedures of the research effort. This leaves an audit trail for the following investigator. The “general way of approaching the reliability problem is to make as many steps as operational as possible and conduct the research as if someone is always looking over your shoulder” (Yin, p. 45, 2009).

Maintaining the integrity of this exploratory research effort was a primary focus of this case study. To insure construct validity, the researcher used multiple sources of evidence. In addition to administrator interviews, the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (TWC) was examined in addition to the interview material from the building level administrator. Also, survey data from the two years of implementation were examined at the school level and the district level. Moreover, assistant principals were
surveyed to add an additional perspective to the case study. The TWC survey, the district survey and the assistant principal’s survey allowed for a comparison or triangulation of what is stated in the interviews and what the survey instruments revealed about implementation of professional learning communities.

These data points paint a picture of the implementation effort. At that point, the researcher explored possible explanations of the various sources of data via: 1. Pattern matching. 2. Explanation building. 3. Addressing rival explanations as is recommended by Yin (2009) to assure internal validity. This results in “analytic generation” of a probable theory that could be explored via other case study efforts in other school districts. Only then, if the case study efforts of others yielded similar results, could the theory be generalized to a more universal population (Yin, 2009).

For further case studies of this nature to occur, the researcher must be explicit and descriptive of the procedural steps involved in this case study effort. By being explicit and descriptive, later researchers can follow the research process with other populations to address reliability. The researcher maintained a journal of the research effort and process to insure reliability with future case study efforts. Maintaining integrity is a primary concern of this research effort and with the researcher due to his relationship with the school district and over twenty years of service within the school district as a teacher, coach, principal and central office administrator.
Phenomenologists typically conduct between 5 and 25 one hour interviews (Moustakas, 1994) and their concern is have they accurately represented the interview(s) through textual description and structural description. Conducting the interviews, describing the phenomenon (as each of the 5 to 25 interview subjects understand it), understanding the phenomenon as each of the interview participants understand it, horizontalization of their representations, discovering the “essence” of what the phenomenon is in all of the interviewee’s eyes is the goal of the phenomenologist.

With qualitative research, the concern for being reliable is the researcher gaining full access to the knowledge of the informants, their knowledge and understanding and the researcher being able to capture this understanding. “Have I asked the right questions?” or “Have my horizontalization techniques worked to create the right picture or concepts present with this phenomenon?” are questions qualitative researchers and phenomenologist would ask of themselves and their research.

Just as a quantitative researcher would hope another researcher would find similar results, a phenomenologist would hope that another researcher who would attempt to interview a subject about the same phenomenon would gather a similar understanding of a subject’s understanding of the phenomenon studied. With phenomenology, the effort at accuracy with this research endeavor would be a concern that the researcher has correctly established a rapport with the research subject to the extent that he or she can fully understand how the administrator felt when implementing professional learning communities.
in their school. The phenomenologist would also seek to further understand what the administrator felt like their understanding of the events of implementation events were when they were doing so.

With the researcher being the instrument in qualitative endeavors, you are questioning your ability as a researcher to bracket your opinions and subjective judgments, in order to accurately capture the insights of the interview subject. You establish procedures to enhance that via member checks, peer reviews and reader verification. The concepts you establish must be well grounded and understood. Accuracy of your understanding and representation is of great concern. The only difference is in the questions you are asking of your data and your data instrument. This is the difference between qualitative and quantitative research and assuring reliability and validity.

The question for the qualitative researcher is “Have I accurately reflected the subject’s perspective concerning this phenomenon?” and “Have I fully gained access to their store of knowledge concerning the phenomenon?” How the subjects understand a phenomenon and its impact influence their daily actions. So, where the quantitative researcher is looking for X causing Y, the qualitative researcher knows that the subject’s understanding of the phenomenon will cause certain behavior as well. It is a similar question, in that both seek to understand what caused X. But due to the nature of uncovering the causes, one cause being embedded within the conscious of another human being, the means and approaches of assurance must be quite different. These questions are different because of the type of information or data gathered in the two types of research. Although this effort is not be a full-fledged phenomenological effort, the spirit behind the
phenomenological interview technique is what the researcher seeks. The attempt is to fully understand the school administrator and the challenges and successes they face when attempting to implement professional learning communities. The full understanding of the administrator’s efforts, actions and approach could better be teased out with a full phenomenological effort. Nonetheless, the time constraints and purpose of this research effort did not allow for this.

However, the process by which phenomenology examines data provides a reasonably solid format for data analysis. Moreover, the specificity of the process enhances the efforts of a case study researcher seeking to enhance the internal validity, external validity and reliability of their research effort. Therefore, data analysis is conceptually organized around the same premises taken by a phenomenological investigator.

Data Analysis with a Phenomenological Lens

A phenomenological investigation involves four stages. The first step or stage of phenomenological research is what Husserl called the “freedom from suppositions, the Epoche “(Moustakas, p. 85). Epoche comes from the Greek and means to refrain from judgment. The researcher sets aside, or brackets, all preconceived notions about the phenomenon at hand to the greatest extent possible. By removing suppositions that pre-exist, the researcher hopes to more fully understand the experience from the participant's own point of view. In Moustakas eyes, “it is a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and
allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again….for the first time” (Moustakas, p. 85).

After *epoche*, the researcher should have secured entry to the research participants for interviews. Interviews are conducted with the research participants and interviews are typically done in three stages (Seidman, p. 16). The third step of the phenomenological investigation begins the data analysis process. After transcription, the researcher begins to list the significant statements relevant to the topic. Each statement or concept is given equal value and each of these statements is listed as a "horizon" of the experience for this participant (Moustakas, p. 97). The horizons are then examined for duplication and overlap and are tested to ensure that they represent a clear expression of a component of the participant's experience. From this point, the researcher begins to develop “clusters of meaning.” The researcher groups the statements into clusters of similar meaning units, or themes. The researcher seeks possible meanings through imaginative variation by varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives (Moustakas, p. 97).

The final step in the phenomenological research process is the intuitive integration of the textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole. (Moustakas, p. 101) The ultimate goal of the phenomenological researcher is to reduce the meanings of the experience of the participants to their essential structure and then discover what aspects of the experience may be universal to all the participants. The final step in the phenomenological research is to use these textural and structural descriptions to form a statement revealing the “essences” of the
experience. This statement of synthesis is the culmination of the methodological analysis and reveals the universal structures of the experience under study. These essences serve as awareness and increase our understandings of the phenomenon at that particular time and place. Moustakas (1994) defined essence as “that which is common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is” (p. 100). Patton (2001) believes that “there is an essence or essences to shared experience” and that “these essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon that is commonly experienced” (p.106). The full understanding of the administrator’s efforts, actions and approach could better be teased out with a full phenomenological effort. Nonetheless, the time constraints and purpose of this research effort do not allow for this. However, data analysis with the phenomenological lens allows some semblance of understanding and opens the door for a full-fledged phenomenological effort in the future.

The Principal’s Perspective

This research effort seeks to add to the current research base by giving some voice to the principal’s perspective. Since principal leadership is central to the change effort at the school level (McCall, 1994; Tucker 2002; Marzano, 2003) it is important that their voice is heard among the voices who speak about implementing professional learning communities. Primarily, this research effort attempts to denote the cultural challenges faced by building level administrators as they attempt such a profound change within their buildings and hopefully delineate between the technical challenges from the adaptive challenges as defined
by Heifetz and Linsky (2002). The purpose of this effort is to provide insight and literature concerning implementation for future building level administrators.

Summary of Chapter Three

This chapter outlines the nature of the qualitative research effort. It outlines the purpose of the study to discover hurdles school building administrators face when attempting to implement professional learning communities in the school building. Williamson (2008) notes the professional learning community reform effort fails to address the complexity of providing climate and creating culture that is demanded when implementing professional learning communities.

Many authors (Schlechty, 1997; DuFour, 1998; Sarason, 1996) have noted the complexity of creating cultural change in schools and the impact of school culture on school reform efforts. DuFour (1998) indicates that “changes in structure are tangible and can be announced with flourish,” but, “Cultural changes are less visible, more amorphous, and much more difficult to make” (p.133). Phil Schlechty (1997) notes that “structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability” (Schlechty, p. 136). DuFour (2008) and Hord (2007) denote the necessity of cultural change when implementing professional learning communities.

This research is conducted as a case study via interviews with principals and uses the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (TWC), a district level survey and an
assistant principal survey to provide a comparison of what the principal conceives the challenges to be when implementing professional learning communities. And, as Seidman (2006) cites, “the purpose of interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to evaluate as the term is normally used. At the root of the in-depth interview is an interest in understanding the lived experience of another. This research is simply trying to gain an understanding of the phenomenon as the building level administrator has lived the experience.

Primarily, this research effort attempts to denote the cultural challenges faced by building level administrators as they attempt such a profound change within their buildings and hopefully delineate between the technical challenges from the adaptive challenges as defined by Heifetz and Linsky (2002). The purpose of this effort is to provide insight and literature concerning implementation for future building level administrators. This chapter outlines and defines those challenges as well as the methodology of phenomenological research that will be used to ascertain that information.

The main question for the qualitative researcher will be “Have I accurately reflected the subject’s perspective concerning this phenomenon?” and “Have I fully gained access to their store of knowledge concerning the phenomenon?” Do I understand how the subjects understand the phenomenon? Moreover, how does this understanding impact and influence their daily actions? Moreover, and on a larger scale, could this case study effort be replicated in other districts and can this effort, when combined with similar efforts result in “analytic generation” of a probable
theory that could be explored via the other case study efforts in other school districts. And if so, if the additional case study efforts of others yielded similar results, could the theory be generalized to a more universal population (Yin, 2009). The study itself is a case study, but phenomenology provides and elucidates the methods to capture the experiences of the phenomenon of implementing professional learning communities and the technical and adaptive challenges faced by those building level administrators.
The county the researcher conducted the research in was a rural county in Southeastern North Carolina. The county has a rich agricultural heritage and is home to approximately 53,000 residents. The major industries are based on the agricultural history of the county. Butterball, House of Raeford, Murphy-Brown, Bay Valley Foods, Nash Johnson & Sons are all agricultural based businesses and are the largest employers in the county. The school system is the third largest employer in the district with 1,300 employees. The population has increased about 8.9% since 2000. Most of this increase has been with the increase of Hispanics or Latino population. The county is the 9th largest county in the state with a land area of around 820 square miles. There are 10 incorporated towns in the county and each of these are served by various elementary, middle and high schools. Four traditional high schools and one Early College High School are in the county (http://www.duplinedc.com/industry.html accessed January 16, 2011).

The lack of economic growth over the years has had impact upon the county. Limited attractiveness to industry and business has led to little if any economic growth. The lack of economic growth has handicapped the county from contributing to communities, schools, and enhancing the opportunities for business and industry which are key influencers in making an area attractive for growth. The rich agricultural heritage has brought prosperity to
a limited few. Although the median family income is $42,757 many families live in poverty. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students attending the school system is above 70%.

In essence, the county is in an economic stagnation. No growth and lack of attractiveness to industry and business dictates the county function on current income levels. That amount basically provides for the essentials in terms of educational funding and leaves little investment room for growth and future opportunity.

It is estimated that approximately 5% of the residents have a four-year college degree (http://www.cltresearch.com/Duplin_Demographics/NC/Education_Level_Profile, accessed January 16, 2011). Only 2.4% of residents have a degree beyond a four-year college degree.

Table 4.1: District Education Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population by Education</th>
<th>Participant county, NC</th>
<th>North Carolina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 9th grade</td>
<td>4,287</td>
<td>350,991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some High School, no diploma</td>
<td>6,381</td>
<td>644,869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate (or GED)</td>
<td>11,485</td>
<td>1,834,734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College, no degree</td>
<td>6,067</td>
<td>1,214,179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Degree</td>
<td>2,802</td>
<td>544,408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>2,825</td>
<td>1,099,551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>1,279</td>
<td>579,489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>53,267</td>
<td>9,470,086</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Much of the population has not been exposed to post-secondary education. Only 5% of the population has an associate’s degree and approximately 5% have a bachelor’s degree.
Only 2.4% of the populations have a degree beyond a four-year degree. Combined, less than 13% of the county’s residents have earned an associate’s degree, a four-year degree or a graduate degree. This coupled with no investment toward new opportunities leaves the county in a unique position, similar to many counties in eastern North Carolina. The area affords little economic opportunity and with limited experience with post-secondary education by most citizens, no new opportunities appear on the horizon. This economic stagnation certainly impacts the contributions the county can make to local schools. This situation led to a school-funding lawsuit between the Board of Education and the County Commissioners, which began in 2007. The school district won a 4.7 million dollar judgment against the county commissioners in 2009, which was appealed and eventually in 2010, the county was faced with paying the award.

This award for the school system also coupled with the entrance of a new superintendent in July of 2010 created an opportunity for the Board of Education and the County Commissioners to restore previously damaged communication lines. Many citizens were pushing for the lawsuit to be dropped and the award dismissed due to the increase of taxes required to pay the award. Citizens were vocal at local county commissioner meetings and several made appearances at local board of education meetings requesting the dismissal of the lawsuit. There was often commentary in local newspapers of a similar note. In the end, the board of education, urged by a new superintendent, agreed to dismiss the 4.7 million dollar award through a memorandum of understanding with the county commissioners. The memorandum of understanding dropped the 4.7 million dollar award and increased the local contribution to education from 7.7 million dollars per year to approximately 11.0 million
dollars per year or 40% of the ad valorem taxes collected.

Although this memorandum garnered approximately a 2.2 million dollar per year increase in local education funding, it is far less than the 4.7 million dollar award for one school year. In the end, the school district settled the lawsuit for approximately one half of what was determined to be their yearly needs in court. While the political gains may have been worthy, it will take a few years to fully understand if the settlement was a wise move for the county’s children and schools.

The schools themselves have an ADM (average daily membership) of approximately 9,000 students. Of the 9,000 students, approximately 2,400 are high school students and approximately 6,600 are in grades kindergarten through eighth grade. The county itself has four high schools and an early college high school. There is one medium sized high school of approximately 900 students, two high schools of approximately 500 students, one small high school of 300 students and an Early College High School on the campus of the local community college that serves approximately 150 students.

Typically, the high schools graduate approximately 500 students each year. Of the graduates, approximately forty percent attend a two-year college, twenty-five percent attend a four-year college and twelve percent join the military. The completion or success rate of the district’s students in the University of North Carolina system shows that approximately twenty percent of the district’s graduates are enrolled in a UNC institution (http://fred.northcarolina.edu/cgi-bin/broker accessed July 24, 2011). Of those that enrolled in a UNC institution in 2004, in 2007 62.4 percent had a GPA greater than 2.0 and 32.9
percent had a GPA lower than 2.0 (http://fred.northcarolina.edu/cgi-bin/broker accessed July 24, 2011). Of that same class, 52.9 percent had graduated in five years (http://fred.northcarolina.edu/cgi-bin/broker accessed July 24, 2011). It is apparent many of these graduates with college degrees do not return due to the low percentage of residents with four year or graduate degrees.

These high schools are fed by seven middle schools and six elementary schools. The middle schools each feed a particular high school and of course, elementary schools feed particular middle schools. The county is divided into four high school districts.

Academic Performance

The academic performance for the district shows modest gains over the past three years in AYP (adequate yearly progress) and North Carolina’s ABC’s Accountability model. One of the high schools, which was one of North Carolina’s priority schools has seen significant growth over three years. And, most all of the district’s elementary, middle and high schools have seen growth for three years.
Table 4.2: District AYP and ABC Results

**Participant County Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Met Expected Growth</th>
<th>2006-07</th>
<th>2007-08</th>
<th>2008-09</th>
<th>2009-10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of Schools Met Expected Growth</td>
<td>School System Overall: Yes</td>
<td>School System Overall: Yes</td>
<td>School System Overall: Yes</td>
<td>School System Overall: Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Schools Met High Growth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7 &amp; School System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Schools Met AYP</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Subgroup Target Goals Met</td>
<td>52 of 54 (96.3%)</td>
<td>48 of 57 (84.2%)</td>
<td>52 of 54 (96.3%)</td>
<td>48 of 58 (82.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of schools meeting AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) has improved somewhat over the last four-year period. In 2006-07, seven schools met AYP and in 2007-08 only two met AYP. In 2008-09 eleven of the schools met AYP and 2009-10 eight of the schools in the system met AYP. Nonetheless, the number of schools meeting expected growth has climbed from 10 schools in 2007-07 to 15 of the schools meeting the expected growth mark in 2009-10 and the school system as a whole meeting the expected growth target each year. For the first time in many years, the school system as a whole met the high growth marker in 2009-10. The 2009-10 school year denotes the year of full-fledged implementation of professional learning communities. It is also the year of the best academic results for the schools and the district.

Below are the performance composite results for each school. The rise in performance composites at each of the schools can be seen in the following chart.
Table 4.3: District Academic Performance 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Grade Span</th>
<th>Expected Growth</th>
<th>High Growth</th>
<th>Performance Composite</th>
<th>ABC Status</th>
<th>AYP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oak Elementary</td>
<td>PK-8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>Pro Exp</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pine Elementary</td>
<td>PK-8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>Pro Exp</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sycamore Middle</td>
<td>06-8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>Pro Hgh</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradford Elementary</td>
<td>PK-8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>Pro Hgh</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birch Elementary</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>Pri Exp</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early College High</td>
<td>09-12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>Dst Exp</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beech Middle</td>
<td>06-8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>Pro Exp</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cypress High</td>
<td>09-12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>Dst Exp</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fir High</td>
<td>09-12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>Pro Hgh</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hickory Elementary</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>Pro Exp</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chestnut Elementary</td>
<td>PK-6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>76.4</td>
<td>Pro Hgh</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butternut JrSr High</td>
<td>07-12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>Pro Hgh</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pecan Elementary</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pear Elementary</td>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>Pro Exp</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange High</td>
<td>09-12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>Pro Hgh</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poplar Middle</td>
<td>06-8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>Pri Hgh</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ABCs Status:** HE-Honor Schools of Excellence; Exp-Expected Growth; Hgh-High Growth; Exc-School of Excellence; Dst-School of Distinction; Pro-School of Progress; Pri-Priority School; MI-25 Most Improved K-8 Schools or 10 Most Improved High Schools; LP-Low-Performing; NR-No Recognition; 95R-Less than 95% tested

**AYP Code:** SH-Met w/Safe Harbor, CI-Met w/Confidence Interval, GR-Met w/Growth
(Source: NC Public Schools.org accessed March 1, 2011)

**IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSS**

Implementation of professional learning communities began in the 2008-2009 school year at the district level. As the fall of the 2008-09 school year began, principals were informed about professional learning communities in principal’s meetings and several texts were purchased for school administrators to allow them to read and learn about professional learning communities. In addition, the Southeastern Education Alliance, in conjunction with the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, hosted staff development on professional learning communities with Dr. Anthony Muhammad on three different occasions. Many of
the principals in the district attended this training. In the 2008-09 school year, many of the schools began to incorporate professional learning communities into their functions and begin the process of establishing common planning times, teams and norms and began to create a pyramid of interventions.

In addition to these steps, at each principal’s meeting an aspect of professional learning communities was discussed and to insure principals had an understanding of the components of professional learning communities. A few of the schools in the district made great strides in this first year and were well on the way to operating at least in part as professional learning communities. In February of 2009, Ken Williams, a trainer with Solution Tree was contracted to do a workshop with school improvement teams and principals about the implementation of professional learning communities. Each principal and five to six members of each school’s school improvement team attended the workshop to lay the groundwork for district implementation.

In the 2009-10 school year, one day of the three-day administrative retreat was designated for professional learning communities and their development. Principals worked collaboratively and as a district to craft their plans for implementation of professional learning communities in their school. It became a district wide effort and administrators were expected to go back to their schools and lead the implementation. The July administrative retreat was a work session for principals and would begin the preparation for a district wide work session for teachers in August. In August, each teacher in the district received one-half day training on professional learning communities by Ken Williams. Every
principal and every teacher had been exposed to the idea of professional learning communities by a nationally recognized trainer as the school year began.

In addition, during the 2009-10 school year, principals were requested to produce products for central office directors to indicate the progress of professional learning communities in their schools. Directors verified that teams had been created, planning time created for teams to meet, norms were created by teams and teams were evaluating data. One teacher workday at the beginning of the year was designated for staff development and devoted to professional learning communities. Teachers were given the opportunity to meet and to work on norms, evaluate data, and create a game plan for the rest of the school year. In addition, two other early release dates were designated for professional learning communities and used to allow teachers to meet with their professional learning community teams. The first designated early release date was designated for teachers to meet within their school and the second for teachers to meet with other subject area teachers from different schools.

At the end of the 2009-10 school year, teachers were surveyed to assess what staff development was needed to further enhance professional learning communities and to locate strengths and weaknesses. Most school staffs indicated they needed further training on developing common assessments. At that point, each school selected five to six staff members to attend a staff development train the trainer workshop from Chris Jackic with Solution Tree. Each school’s five to six staff members were to return and train their staffs on developing common assessments. The goal was that the weakness was addressed and staff
had more insight on developing common assessments. An overview of the yearly steps by the district to implement professional learning communities is summed up in the table below.

Table 4.4: Implementation Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008-09</th>
<th>2009-10</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build background knowledge</td>
<td>Administrative retreat with Ken Williams for principal’s training on PLCs</td>
<td>Common Assessment training provide to each principal and five to six staff members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop in February with all Principals and School Improvement Teams by Ken Williams with Solution Tree</td>
<td>All teachers in the district receive one-half day training on professional learning communities and protocols and practices</td>
<td>Central office directors attend professional learning community meetings in schools to verify working</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals attending SEA and UNCW provided workshops on PLCs with Dr. Muhammad</td>
<td>Survey done at mid-year and year end to assess progress and strengths and areas need to improve</td>
<td>Professional learning communities are a part of the Teacher Evaluation Process which is adopted by North Carolina</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various texts purchased for principals and central office staff</td>
<td>Directors ask principals for various products to verify the establishment of professional learning communities such as team meeting times, intervention schedules, data, etc… and timelines established district wide to have teams created, data reviewed, assessments created, etc…</td>
<td>One workday devoted to professional learning communities to allow teachers to meet with grade level and subject area teachers in professional learning communities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One teacher workday devoted to PLCs and two early release dates devoted to PLCs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several changes that impacted the development of professional learning communities took place for the 2010-11 school year. A new superintendent was hired and the expectations from the superintendent caused a change in the format of principal’s meetings. Where in the past a portion of each principal’s meeting was dedicated to outlining professional learning
communities and the expectations upcoming as well as the products to ask for from professional learning community teams, principal’s meetings did not include any information on professional learning communities. The results for the 2010-11 school year will soon be determined and if this was a wise decision can be determined by further examining the results. In the opinion of the researcher, the practice of taking time in principal’s meetings to outline the expectations for professional learning communities and provide instruction for principals on moving the development of professional learning communities forward will not be favorable for the development of professional learning communities for the district. Although principals were given the same timelines and protocols as the prior year, they were expected to carry these out and no time was made during principal’s meetings to supplement principal’s implementation at their schools.

PROCESS AND EXPECTATIONS

In the prior year, timelines for the district were established where each school would develop team norms, SMART goals, determine essential learnings and develop common assessments by a certain date. These benchmark dates were monitored by the curriculum directors to insure they were occurring and if schools were experiencing difficulty, the director was to assist the principal in insuring these target dates and products were achieved. In general, the timeline for the products for professional learning community components were outlined as listed below:
• Team Norms—2 weeks—September 10
• SMART Goals—2 weeks—September 24
• Essential Learnings—2 weeks—October 8
• Common Assessments—2 weeks—October 22
• Evaluate Common Assessments—2 weeks—Nov 12
• Pyramid of Intervention—2 weeks—Nov 29-Dec 10
• Evaluate/reflect on team and improvements—2 weeks—December 10

STAFF SURVEY OF IMPLEMENTATION FOR 2009-10

Staff completed a year-end survey about professional learning communities in May of 2010. This survey was recommended by staff development trainers with Solution Tree as a means to measure the progress of implementation. This survey is also recommended by Ken Williams, a trainer with Solution Tree and Professional Learning Communities At Work (2008) as a means to measure the progress of the implementation and determine areas of weakness. The survey consisted of eighteen questions about professional learning communities in their schools. This survey was completed by 228 of approximately 600 teachers in May of 2010 online via Survey Monkey.

Respondents were given two weeks to rank their team and schools on a Likert scale survey of the eighteen questions. They were to rank their team from one to nine concerning the development of professional learning communities and their development in their schools. A score of one on an item indicated this characteristic was not true of their team, the score of nine indicated the characteristic was very true of their team. The questions for the
survey are outlined below:

1. We have identified team norms and protocols
2. We have analyzed student achievement data and established SMART goals.
3. Each team member is clear on knowledge, skills and essential learnings for each subject and grade level.
4. We have aligned essential learnings with state and district standards
5. We have identified course content and topics to eliminate indecision about what to teach.
6. We have agreed on how best to sequence to content and established timelines.
7. We have identified prerequisite knowledge and skills students need to be successful.
8. We have identified strategies to assess prerequisite knowledge and skills.
9. We have developed strategies to assist student in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills.
10. We have developed common formative assessments to assist us in determining if students have mastered the essential learnings.
11. We have established a proficiency standard we want each student to achieve.
12. We use the results of common assessments to assist each other in improving our practice.
13. We use common assessment results to determine students who need additional interventions.
14. We have agreed on the criteria by which we judge student work.
15. We have taught students the criteria by which they will be judged on.
16. We have developed common summative assessments to evaluate our student’s knowledge of essential learnings.
17. We have established a proficiency standard we want each student to attain.
18. We formally evaluate our adherence to team norms and effectiveness of our team at least 2 x per year

At the end of the first year of district implementation, according to the survey results, teachers in the district were most comfortable with establishing team norms, determining essential learnings, developing SMART goals and determining course content to be covered. Teachers were least comfortable with aligning grading practices, developing common assessments and formally evaluating team adherence to norms and determining team
effectiveness. The survey information was gathered to be used at the district level for future planning and staff development support efforts to further support the development of professional learning communities in the district.
### Critical Issues for PLC Teams Results

#### Rating Scale to indicate extent to which true of your team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options (1-Not true, 9-Vey true)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>AVG</th>
<th>#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. We have identified team norms and protocols</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>143</td>
<td><strong>8.22</strong></td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. We have analyzed student achievement data and established SMART goals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>109</td>
<td><strong>7.80</strong></td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Each team member is clear on knowledge, skills and essential learnings for our course or grade level</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>118</td>
<td><strong>8.03</strong></td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. We have aligned essential learnings with state and district standards</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>135</td>
<td><strong>8.17</strong></td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. We have identified course content and topics to eliminate to devote time to essential learnings</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>101</td>
<td><strong>7.71</strong></td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. We have agreed on how best to sequence the content and established pacing guides to master essential learnings,</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>82</td>
<td><strong>7.41</strong></td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. We have identified prerequisite knowledge and skills students need to master essential learnings.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>87</td>
<td><strong>7.66</strong></td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. We have identified strategies to assess prerequisite skills and knowledge.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>79</td>
<td><strong>7.53</strong></td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. We have developed strategies to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>78</td>
<td><strong>7.52</strong></td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. We have developed common formative assessments to help us determine mastery of the essential learnings.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>97</td>
<td><strong>7.52</strong></td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. We have established a proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on common assessments.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>100</td>
<td><strong>7.58</strong></td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. We use the results of common assessments to assist each other in building on strengths and weaknesses of our practice.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>89</td>
<td><strong>7.29</strong></td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. We use common assessment results to identify students who need additional time and support to master the essential.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>93</td>
<td><strong>7.56</strong></td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. We have agreed on criteria to judge the quality of student work and provide them examples and models.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>75</td>
<td><strong>7.23</strong></td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. We have taught the students the criteria they will be judged by and provided examples.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>90</td>
<td><strong>7.50</strong></td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. We have developed common summative assessments to evaluate our strengths and weaknesses.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>77</td>
<td><strong>7.30</strong></td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. We have established a proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on summative assessments.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>90</td>
<td><strong>7.55</strong></td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. We formally evaluate our adherence to team norms and effectiveness of our team at least 2 x per year.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>70</td>
<td><strong>7.00</strong></td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.5: Staff Survey on PLC Implementation
The North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions data were examined for an analysis of how implementation of professional learning communities may have impacted the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions results. An analysis of the NCTWC survey results from 2008, prior to district wide professional learning community implementation to 2010, the year that professional learning communities were implemented seem to show no negative correlation between implementation and the teacher’s views of teacher leadership or school leadership within the district. In fact, the district’s scores in all areas of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey show positive results.

In the category of School Leadership, there was indication that the faculty and staff possessing a shared vision was improved by eleven percentage points, from seventy percent of the staff in 2008, to eighty-two percent of the staff in 2010. In addition, there was an increase of six percentage points in the area of teachers being held to high professional standards for delivering instruction. Most notable in the area of Teacher Leadership was a twenty seven percentage point gain in the area of teachers being allowed to make decisions about educational issues within their schools. The argument that professional learning communities restrict the educational decision-making and freedom of teachers does not seem to be reflected in the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions survey for this district.
Table 4.6: North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>% Agree</th>
<th>% Agree</th>
<th>Gain/Loss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TWC Survey Questions</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7.1</td>
<td>Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about school leadership in your school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. The faculty and staff have a shared vision.</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>11.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in this school.</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. The school leadership consistently supports teachers.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Teachers are held to high professional standards for delivering instruction.</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>94.3</td>
<td>6.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>h. Teachers receive feedback that can help them improve teaching.</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>84.5</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>i. The procedures for teacher evaluation are consistent.</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>9.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>j. The school improvement team provides effective leadership at this school.</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7.3</td>
<td>The school leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Leadership issues</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>11.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Facilities and resources</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>17.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. The use of time in my school</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>14.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Professional development</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>7.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>i. New teacher support</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>16.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q6.1 Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about teacher leadership in your school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>13.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues.</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>27.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions to solve problems.</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>13.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. In this school we take steps to solve problems.</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE RESEARCHER’S INTRODUCTION TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The researcher’s exposure to professional learning communities came by accident. As a high school principal, the researcher was made aware of a remediation period being added into the school day at a high school in a district in a county that was an hour away. The researcher and another high school principal visited the high school to meet with the principal and staff about the implementation of the additional period. This visit was in July of 2007. Upon visiting with the principal and learning about the logistics and management of the additional period, the principal began speaking of common formative assessments, professional learning communities and terms I was somewhat unfamiliar with.

This spurred interest and the researcher began to search for materials on the items spoken of. This search continued and was followed by several phone calls to the principal and the discovery of creating professional learning communities began to develop. As a principal, the researcher was excited about a system being in place to review data, having the teachers develop goals for instructional focus as a team, and to learn from each other through sharing. The researcher knew as a teacher he would have benefitted greatly from this. In addition, the researcher wanted the school to operate in this fashion and was completely consumed by the opportunity to create this in the building. The researcher and twelve of the most influential staff members went to visit the high school early in the fall. They were excited with what they saw as well. The school visited was similar to the researcher’s school.
demographically, the communities were similar and so was the size of the staff and student body. The guiding coalition of teachers who visited and the researcher went before the faculty at a staff meeting and said “we believe this is the direction we need to head.” The principal spoke last and told the faculty that he had been a student, a teacher and coach at the school, an assistant principal and now was the principal and would have a student here in four short years and that he believed it was the very best move they could make as a school for the future.

The endorsement of the faculty was gained and the staff began to move forward and plan how they could implement professional learning communities in the high school. Several teachers attended “Team Leader Training” with the Triangle Area High Five organization and the researcher attended trainings and workshops on almost every aspect of professional learning communities. The researcher’s spouse attended as well. She was a beginning principal at a K-8 school which fed the high school where the researcher was principal. Both attended workshops on Team Leader Training, The Pyramid of Intervention Workshops, Building Common Formative Assessments and saw the DuFours speak in Raleigh, N.C. It was a wonderful learning experience and both had the opportunity to learn together and it was bountiful because both could build off each other’s ideas.

Both began to educate their staffs about what professional learning communities were, how they operated, and what the non-negotiables were as well as how to organize and lead the effort. That was where the similarities of our journeys began to diverge. From the principal’s chair, the researcher’s staff seemed to be on board with the move to create
professional learning communities, seemed to understand their role and little if any
dissention seemed to be present. The researcher’s wife’s staff was another story. Many on
her staff seemed reticent, resistant and opposed to working as a professional learning
community. Only afterwards did they realize the situations were quite different and the
implementation was going to be quite different in the two schools. On the surface, the
situations and each arrived at their schools were quite different. The researcher had been a
graduate of the high school he was now principal of and had spent ten years in the school as a
teacher, working side by side with many of the staff who were still there. The researcher had
also spent one year as an assistant principal at that high school and had been a principal at an
elementary school for two years prior to coming to the high school to be the principal. He was
also in the third year as principal of the high school and all had gone really well the first two
years of the principalship at the high school.

The spouses’s story was quite different. She was in the second year of her first
principalship at the largest elementary school in the district. On top of that, the school was a
K-8 school and under sanctions for failing to make AYP for several years in a row. She was
beginning her second year and the first had been somewhat challenging. Moreover, the
school had many staff that was very vocal in the community and well into the final years of
service. Where implementation was going well for the high school, each step of the
elementary school’s journey was quite different. As the researcher began to understand,
sometimes the journey of changing a culture is a tremendous challenge for a school leader.
Because of the buy-in and experience with the school the researcher had, he felt he could go
in and ask the staff to do anything reasonable for improvement and the staff would respond
and do what was asked. The credibility the researcher had with them as a principal was there and so moving forward was easier, the researcher just had to make sure he was doing the right things and also made it a priority to remove all the static and have the teachers work on a few solid things that would have great leverage in making a difference.

The researcher’s spouse’s story will follow. And, although quite unusual in a dissertation, she will let her tell her story from her perspective. Nonetheless, the researcher’s journey with professional learning communities does not end where many would think. Although it would be nice to tell readers the school implemented professional learning communities and academic results soared and collaboration abounded. It did not happen that way. At the end of the school year, the researcher was promoted from the high school principalship to the secondary director for the district. He was to be in charge of the secondary curriculum (9-12) for all the district high schools. Also, he was to facilitate the development of professional learning communities throughout the district at all the schools. This involved arranging training for principals, setting up staff development for staff and doing many of the things he had been doing as a high school principal to facilitate the development of professional learning communities within a school setting from the district perspective. On the one hand, the researcher was reticent about leaving the high school and not finishing the task of creating professional learning communities at the school, but on the other hand he was looking forward to helping fellow principals with the information and logistics to implement professional learning communities within their schools. And, the task of creating professional learning communities at the high school would be in the hands of a new principal to follow the researcher.
MICHELLE’S STORY

After only two years as an assistant principal, I became the principal of the largest school in our rural county. The school consisted of nine grade levels (K-8), more than 100 employees, nearly 950 students, and 29 AYP subgroups. Many of the teachers at this predominantly white school had both historical affiliation with the school and political influence with the community. The school had failed to meet AYP for numerous years although it performed within the top half of our district’s schools, and was facing sanctions of the No Child Left Behind Act. Going in, I already had a great amount of knowledge about the school, both factual and perceptual, for I had been an eighth grade, language arts teacher at this same school for the five years previous to my becoming an assistant principal at a neighboring school. In addition, I knew this school from the perspective of a parent. In the same year that I was named principal, our daughter was a fifth grade student and our son was entering Kindergarten.

While I think my husband and other principals viewed PLCs as a means to gradually move their schools from “good to great” I saw PLCs as a means to immediately move our school out of federal, school improvement sanctions. I believed that transforming our school into DuFour’s concept of PLC was necessary and urgent. I believed we would make AYP quickly and just as quickly forge ahead as the most outstanding school in our county. I believed both our teachers and students were capable, and that merely educating our staff about the paradigms and practices of PLCs would propel them into tasks like determining essential learnings, like creating Common Formative Assessments, like collaborating
interdependently, and like focusing on reality and results with a voracity to improve student learning.

Boy, was I naïve! Yes, our school did get close to success (meeting 28 of 29 AYP targets and missing the 29th target by only three students) in the first year of county-wide implementation of PLCs. However, the eager zeal and fervor that I had envisioned from the staff as I would teach them the cultural concepts of PLCs did not exactly occur. I had hoped to provide information as the catalyst for teacher leadership in which I metaphorically just “offered a hand or a boost” to help teachers up the stairs to our goal. Instead, I became the lady “leading the charge” up those stairs as I battled “fundamentalists” at every step, hoisted up “tweeners” by the hand, and challenged “believers” to keep up with me on my way to the top. In other words, we got there, but not without all of us (including and maybe especially me) suffering battle wounds.

So, why was my experience so different from my husband’s? I believe four main factors were at play: the different cultures of our schools, the starting reality of where the schools stood with regards to student achievement, our own credibility (or lack thereof), and our own personalities.

In my opinion, Ben’s school already had an influential set of teacher leaders within the building that were eagerly searching for a better means to produce improved student achievement. They were thirsty and Ben led them to water. Ben’s school was already the most successful in the county and wanted to become one of the best in the state. He was
already a trusted and respected member of the school and most of the staff had known him to be such since childhood. He is analytical, protective (of self and everyone), strategic, and humble. With all of these positives in play, his school easily transformed into a PLC culture.

On the other hand, the culture of my school was already firmly rooted for resistance. The premise seemed to be, “We are good teachers and this is a good school. The AYP data is meaningless and unreachable. We have more subgroups that any other school in the state and we are doing great considering. Just leave us alone and let us do what we do.” Convinced of this mantra and skeptical of data, this school did not even want to face itself in the mirror. To make matters worse, the hand that was holding the mirror belonged to an “outsider” known to be controversial and if need be, confrontational. I think my staff probably felt, “Whether anyone liked it or not, this lady was diving headfirst into the deep end and expecting each of us to follow.”

Because of my tendencies to take swift action, to figure out the details as I go along, to hold people accountable, and to focus on results, I knew I would create waves for the staff. I was willing to rock the boat and become the target of the dissenters, because I believed it was the most expedient way to get results. And boy, I did rock the boat! By presenting data and asking PLC teams to take a reflective look at themselves and their colleagues, some of the teachers that had been perceived as the “best” teachers, the “experts” in curriculum, and the “leaders” of the status quo were literally knocked overboard. Those teachers that accepted the reality of data and sought means for improvement soon began to prevail as the new, instructional leaders. Those teachers too pained by the reality of the data or too
resistant to it began to decline and many of them retorted with social and political bullying with me as their main target. Emerging teacher leaders were reticent in fear of suffering similar consequences. With such an upheaval of the status quo, results both positive and negative were generated.

THE DISTRICT’S STORY: IMPLEMENTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS A DISTRICT

The span of the challenge of the implementation of professional learning communities from the district level became apparent about six to eight weeks into the endeavor. The researcher was well aware of “pseudo-PLCs” and how the term or label of professional learning community was becoming more popular and being thrown around quite often. Often times, the researcher noted that within two weeks of beginning implementation, the exceptional children’s director was speaking of how her PLC teams were meeting and functioning effectively. The researcher understood the term PLC had moved beyond the "whisper" of researchers to loud cry among many practitioners but the researcher didn’t know it could happen that quickly. The researcher knew PLCs were the en vogue term for the moment in education, but was most dismayed when the Superintendent stood up and said, “PLCs are just another way to talk.” It was at that point that the recognition of the conceptual understanding was lacking at the top, and the materials, information and efforts supplied to educate the Superintendent were in vain.

It should be noted that the conceptual understanding is important and most literature on professional learning communities indicate that the term PLC travels faster than the
concepts that need to be in place to actually have one working in your school. Many schools engage in superficial activities to claim the PLC title when very little is occurring “under the hood” that is PLC related. The processes that schools engage in to become superficial PLCs will have little if any effect on teaching and learning or student achievement.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER FOUR

The district planned out typical implementation steps for PLCs when the journey began the professional learning community endeavor as a district. The high school director coordinated the district wide effort. The first steps were to identify the components of PLCs and begin to educate our principals about PLCs. The director consulted experts and districts about how best to implement. It was determined the best direction was to bring in nationally recognized speakers to do training and lead our principals and teachers. Additionally, each principal was to spend time in faculty meetings going over components and practices for creating PLCs. The district also bought web-based support subscriptions to support principals and teachers with video and texts as they began the journey. The directors also checked products produced at each school to verify each school was incorporating the PLCs into their day-today activity. The nexus of this effort was to verify that PLCs were indeed occurring in their schools and were not superficial. From all information gathered, the implementation appeared to be moving in the right direction. Additionally, the district had been informed by the trainers provided by Solution Tree that they were taking the right steps to insure implementation and student achievement results and North Carolina Teacher
Working Conditions results appear to show no negative impacts of the decision to implement professional learning communities as a district.
Eleven of the district’s sixteen principals were interviewed for this research endeavor. Each administrator was asked a series of questions concerning their implementation of professional learning communities at their school. The principals interviewed represented different grade spans and various years of experience as an administrator. The table below outlines the general demographics of those administrators.

Table 5.1: Demographics of Administrators Interviewed

| Male/Female       | 6 Male  
                      | 5 Female |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| Elementary/Middle/High | 4 High School  
                      | 4 Elementary |
|                   | 1 Middle School |
|                   | 2 Kindergarten through 8th grade |
| Years Experience  | 5 with 1-5 years experience  
                      | 5 with 6-10 years experience |
|                   | 1 with 15-30 years experience |
| School size       | 1 with approximately 150 students  
                      | 1 with approximately 300 students |
|                   | 5 with approximately 500 – 600 students |
|                   | 4 with 900 approximately students |
| Minority          | 2 African American  
                      | 9 Caucasian |
When did you first learn about professional learning communities?

Participants learned about professional learning communities through various means. Some were exposed to PLCs via state level efforts with the Turnaround Program for low performing schools, some via efforts through the Southeastern Education Alliance and the New Schools Project, but most were exposed to professional learning communities and the components of PLCs through local district efforts to implement professional learning communities. Some also worked in Wake County schools and were exposed to the conceptual framework for professional learning communities there. Nonetheless, the majority of the information and specifics of implementing professional learning communities was with the local district’s efforts to implement professional learning communities. One principal notes, “I heard about it in graduate school and first learned about it, but I actually saw it in action when I was working in one of our elementary schools.” Of the ten administrators interviewed, three had been exposed to professional learning communities via the local district’s efforts.

How much time did you spend studying and learning about professional learning communities?

Most of the respondent’s learning about professional learning communities was done in district level workshops or other workshops. Very few spent time outside of the regular workday studying on their own about professional learning communities. Only three noted they did outside reading or attended workshops on their own to further their knowledge of professional learning communities. Nonetheless, all of the administrators noted the
professional development they did attend at the district level or with other agencies to be helpful. “They all have been helpful” was the feeling expressed by one of the elementary principals in the district. Most principals noted that most of the information they garnered was in the district level principal’s meetings and in the local staff development. Yet, most noted they could have done more reading or study on professional learning communities and would have liked to. One administrator noted, “Could I have spent more time learning about it? Yes, if I had that time, I could, because I wanted to learn. I wanted it to be something that was not here-today-gone-tomorrow-kind of thing…”

This highlights an interesting point noted by one of the principals who had worked in Wake County. “I know when I was in Wake County as a principal for six years that was right when I was getting into it that was our focus. In fact, my interview with Bill McNeill (former Wake County Superintendent), I remember him asking me about it. Luckily I had been, you know, and seen the conference and knew enough to say something intelligent about it when he interviewed me. Wake County really started focusing on it. So, I would say every year that was the focus of our staff development, with other things added in.”

This is interesting because it notes the other district devoted six years to the staff development effort to support professional learning communities.

In general, trainings provided by the local district comprise the majority of the information for principals on professional learning communities. And, most principals interviewed noted “the training I have gotten here has been the best help” Only one principal noted they had ordered materials concerning professional learning communities and
implementing them. The materials that were provided by the district were the materials most referred to and used by principals.

**What were your initial likes and dislikes concerning professional learning communities?**

Principals expressed they liked many things when they initially began to learn about professional learning communities. They overwhelmingly noted the focus on student learning and achievement with teachers as a positive aspect of professional learning communities. One of the middle school principals noted that focus.

What I like about it is that it forces teachers to have – they have always met, they have always had grade level meetings or whatever, but it kind of gave those meetings a better direction and more academic focus.

This focus on student learning was also echoed by a high school administrator who summed up the impact of the implementation of professional learning communities in his school.

For us at our school, what I like about PLC is that it gives us a set time weekly to talk about instructional issues. We still talk about the managerial things some in the meetings, but that has been greatly reduced this year. We try to get that information out as much as possible in e-mails, or maybe devote the first five or the last ten minutes of a meeting just for that. But we try to keep them focused on instruction. And that is what the teachers want. They say in year-end surveys and all that: “We don’t talk about instruction enough. We don’t talk about instruction enough.” But if you have this, just calling it PLCs and you know Learning Community, they think that that time is designated for instructional conversations. So I like the fact that it has given us, if nothing else, an excuse to do what we are supposed to be doing and not wasting time on those managerial type things after school.

Several of the principals also expressed they liked, “individuals within the school having a set framework for a common purpose.” One noted in particular that professional learning communities gave his school more direction. “When you work independently you can go
different ways.” The idea of building consensus and developing a common direction was also noted by about one third of the administrators interviewed.

The administrators also noted their initial negative feelings when they began to hear about professional learning communities. One principal noted, “Usually, like many educators, when something new comes out I am like, ‘Oh, here is something new we have to do.’ But then when I really learned what PLCs were about, I found out it is an excellent thing.” Overwhelmingly, most of the principals noted the focus on student learning and achievement as an initial thing they liked about professional learning communities. “We had those discussions in little spurts and pockets before, but professional learning communities gave them more priority” noted a high school administrator.

One idea that emerged was the principals need time to digest and understand professional learning communities and the leadership required to lead professional learning communities. A middle school principal noted, “It just took me a little time to get the full meaning of what it was about.”

One of the hurdles principals faced was that implementing professional learning communities infringes upon teacher’s traditional planning time. Many noted that their teachers saw their planning time as “their planning time” and not time to be involved in team meetings. It is a hurdle principals will face when implementing professional learning communities. Principals will have to create time for team meetings and that may include garnering some of teachers’ planning time they had been using independently. Getting everyone onboard as how to restructure planning time to create individual and team meeting times is critical when the professional learning community implementation effort began. “It
does take time…the process….the whole process is a long process and sometimes hard for teachers to wrap their brains around it” (Middle School Principal). This sentiment also coincides with the following statement by one of the elementary principals.

I can’t say that there were things that I didn’t like; but things that I saw as obstacles, as introducing this to a staff, would be teachers tend to want to see their planning time as their time. Even with team meetings, they view team meetings as their time, not time that I set guidelines for them. I saw that as an obstacle, as telling them exactly what they needed to be doing during their team planning.

Most principals needed time to digest the conceptual idea of professional learning communities themselves, but also needed strategies to overcome the negative reactions by the staff. Two of the principals felt understanding the conceptual theory and premises behind professional learning communities came easily. Most needed time to understand it personally and then strategies to move the concept forward at their schools with their staff. Only one of the elementary principal felt upon first learning of professional learning communities that they were sold on the idea and had a good understanding of the concept.

Several of the principals noted the idea that professional learning communities provided more of a distributed leadership approach and this at times was difficult. The section below best highlights this idea.

A. One thing that has been difficult for the teachers, I think, to wrap their brain around, if I am understanding the PLC concept correctly, is that I am not the dictator that tells them what to do.
Q. Right.
A. They are the kindergarten experts and the first grade experts and the second grade experts. But it is their natural tendency whenever they have a problem or a question is to come ask me. So for me to turn that back on them and say, “You all have to figure that out.” That has been – it is not necessarily something I didn’t like, but it has just been a change for my mindset and their mindset. But it has been beneficial because they have had to figure it out.

And, you know, reaching consensus is difficult. If you have got seven people on your kindergarten team, you know, that consensus. And then we used the book *Learning by Doing*. We bought it for the whole staff, and that kind of guided us through. And I would pick different chapters for them to read. I didn’t necessarily go in Chapter One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, order. Because the one about consensus and conflict is one of the chapters towards the end of the book, and we needed that --

Q. Early on?
A. Early on. So, but just letting me take a step back and giving them: You are the kindergarten experts. I don’t teach kindergarten. You all figure it out.

Navigating the change in structure of planning times for staff and conceptually digesting all parts of the change are issues that districts or schools implementing professional learning communities must be prepared to encounter.

**Was the decision to implement professional learning communities at the district level a wise one?**

Despite hurdles that will be faced when implementing professional learning communities, all of the principals felt moving the concept forward as a district was important and fruitful. They noted that the conversations they could have among fellow principals and gaining understanding together as it moved forward within the district as being important.

One of the elementary principals stated, “It was a good idea to do it because it is not really a program or a thing or something extra. It is just doing what you already did in a more focused, better way.” They also noted the congruence of the district effort and the state level
initiatives and the ideas of professional learning communities being included in the teacher, principal and superintendent evaluations.

I definitely think it (implementing professional learning communities) was a wise decision. I think the biggest reason would be the fact that the state was moving in that direction, too. And if we started at the same time they started putting emphasis on it, it didn’t seem like to us to be an extra thing later on down the road. If principals are being evaluated on effectiveness of PLCs, and teachers are being evaluated on their performance in PLCs, then why not do it? Why wait a couple of years to figure out what to do with that? So I think it was very wise to do so. And I think we did it the right way, too, by studying the literature behind PLCs and bringing in national speakers who were experts in that field. Because I think if we try to do things on our own, sometimes we make a lot of mistakes up front. But by bringing these folks in, I feel like they were able to troubleshoot from the get-go in saying, “You know, I have been there and done this. Try to avoid making these same mistakes.” So I think the way we approached it was very effective.

Two principals noted that actually giving the implementation effort a name somewhat hurt the implementation. Below is one high school principal’s thoughts:

“I definitely think so (implementing it as a district was wise). I think PLCs – I hate the title. I wish that we didn’t give it a name at all, and we just did it—you have to name it I guess— but teachers get turned off by PLC (the name). They already don’t like to hear it, so we talk about it in different ways. “ Another put it this way, “we have had so many boats and ships that we were jumping on, that they were thinking it was some other ship that we were going to sail for a year or two and abandon; and that is what they were worried about.”

Another elementary principal noted “her approach was to say these are best practices and some of the things we are already doing. And, if there are other practices that will help us….lets learn how to do them as a staff”(K-8 Principal). “I introduced it that way and discussed with them all the stuff they were already doing….before I began to tackle the things we were not” (K-8 Principal). She went further to note that the naming of things
sometimes creates aversion to new ideas and her beginning with common things they already were doing was successful.

    I gave them the information that they already knew that they were doing. And then I said, “Guys, this is PLCs.” For it to be a true PLC, these are things that we are going to have tweak. Most of the stuff you are already doing is called something different. And we went through, in other staff meetings, and labeled, “Okay, this is what you do. This is what this is.” And compared what we were doing to what the PLC concept was. I know other administrators went into their schools with the term “PLC” and introduced it like it was an entirely new thing.

A similar approach, scaffolding from what was already in place and common practice within the building and then adding in new practices was taken by another elementary principal who had been successful in implementing professional learning communities in her school.

    I think any time teachers respond to things in the way they are presented to them. You know, if as a principal you are like, “Oh, God, the county came up with this for us to do now,” then that is going to be their attitude. Or if you say, “Guys, we have been doing this already. We have always had grade level meetings. Now it is just, you know, fine-tuning that process a little bit.” So I don’t think that we had a lot of resistance to the idea of PLCs.

This principal also noted her strategy in moving the concept of professional learning communities forward in her school and her understanding of the change process.

    A. And I think they always said it (change) was a three- to five-year process. But it is hard to change people who have been doing something the same way forever and ever and ever. Especially at a school like this where they have typically gotten good results doing what they have always done. Q. Right. A. So then you have got to let them know why the reason is to change, if we are already quote-unquote successful. Q. Right.
A. You know, but until you are a hundred percent, there is always room for improvement. So we talked a lot about at this school going from good to great. We are a good school. But do we want to stay a good school? Or do we want to be a great school?

Q. Right.

A. So just helping people understand the reason that you need to change; but also that it is going to be a slow process, and everybody is not going to get there at the same time.

How did your teachers respond when you begin to move forward with professional learning communities in your school?

There were varied responses from school administrators as to how teachers responded to implementing professional learning communities in the district. For some principals, it was simply another day at work and they took the implementation in stride. For others, their implementation was more strategic in that they developed a particular strategy to move the implementation forward at their schools. The responses were in general positive, yet there were “resistors” to implementation and changing practice. The responses below highlight the variance:

Well, my core teachers, they really get onboard with things. Now, my other ones that are not – you know, I will say in the test areas – the testing area teachers always want to know something new that is going to help them because they say, “We feel that, you know, all the weight is on us because we know that people are looking and pointing fingers when test scores come out.” So they want to do everything they can to better themselves and better their instruction and better the whole team. But, overall, I would say that they took it in a serious way. (Middle School Principal)

I think overall it was positive because they do like to meet and work together. It has helped, with us --since we have started doing, you know, Vertical PLCs, we try to do one of those at least, if not once a month, every other month, where they do meet. There are four teams and each team has kindergarten through fifth grade and a resource person on each one. So the Leadership Team decides what topic or issues we are going to deal with, and then those
groups can work on those. So it has been very positive. (Elementary Principal)

I was fortunate in my school to have walked into a situation where teachers were already operating – they didn’t call them PLCs; they called them Critical Friends Groups. They didn’t know they were PLCs. I walked into a situation where teachers were used to working together to solve those types of problems. But, of course, we still haven’t perfected any of that. But we are farther along now than we were. (High School Principal)

Perhaps the most insightful and illuminative conversations with elementary principals noted the different responses from different staff members.

Q. Got you (I understand). How did your teachers – you have talked about this a little bit – how did your teachers respond with implementing PLCs?
A. Some of them had – I want to talk about the negative first, and then I will talk positive.
Q. Okay.
A. Negative. All this is one more thing we have to do. Then, the County Office this, and dah-dah-dah-dah. You name it. All kinds of comments. And then you had the people who were reluctant, and not saying anything, and were just curious to see what was going to happen. Sort of like they were going to chug along and sort of take sides if need be. I said, “Well, you need to be on my side. Here is what we are going to do.”
Q. Right.
A. And then you have the people who were dug in. We have done it this way and this way. I will do what you say because you are the principal. We had plenty of that.
Q. Right.
A. But also we had people who were jumping onboard with it and were real excited. They felt empowered about, you know, they have voice, they have say-so. They matter. What they think matters.
Q. Got you.
A. Those types of things. So I can make a difference; but together we can make an even greater difference. So we had a lot of positive stories, too. Some from my young teachers, some from my young-at-heart teachers, who are our veterans, too. They saw the benefits and made some connections with what they had experienced before in years past, years gone by. And then they would say, “Well, that is what they are calling it now.” And they said, “We are all for it.” And so --
Q. Some of both?
A. Some of both.

Most all principals noted the fact of the move to implement professional learning communities being part of a district wide effort and being included in the principal and teacher evaluation instruments was helpful. Nonetheless, they did note a variety of responses from their staffs. However, most noted the congruence and alignment of the state emphasis on professional learning communities through the teacher, principal and superintendent evaluation instruments made sense and added credibility to the effort to implement professional learning communities. In the administrator’s minds, the decision of the district to move forward was well-timed and preceded efforts at the state level where professional learning communities were seen as integral to the teacher, principal and superintendent evaluation instruments.

Q. Right. Does PLCs being included in the teacher evaluation help?
A. Somewhat. I am trying – I think it was Karla Casteen (North Carolina Teacher Academy Trainer) in her brain research (staff development) that actually pointed it out to all the teachers, that it (PLCs) was in the evaluation, and specifically showed them where it was. Not that it is going to have a major impact on their evaluation, but at least it is on their minds. And when I am doing summaries, it is on a lot of them. If I have a recommendation, where it come down to resources, the number one resource I put down is PLC discussion.

(High School Principal)

An elementary principal further expounded upon this notion. Noting that with the new NC Teacher Evaluation instrument, teachers are expected to collaborate and lead outside their classrooms.
Q. Right. Does it being in the Teacher Evaluation Instrument, and even the Principal and Superintendent, does that help?
A. I think it does. I love the new Instrument. You know, I like the fact that we are going to have another piece to it because I think that part needs to be addressed. I don’t think it needs to be the end-all, but I think it needs to be a part of it. But for it to be in there, there is so much in that Distinguished Category that requires a teacher to step outside of their classroom and to be interacting with their colleagues and trying to initiate change with their colleagues and encourage that growth.

Some principals had a different view on the accountability brought about by professional learning communities being included in the evaluation instrument. One noted that “for schools questioning and going kicking and screaming, yeah. They have more at stake when they understood that you do it or this will affect your evaluation” (Middle School Principal). Another high school principal stated, “It is still very, very, vague. I would like to see a more, a little bit more teeth and all in the evaluation.” Although the principals in the district varied in how to use the evaluation instrument as leverage for implementation, some thought it critical and used it and some did not see it as a leverage point, most felt it was indeed valuable that professional learning communities being in the evaluation instrument was key. As a high school principal simply put it, “they are held accountable for their participation.” All principals seemed to recognize the difference between attending professional learning community meetings and actually participating in professional learning communities.

An interesting note was that one of the principals just beginning the role of school leader noted that his staff wanted to see if he was going to move forward with the effort because of his newness to the role. “They were looking to see with me being a new principal if I would still require them to do this. There were veteran teachers who were entrenched,
not wanting to change and hoping I would not make this a big rock. They were hoping if they balked enough it would go away.”

**Did you have training in your administrative program on handling school change?**

Three of the ten principals interviewed said they had received training on navigating school change. Seven of ten indicated that navigating change within the organization was something they had to learn on the job. Of the three principals who indeed had some coursework or training on leading change within an organization, two noted that it was one course in a Masters of School Administration program and one noted it was one chapter of text within a course. Most principals indicated they would like additional training on leading change in addition to some element of professional learning communities. One of the most recent graduates indicated the philosophy of their Masters of School Administration was becoming a transformative leader and that had influenced and educated her somewhat with organizational change. Principals who were not recent graduates of school administration programs indicated less training with how to lead change in the building.

Essential learnings, assessment and interventions were the most commonly mentioned areas for additional training related to professional learning communities. But, when it came to leading change in the school building, most had little exposure to how to lead change in the building.

Q. As a principal going through your training for leadership in a school – I personally didn’t have very much training about bringing about change in a school. So tell me about that? And like moving PLCs forward? And like your training? What is your opinion of principals understanding how to bring about change in a school?
A. There was one course that I took in my principal training that dealt with change within the educational environment. The only thing that stood out to me about that particular class, and it has been helpful, is that change cannot take place overnight and that you are going to have people at different stages in the change process. The more that you have that buy into it, that can affect those that didn’t (buy in), the better. But I know not to expect that everybody is going to just submit and do exactly what you want. That has helped me because, with that understanding, I don’t come across as being the Gestapo. So you can help, by understanding that that is not going to happen but was I prepared totally for it? No.

When asked their philosophy about leading change, although there was some deviation most principals indicated they needed prominent or informal leaders in the school staff to help them navigate change. In one of the training sessions offered by the district, Chris Jackicic, a presenter with Solution Tree and former middle school principal in Rick DuFour’s school district, noted the need for “a guiding coalition” or covey of formal leaders within the school to help move change forward. Most principals understood and practiced this concept and understood the need to have prominent members of the school staff involved in the change effort. One principal’s interview indicates the instinctive understanding most principals had in involving key players in the change effort.

One of the main things that we discussed was that you cannot come into a situation and start making change. You have really got to come in and look at the entire situation. You have got to determine where your staff strengths are. You have got to determine where your staff weaknesses are. You have got to determine who the key players are, who the most influential people are within your building. And you look at what is going on and just take notes. Just make mental notes; maybe, you know, notes on paper. Because, if you start with negatives, they are going to go kicking and screaming. If you can’t get them to buy into it and then to almost think it is their idea, you are not going to make change. It may look good on paper. But until you actually start working with the ones – and it may be something small, you know. You may have to start with your key people and then other people see it and get jealous,
for lack of a better word, and it kind of filters out through the whole school. But, you know, you are going to start with your key people. You can’t let the naysayers hold you back, if it is something that the rest of the school really sees as a need. They are going to have to conform or get out, basically. (Elementary Principal)

Another of the high school principals went more into depth concerning developing a “guiding coalition” to help move the initiative forward within the school.

A. I just try and be proactive with that by getting the teachers onboard before we make any decisions. So once that resistance starts, you are almost forever going to be in a battle. So, I mean, that – my biggest thing is trying to keep that from ever getting --

Q. Getting there?
A. – To that point. You know, that is what I am saying. Teacher buy in is critical. Having teacher input is critical. When they feel like this is something that have had an opportunity to put their two cents’ worth in; when they feel like they have helped driven the direction, they are so much more likely to be onboard. And, you know, it is also one of those things that when I see something major we are getting ready to do, I will throw out feelers to some of the teachers that have that influence. I will say, “Look, this is something that I have been contemplating, just thinking about; not necessarily something that we are going to do, but just wanted your input. What do you think of this?”

Q. Right.
A. And, you know, they don’t mind telling you exactly what is on their mind. You know, they will let you know, “This is a good idea,” or “This is a bad idea.” So that is – I try to head it off before it ever gets to that resistance.

One of the high school principal’s philosophy was similar. He noted that, “You can coerce, you can force folks to do what you need them to do, and they will do just that, the bare minimum, and get by.” He went further to say that building trust, modeling the way and salesman ship were important to move change forward.

I believe if you want real change, there has got to be trust. There has got to be a lot of things that you get people to buy into. You sell it to them. You show
them that it works. I think you have to be a salesman. So I just believe, I do believe you have to sell it to them. You have got to show them that it works, and there has to be this trust there where, you know, we are in this together. I believe that if you are going to lead change, they have to see you do it before they are going to do it.

Moreover, all principals noted the challenge of asking teachers to change their practices. All recognized that one of the major hurdles to the implementation of professional learning communities was to ask teachers to do things differently. The changing of daily practices of the teachers and the school as a whole is what is required to implement professional learning communities.

I mean, this sounds kind of like a cop-out answer. But I don’t mean it to be at all. But I think the most difficult thing for them (teachers) to do is just change to what they are doing. They are so used to sticking with what they have done forever. That is the hard part, is convincing them to take chances and, you know, stop doing it that way. You know, really, what if you dropped that and jumped over here to that? That, I think, is the real challenge. Are you willing? The data can say this, you know, and it can point you in this direction. It can be clear as a bell, and they will still walk right back in sometimes and continue to do what they have been doing. I think that is the challenge of PLCs. (High School Principal)

A few of the principals also noted the need to present facts and information to staff in order to facilitate the need to change and the need to allow time for change to occur.

A. I think there was a course that I took that a change unit, but it wasn’t the whole class. And basically change is a long process.
Q. Right.
A. And I think they always said it was a three- to five-year process. But it is hard to change people who have been doing something the same way forever and ever and ever. Especially at a school like this where they have typically gotten good results doing what they have always done.

These two ideas were also noted by another K-8 principal who stated,
It is not going to happen in a year. It may not happen in two years or three years. But you really need to get a feel for what is already happening, and then mold what is happening into what you need to happen. And you need to make sure that you have data ready. You need to make sure that they have information.

I am big on, I am into presenting facts, presenting info. I don’t ask them to depend on my word alone, or to trust me. I feel like my staff does trust me. But by the same token, it is human nature that, if you don’t see it is writing, or you don’t see the statistics, that you tend to question or judge. So with new things that we do, you know, I try to present information that supports change.

Many of the principals spoke about how they navigated resistance from teachers when implementing professional learning communities. Their chief strategy was to listen to resisters and hear what they have to say. An elementary principal most succinctly stated her strategy of listening to what those resistant to implementation had to say:

Q. As a principal, when you face resistance from the faculty, how do you handle that? How do you go about—whether it is implementing PLCs or changing a reading program? When you have teachers that say, “I just don’t want to go that way,” how do you deal with it?
A. You have to listen to what they have to say because there may be valid points that we haven’t considered. But, hopefully, you have done that before you make a change. You have gotten that input and those conversations have happened before you say, “Okay, we are going to do this.” So I think that cuts out a lot of what you are talking about. Because they know that I have done my homework, and I have talked to everybody. And you are never going to get one hundred percent.
Q. Right.
A. But, again, once the decision is made, the decision is made. And you are going to do it, or you need to find another place to work. And, fortunately, it has not come to that. But there have been people that will come and say, “I don’t agree.”
Q. Right.
A. And I will ask, “Why?” And if there are points—we have to agree to disagree at some point. But there are rare times, fortunately for me, because I don’t like conflict, but there are rare times when I will have to say, “I am sorry, but this is what you have to do. I understand what you are saying. You
need to understand what I am saying. And this is what I have decided for this school, and so you are going to have to do it.”

Q. Right.
A. And, fortunately, you know, we can walk away without yelling, and respectfully agree to disagree, but this is what we are doing.

Q. Right.
A. Now, what they do when go to their room and close the door, you don’t always know, but you have a pretty good idea. But, again, if you have done that legwork and those conversations and most of that buy in before you ever make the decision, then so much of that is cut out.

Five of the principals strategically created teams at the elementary level when facing resistance from staff. Three principals explicitly noted that when staff members were resistant to the idea of implementing professional learning communities that resistant staff members were “strategically” paired with those staff members who were strong, adept and supportive of the move to professional learning communities. This strategic paring of staff members who were less enthusiastic is explained below:

Q. Have you had any situations like that, where there have been critical events when teachers of influence helped or hindered? Or when you have had to make a decision to say, like, “Well, yes, we are moving forward with this,” that has kind of shaped things here and the culture of the school in implementing PLCs?
A. I really have not. I am fortunate. I actually have a young staff. I have one older staff member that, I guess, I know there may be some undercurrent with, who doesn’t seem to be willing to change quite as easily as everyone else. But I paired two very equally as influential people with her that are younger and that are more open and excited to try new things, that have physically drug her along.
Q. I got you.
A. Because she knows she is going to get left because the other two are just really in – they are actually not really young, but they just are really excited about new research, new innovative tools, technology. And so they have done, I mean, they have done what they needed to do. They haven’t left her behind.
Q. Right.
A. And, you know, sometimes it may have taken them actually doing some of the stuff for her.
Q. Right.
A. Either way, you know, she is the one that has to present it to her class. And, over time, she has somewhat conformed because they are willing to drag her with them. It has been an easier process.
Q. So it is kind of wise as a principal to maybe strategically put your teams together? If somebody is weak in an area, to have them with stronger teachers to kind of either drag them or help them, whatever it needs to be?
A. Exactly. Exactly.

Most principals understood there would not be one hundred percent buy in to becoming a professional learning community and they would face some staff members that were resistant to the idea. Nonetheless, the guiding principle behind their decisions was their belief that implementing professional learning communities would improve outcomes for students in their schools. One noted explicitly that the concepts behind professional learning communities were hard to argue with. And, she went further to state she believed most people on most school staffs would buy into the professional learning community concept and if there were problems moving the idea forward in the school it would be a problem with how the principal led the movement in the school.

I think in schools where there were conflicts with implementation it was conflict within those staffs and that principal, is the way it was introduced and not the concept in general. Because I can’t believe any educator at any level would say that PLCs are bad.

This principal went further to clarify how they handled staff members who were not on board with the professional learning community movement.

A. I am big on, I am into presenting facts, presenting info. I don’t ask them to depend on my word alone, or to trust me. I feel like my staff does trust me. But by the same token, it is human nature that, if you don’t see it is writing, or
you don’t see the statistics, that you tend to question or judge. So with new things that we do, you know, I try to present information that supports change.

Q. Right.

A. And, you know, there may be times that I have presented both sides of it.

Q. Right.

A. You know, I present the positive and say, “Well, guys, I know there are some drawbacks to this, and this is information I have found, you know, that says the opposite. But looking at what this is that we can gain if this works.”

Q. Right.

A. And, you know, it is presenting the data, and not asking them to rely – over time, once your staff sees they can trust you, it is easier --

Q. Right, right.

A. Just talk to them. You know, if you are not jumping on every, you know, bandwagon or changing just for the sake of change. And I think, you know, sometimes we may get in the habit of seeing this, and this is great; and seeing this, and this is great; and then coming back to our schools. We have so much going on, you know. If you are going to change, you need to make sure it is change for the right reason.

Q. Right.

A. You need to make sure that once you change, that you have thought it through enough that you can steady and that you can stay with it, instead of the very next year doing something different.

Another elementary principal facing a prominent staff member who was resistant did the same thing.

A. I have had a situation where one particular person was toxic to that team. I moved that person to see how being in a new team will affect, and I am going to have that conversation with that person, “Look, this is another reason why I am moving you because these are some of the concerns I have. You need to work on this. I am putting you in a new environment where people already know that you have this.” And some – some, you can tell me if I am wrong, or should I change that? But I know of one person in that PLC she has had an argument with. But at the same time was the best for the students. You are very talented and capable in instruction, and so is this person. I expect you to move beyond that and be professional.

Q. Right.

A. But just say, “I am giving you another change with another team to have a different approach, even though there is some history with those team members.”
Q. Right. I mean, the thing that has happened in the past is a lot of times the teacher who has been there the longest or yells the loudest is the one who has been the most influential. And that does not necessarily mean the best decisions are made.
A. Um-hum.
Q. So they have to work together and come to a consensus on a decision. So that teacher you are speaking of has to understand that that is how the game is played. In the past, you may have won all the battles.
A. Um-hum, um-hum.
Q. But that is not how it works now. And that has been one of the – you know, in every school, there is going to be those teachers that have been the bedrocks to the school, and they have kept it going. And when the culture starts to change, and they no longer are the lead dog, so to speak, they, you know, they fight back. And that is just normal and natural. But they can reestablish themselves --
A. Um-hum.
Q. – If they chose to, but some don’t necessarily want to do that. But, I mean, I think that is what you have to do. If you have got a teacher that is not doing well, I would put her with two that two that do work well together, so she has to play along with them. You have to be strategic like that. So I think that is the thing to do. So. All right.

Three of the administrators noted as mentioned above that sometimes implementation of new strategies creates shifts within the school staff in terms of what staff members are seen as prominent and successful. This in itself may create tension and the necessity of adaptation. Staff members who have been seen as successful and credible for many years may face a loss of standing with the principal and the other teachers. This phenomenon must also be taken into account and understood by the principals. One principal in particular noted that upon implementing professional learning communities that new success stories began to emerge and staff members who were once seen as unsuccessful outperformed teachers who were traditionally recognized as the best teachers and this in itself created tension.

I had one teacher who if you went into my community and asked who was the worst teacher in the school, the general consensus would be Mrs. Jones was
the worst and most of the parents would try to avoid. But, when Mrs. Jones’ students began to outperform Mrs. Johnson’s and Mrs. Williams students, and Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Williams were always thought to be the “best” teachers in the school, that created some tension for me and for them. Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Williams were always thought to be the “best” and were resistant to new ideas and approaches. Mrs. Jones bought into the whole idea of professional learning communities and began to implement and practice, by the book, the concepts. Her kids began to outperform and that is when I began hearing in the community that Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Williams were not supportive of me as the principal.

(K-8 Principal)

Four principals understood the need to maintain a positive relationship with teachers who were resistant to the change effort. This idea was also echoed by another elementary principal.

It is about – and this sounds so clichéish – but it is about relationships and how you treat people. And that they can come to you and not be afraid to question you in a respectful, professional manner. You know, “I just really need to understand what you are thinking about this.” I know that I am approachable and people can come to me. Now, in the beginning, that kindness can be mistaken for weakness.

Relationships among the teachers and principal are also key if a district uses an instrument like the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions survey as part of the principal’s evaluation. Nonetheless, the administrators interviewed had a rudimentary understanding of the change process and navigating cultural change within the school building. Most were not equipped with a tangible philosophy or process whereby they would hold to navigate the change of culture. However, most principals had some instincts and insights into at least parts of the change process. Different principals were strong in different areas. Some understood relationships
were important, and felt the relationship between the principal and teacher can never lose priority over the need to move the initiative forward; others provided factual information and some knew the evaluation instruments also provided leverage.

**Did implementing professional learning communities affect your leadership style?**

The general response from most administrators was that the implementation of professional learning communities did not affect their leadership style. Most administrators, eight of the ten, indicated they were team-based leaders philosophically at the outset. Only two administrators noted they were somewhat autocratic and they had to move to a more team-based approach.

Some principals are really dictators. Some of them are looser. Did bringing in PLCs influence your leadership style any? Did you have to change or adapt the way you approach leadership because of PLCs?

A. For me, no. PLC kind of models, I guess, my philosophy of being a school principal, being a leader. Because I have always believed in, you know, I don’t want to be the only one with my head on the chopping block.

Q. Right.

A. I want to involve enough people in decisions that I make so that I know I am making the right decision. In the end, I know ultimately it is my decision. But I am going to involve enough people that I really feel like I am making the right decision. So PLCs just kind of played right into my own philosophy. I am definitely not a dictator. I can, if I have to be. For a general style, that is not my style. I want a group to help me make my decisions. Not just me. I don’t like being the only man out there.

To add to the information above, one principal noted that an autocratic leadership style indicated a lack of trust.

Q. Good. Good. Did implementing PLCs, does that change your leadership approach? And you have kind of already talked about. Like some people who may be more a dictator or something, that might not work for them? But for you, really, no?
A. No, that doesn’t work for me because when you are like that, you have to – I don’t see how – you just have to remember everything that you have dictated, you know.

Q. Right, right.

A. And stay on top of that. And you are not trusting people; and you are not helping them to be a leader because you can’t do it all by yourself. So to me, when you don’t use PLC, and you choose to dictate how people should do things, you are taking full responsibility of what happens. Even though it is a reflection of you, what happens, but you have to give people a chance to be empowered, and to be people.

(Elementary Principal)

One principal extended the notion of professional learning communities and the framework being supportive of her beginning a principalship.

As I have talked to different people, I think it has been different at different schools. That has really been for me, as a first-year and second-year principal, it has really been, I don’t know, I would say, a saving grace. But it has allowed me to implement teamwork and have the support that says, “Look, this is the training that you have received about teamwork.” You know, it just goes in line with exactly what I like to see in a school. So it has been greatly supported in terms of how to take the school to the next level.

(Elementary Principal)

Similar thoughts appeared from high school principals on being a team-based leader.

Q. Did you have to change your leadership style any at all? Or were you already kind of a team-based leader?

A. I think I have always been that way. I am sure you can find some that will tell you that it is not. But I feel like, I have always viewed myself as “in it with you” and “kind of beside you” and “we work together.” Even when I write e-mails, I don’t want to, I don’t want to sound like it is “me” or “I” in it and all that. It is “we.” I try to always make it feel like we are a team, and this is the way we approach things and all of that. We all have just jobs to do.

Q. Right.

A. And, you know, we are working together. So I think that is what you would hear from most everybody. I guess the real answers are what you would find out from them if you talked to them. But I don’t feel like I changed because of PLCs. I feel like I got some really great ideas and, you know, kind of how to put it all together. It is kind of like you have got skills,
but PLCs kind of reins all that in and says, you know, “This is the way it needs to be used,” and kind of sets you on a journey.

(High School Principal)

One principal noted that professional learning communities enhanced their leadership approach and made them move from autocratic leadership to a more team-based approach as they begin to grow as a leader.

Well, like I said a little while ago, I think I may be some of the hold-up in that our teams have not gotten as far as they -- as far as teachers showing that leadership in those meetings. I am more of a, I guess I am probably more autocratic, and I want to make sure they are talking about the right things. And I want it to be facilitated correctly. And I may have a tendency to let go of some of that because I am scared of what the results might be. But I also know that at some point you have got to take that leap. Because if you don’t ever give the teachers that leadership responsibility, you don’t know how the results are going to be. And eventually they will get to where you want them to go, but not until you let them try it.

So it hasn’t changed my style any, but it has probably made me reflect on what I need to do differently -- and that is giving them more responsibility up front. There have been a couple of times, even in the last couple of weeks, where I knew what our topic was going to be to discuss at the PLC meeting, but I have been called away to a meeting, or I was here or there, and couldn’t make the first part of the meeting. So I have still set the agendas, which is probably terrible, but I have said, “Okay, here is the agenda, Mrs. Outlaw. Will you run the meeting for me?” And, you know, she did it. You know, it was probably perfectly fine. It was probably a little differently than I would have done it. But if the results were the same, I have got to get used to it being done a different way. And that is something that I have to get used to.

(High School Principal)

**How important was trust and how do school leaders build trust to enable implementation?**

Most principals understood the necessity of trust in implementation of professional learning communities and the necessity of trust for leadership. Trust between the faculty and administration is a necessary component to successful implementation. Trust is often
referred to as a foundation or first fundamental of leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2010) note that the level of trust constituents have in their leader determines the amount of influence they will willingly accept from them. All of the principals interviewed echoed this point as a vital component to success.

A. I think it is maybe the most important thing, if not the most important thing. If they don’t trust you, then you are done. I can even tell you that -- you know how you have people that don’t know they can trust you yet? They can; they just don’t know it yet.

Q. Um-hum.

A. I hate that mode. Like I want that to end so bad, you know. Just like me, when you come to a new county and all. People will always have question marks and doubts and wonders and all that. But I hate that mode of: What are you about? You know, just kind of looking at you from the corner of the eye. And I can tell you, teachers; for the most part, I think our faculty and staff trust me and believe that I will do the right thing because of the RIFs and other things that have gone on here.

Q. Right.

A. You know, it always challenges that. You know, it will always – but I think, you know, it is the most important thing. What do you have if you can’t?

Q. That’s right.

A. I mean, you have got to be able to look somebody in the eye and tell them, “This is what we are doing” or “Give me your feedback.” But I think you have to earn it the right way. They have to feel like it is an “us” team kind of approach, and that we are working together, you know, for the right things. And I think if teachers, they will trust you when they know that you, no matter what – you can even disagree – they will trust you when they know what you are doing is right for the kid; and then after that, what is right for them.

Q. Right. Right.

A. And if you, I try to live by that. And if the teacher thinks this should happen, and I disagree, and we go a different direction, or whatever, I always make sure, “Look, I want you to know I am only doing this because I believe it is in the best interests of the kid right now for us to do blah, blah, blah.” And I think if they believe that, they are more likely to trust you. So, yes, I think it is extremely, extremely important.

(High School Principal)
Another high school principal saw trust as equally important as getting the teachers to buy into the professional learning community concept.

Q. How does trust affect implementation? The trust between the principal and the staff?
A. Well, almost as much as buy in. Because if they don’t trust the principal, they will do it. But when they do it, they will resent it, and they will resist a lot more. And I would survey the teachers here, as far as my job: How am I doing? What do I need to do differently? Trust was extremely high that first year. The second year, it plummeted quite a bit. And that second year was a lot more resistance. So I think trust is a big, a big deal with teachers.

An elementary principal succinctly summed up the importance of trust in building professional learning communities within the school by simply saying, “If you don’t have it (trust) you can’t do it.” She further explained her answer by noting that “they definitely had to trust me before I could say, ‘Look, I am holding you accountable for this.’”

Another K-8 principal had similar thoughts:

A key thing for a school leader, a superintendent, a director, is trust. How does trust affect you as a principal when you are trying to implement and move things forward?
A. As I stated, if you are someone that just makes kind of off-the-cuff changes, then, you know, when you come in and introduce something new, your staff is going to roll their eyes and say, “Guys, just hold on. This will pass over and we will move on to something new.”
Q. Right.
A. But if your staff sees that, you know, you don’t make just haphazard changes, that you truly look at the big picture of what is best, and they feel like your decisions and choices you make are truly – that they have had, you know, involvement in making decisions and making changes, you know, when you truly make a change, then they trust that it is for the right reason; that is for the students’ best interests.
Q. Right.
A. And we have to remind our staff that it is not about them; that we are here for the students. They don’t have a job if they don’t have students. And just
as long as they see that what you are doing is in the best interests of the student; that you have got their back as a teacher, but your decision is based on student need, and they see that consistently; and they don’t see changes just for the sake of change or just because you are a different person or you have a different opinion; then, you know, over time, when they see just minimal changes for important things, then trust – I mean, the trust-building is very important.
Q. Right.
A. Without their trust, I mean, nothing works.

One of the high school principals explained that the trust factor must extend even further than the principal and staff relationship, but it also must extend to among the staff in general.

Q. How important is trust? What I am talking about is, you know, they say probably the key thing for leadership is trust. That is kind of the foundation that everything needs has to be built on. So what I am talking about is, let’s say, you have a principal where they don’t trust their leader versus one they do, you know, the implementation is going to take different routes. In your experience, what would you say about trust?
A. I think it is very important. You know, that is something that I have reflected on because we did our Teacher Working Conditions Survey last year. And I don’t like the way that question is worded on the survey. It is something along the lines of: How do you view leadership at your school? And then it says: In regards to leadership in your school, is there mutual respect in your school? Well, what does that mean? Does that mean is there mutual respect between teachers? Is the re mutual respect between the administrator and the teacher? I know it says “leadership.”
Q. Right.
A. But like in our school, leadership is everybody. If you are talking about your School Improvement Team, everybody in our school is on the School Improvement Team. So what I did this year, because our results showed that there wasn’t – that was one of the areas we were a little deficient in, is mutual respect, so I couldn’t get a gauge last year on whether they meant they could trust me; I could trust them; or if they were talking about themselves. Because I know we have staff members that don’t trust each other. They can work together fine. They get along, and they get whatever work needs to be done. But some of that trust may be keeping them from being completely open in those types of meetings.
Every administrator interviewed noted the importance of trust. Only one of the administrators interviewed noted taking some type of action to increase trust.

**Suppose you had the opportunity to begin implementation again, what would you have done differently? Or, if an aspiring principal came to you and said, “I want to implement professional learning communities,” what advice would you give?**

Most principals indicated they would have done some things differently if they had to begin the implementation process again. For the most part, principals indicated only small things they would have altered if they had to begin implementation again. The thing all principals suggested was to have a facilitator or trainer to come to the school and work with teachers to aid implementation.

Q. Right. Suppose you had the opportunity to come back and start all over, what would you do differently?
A. I think I would get, like I said, I would probably try and see if we had staff development money. You know, the first year I was here, I actually had money and didn’t know what to do with it.
Q. Right.
A. With a little more experience, I would have taken some of that money and gotten someone here, even if I had to split it with other principals. I would try and get a little more personalized instruction from someone like Ken Williams. I think that would be my first step. I would have found the money somehow to get one of them here for us. I think that would be the biggest thing I would do differently.

Two of the elementary principals also expressed similar thoughts and the need to work in a smaller setting than a district wide group. Although they were satisfied the district brought in appropriate facilitators and training, more personal school level training may have enhanced their efforts.
Q. If we had to do it all over again, what do you think we should do differently?
A. I don’t know because, like you said, in the beginning you did bring those people in, and you did have those deadlines; and then you kind of entrusted us to run with it. You know, the only thing possibly would be to do it in smaller groups, like by school. But then that is a lot more money and lot more time, so that probably would not be feasible. So that way, if it was just one school – you know, you couldn’t really ask and answer a lot of questions in that great big setting.
Q. I got you.
A. It was just a sit-and-get.
Q. Right.
A. Which you need to get the framework. But then maybe a follow-up with

Q. Somebody coming to your school?
A. With our school, with just our staff.

Principals were asked if an aspiring young principal came to them and wanted to implement professional learning communities, what advice they would give them. The overwhelming responses from principals were to 1.) Build consensus among the staff prior to implementation, 2.) make sure teachers have a conceptual understanding of what professional learning communities are, 3.) move forward slowly with implementation and 4.) do not pretend to have all the answers and bring in outside facilitation if necessary and ample staff development. All principals also emphasized that teachers must share in the responsibility for implementation and building trust and consensus is key to implementing professional learning communities. The following excerpts with principals highlight these thoughts.

Q. Okay. Got you. A young principal comes to you and says, “I want to implement PLCs.” What advice would you give him or her?
A. For them to understand it; not to pretend to have all the answers, because you don’t; and that is okay.
Q. Right.
A. And just to be able to say, “Well, I am not sure. Let’s talk about it. You know, what do you think?” Do your homework, but still understand that you are not going to have all of the answers. How you present it to your staff is going to make or break anything you try to implement. They will feed off of your energy. They can tell if you are just doing it because you have to, or if it is something you really believe in.

Q. Right.
A. And to put the power in the teachers’ hands. And you have to – like you said, some people can’t let go of that. But you have to.

(Elementary Principal)

Another K-8 principal felt scaffolding from practices and protocols already in place was key as well as moving slowly with implementation.

Q. A young principal comes to you and says, “I want to implement PLCs.” What advice would you give him or her?
A. I would give them, I mean, the advice that I stated earlier is: Okay, I would ask him to go to their team meetings, look at the items they are discussing, look at the information that they are already – because now I am going to tell him, “If you go in and say, ‘Look, we are doing PLCs,’” that they are not going to think this is what we are already doing. They are going to think this is something new. And so I would give him the advice, “You don’t need to introduce this as some new thing because fads come and go --

Q. Right.
A. In every county. They jump on bandwagons, and they ride one for a little while, and then get off. I feel when you look at – I am looking at things that we are doing in my school that teachers did when I was a student, that we are calling it something entirely different.

Q. Right.
A. And so before you throw a name out there, you know, I would ask that new principal, “Okay, you really need to make sure that you are in on the ground level meetings. You need to look at what they are doing, what items. And you need to visit more than one time. And you need to make a list of what they are already doing before you throw this out there. And then you make a comparison and show them the benefits of just tweaking what they are doing a little bit.

Q. Right.
A. And then, you know, I would go into the process from that. But just as far as introducing it, they really need to know what is happening in their building before they need to throw a name out there. Because when they
throw that name out there, a teacher’s plate is full. And they are going to dig their heels in, and they are going to go kicking and screaming.

Q. Right. So really when, like a young principal, when they want to bring about change, they need to understand that it is a slow process. You do it a little bit at a time, and you don’t overwhelm your staff. You have to kind of have --

A. Ease them into it. You need to do it in increments.

Q. Right.

A. It is not going to happen in a year. It may not happen in two years or three years. But you really need to get a feel for what is already happening, and then mold what is happening into what you need to happen. And you need to make sure that you have data ready. You need to make sure that they have information. Once you start throwing them the data, you might even start out – because you may walk into a school where the principal hasn’t done that. I mean, along with introducing, I would hand them their kids’ data, and just see what they do with it.

Q. Right, right.

A. And then just tweak it from there, just a little bit at a time.

(K-8 Principal)

Other responses from principals were in the same vein. A high school principal indicated that if you are new to a school as the principal, he would suggest waiting a year to begin implementation until you had a full understanding of what was occurring at the school. All principals were relatively similar in moving slowly to begin with.

Q. A young principal comes to you and says, “I want to implement PLCs at my school,” what advice would you give them?

A. That is a loaded question. I would say, “Start small. Do your research. You know, talk to people that have PLCs in their school. Maybe, if they can take baby steps, maybe go in and observe a PLC meeting, a grade level meeting that is taking place. Look online. Find as much as, you know – if there are webinars, if there are videos or something you can watch, like some of the things that you shared with us. Learn as much as you can about it first before implementing. Because if you start implementing, and like the Learning by Doing, you know – you gave us that. If you start implementing and you miss something, it is going to be hard to go back and rework it and fix it. So I would definitely say for them to take their time and just, first of all, help people – after you do that, help people see the importance of it and what it can do for the school. And then just take steps in deciding what is essential.
Another high school principal who has professional learning communities working well in his school offers the following advice.

Q. All right, you are a beginning principal, or you know of any principal, and he says, “I want to go implement the PLCs in my school.” What advice would you give him?
A. I would give him the book you gave us, the Learning by Doing. And I think it was – which guy was it that stood up and said, you know, that first year he pretty much had his book with him at all times?
Q. Ken Williams.
A. Ken Williams. He said he learned with them. I think principals have to expose themselves as learners and be willing to learn with the teachers and admit that you don’t know it all. And if you can develop that respect and mutual trust, then I think you are going to be much more successful than just saying, “Oh, we are doing PLCs; go run with it.” It is a learning process, and it is probably at least a two-year process before you feel like your teams are established and you can actually do some work that is effective. So I would get that book and go at it.

Although principals made slightly different suggestions, for the most part their ideas were similar. Begin slowly, build consensus, and learn together.

The biggest questions of all: How might the district have done things to better support implementation of professional learning communities?

As a school district, the particular LEA chose to move forward on a district wide basis to implement professional learning communities. The researcher was interested in how they may have better supported implementation within the district. The purpose of this question was to gain feedback that may better support other districts as they may choose to implement and focus on developing professional learning communities.

Recommendations from principals centered around three main themes: a vision of the future, focus and priority, and continuous support. The most pronounced of these
recommendations for future districts considering implementation of professional learning communities is to consider how much support for the effort to implement professional learning communities from all levels of the organization they can provide. The central office, the Superintendent, principals and teachers will have to make developing professional learning communities a priority for them to actually develop. This will mean allocating considerable resources such as time, staff development funds and effort. Of the principals interviewed, many indicated that approximately twenty percent of their time was devoted to professional learning communities as the school year begins.

To do it effectively, and I can tell you, it is, you know you have got, like you said, things that pull you away, but I think to do it effectively you would need to devote, I would say, a good three, four, or five hours a week in it. You know, we set up our schedule of meetings. You know, it is expected that each grade level has a PLC meeting a week. You know, that is there common time that they all meet together. That is their PLC meeting. Then, you know, twice a month we have the Leadership Team, which is, you know, the School Improvement Team is a PLC. And then we have got it built in once a month, but sometimes with things coming up, it has gone to once every other month, is that Vertical PLC. What I have seen that has made the most difference is that Vertical PLC in the school because that is where everybody gets to plan and understand things that are going on across grade levels. And it takes time to get the things prepared for that meeting. If you go in there and, you know – that is why we decided that the Leadership Team would help drive the discussions in that Vertical PLC.

(Elementary Principal)

Although all principals noted the percentage of the work week devoted to professional learning communities declines somewhat as the school year moves forward and the professional learning community teams begin to operate on their own, all principals indicated they could have and should have spent more time than they did on professional learning communities than they have. Based on the responses from all the principals, the
implementation of professional learning communities reallocates how administrators spend their time. It must be noted that principals face competing demands for their time. Professional learning communities take some portion of that time and cannot be lost in the shuffle if true learning communities are to emerge. Principals seeking to implement professional learning communities, from the experience of this researcher, must make it a priority to develop it in their buildings and must have the understanding and support of the Superintendent and central office if learning communities are to occur.

Most of the administrators in the district the researcher was involved with agreed that their particular district had done reasonable job of painting a picture or creating a vision of what professional learning communities would look like in the district. However, a few of the administrators expressed concern that there was not enough congruence.

Q. Okay. All right. Well, the next question was: Do you think we have a congruent picture within the District of what PLCs look like? And you have kind of already --
A. I don’t think so. I do and I don’t. I mean, we all had the same training. We all know the purpose and the procedures and all. But we all have our own different ways of doing it. You know, it is – what I have done this year might work at another school. Another school might not have any problems letting the teachers run with it. This year, my teachers didn’t run with it. So next year, there is going to be support there, more structure and support. So we are not all doing it the same way necessarily, but we all have the purpose and the process, I think, as an understanding. So that congruence – we are not all on the same page, but we all are going in the same direction, I think.
Q. But we probably need to work on the congruent picture with everybody have an understanding how –
A. Yeah, the understanding, you need to make sure everybody has that understanding in the process. And that is what I think those little – if the Central Office says, “By this time and this time, you need to have this done,” as a checkpoint; I think that would provide that congruence there. But, again, not everybody is going to do it the same way.
Q. Right.
A. And I don’t think they should. I don’t think they should because every school is different.
Q. Right.
A. But I do think – and, you know, really that is where – you know, I said earlier that we really don’t need to put something in every principal’s meeting. But every now and then, it wouldn’t be a bad idea. Especially, like just the high school principals when we meet, for us to have as a discussion, “How are PLCs going right now? What obstacles are you facing?” These questions that you are asking right now would be great leading questions in a high school principals – and I say “high school” because what we are facing is completely different than the elementary and the middle school.

(High School Principal)

Most of the principals expressed that timelines and deadlines by the district to have teams formed, to determine team norms, determine essential learnings, and to have those teams review data and give common assessments were helpful. In addition expressed the need to have these items discussed and touched upon in principal’s meetings was effective. During the first two years, these were addressed on a regular basis in principal’s meetings, over the last year, with a new superintendent, principal’s meetings were changed and principals no longer had information session built into principal’s meetings. Most expressed a need for this to be re-established for the upcoming school year to better support professional learning communities.

Q. The District, you know, had a plan as far as implementing PLCs, in that we first educated the principals about what they were. We brought someone in to kind of talk with them about PLCs. And then we brought speakers in to do training with all our staff. And we established timelines. Looking back on that, if we had to do something differently, what would you recommend that we could do differently to improve? For example, if another District were to be going to do this, what advice would you give them based on the experiences we have had? I will give you an example of something that has come up in a couple of interviews; is some of them have said that, “My plate is so full as a principal that if I had had someone come in and work with me to help facilitate this or to lead some of it, I could have gotten more done faster.”
Because principals have such a wide span of things that they have to work with, that is hard for them to say, “Well, I am going to focus on PLCs.”

A. Right, right, right, right. But at the same time, though, we are one of the busiest people that you will meet, but it is all setting priorities.

Q. Right.
A. And letting go. It is hard for us as administrators, and people in general, to let go of things.

Q. Right.
A. Some things that need to be – that are valuable, we need to hold on to them. I am not saying we can let any stuff go, as far as principals. I try not to let anything go, at all. It is hard for me to let go. But we have got to find balance within the principal’s office first. Allow our – you know, go from here and find balance in the school.

Q. Right.
A. But, you know, it would be nice, it would be helpful to have someone come in. But a lot of times when you have someone come in, after that point, it stops. I am saying: The instructional leader of the school is the principal. The PLC process movement, thought, thinking…

Q. It is about teaching and learning?
A. Teaching and learning. And it is important. We need to jump onboard with it. We need to be the ones driving the bus.

Q. Right.
A. It needs to be on the bus. And so it is up to the principals to put it on the bus and monitor. Inspect what they expect.

Q. Right. The principal can’t just delegate it out, and say, “Here is this facilitator that is going to do this.” They have got to buy in and keep driving the bus?
A. Right, got to buy in. And so, yes. Outside people coming in, you know, sort of coaching on the side, yes. But the principal needs to be right there, hands on.

Q. Right.
A. And able to step in and say, “Okay, all right, we have heard from this expert.” And as we move forward --

(Elementary Principal)

This principal denotes that principals need support in moving professional learning communities forward, but they as the instructional leader cannot be displaced as the instructional leader. Principals must have a commitment to the implementation, an
understanding of it conceptually and exercise the effort required to insure the concept moves forward. Principals need support to lead the change effort in their schools but they do not need the effort to be led for them.

An overwhelming recommendation from the principals was for the district to limit the number of initiatives it moves forward. Most expressed frustration if the number of items got beyond two to three main concepts or ideas. The translation was that the district should prioritize and limit the initiatives to two to three. This is noted in the conversation below:

I would say is something that I think we have done a fairly good job of in the county; is not jumping on every new bandwagon that comes along. But in the last three years, we have focused on Professional Learning Communities, Revised Blooms Taxonomy. It is like we have picked some priorities and stuck with those. So I think that that has made it easier. So just don’t go adding a whole bunch more stuff until we are really, really proficient at what we are already doing.

Q.   Right.
A.   Because I have seen that happen in years past and in other counties. There is just always something new and quote-unquote better, but how do you know if you haven’t given what you are doing enough time to manifest its own benefits?
Q.   Right.
A.   And I think we have done that as a county for the last three years, narrowing our focus to the things that are most important.
(Elementary Principal)

A high school principal expressed similar concerns and the need to limit and prioritize initiatives:

I will say, too, there is a point that it becomes an overload, implementing too many new things and all. That was another issue. To me, as a new principal, it seemed like so many new things were coming at, not just me, but at the teachers: Core standards, ACRE, that is just to name a couple of things. But
there were so many new things that were coming at them; that you just add
PLCs on top it. So we don’t have enough time to focus on mastering – I
mean, it mirrors exactly what we do to our students. You know, in third
grade, I remember learning my multiplication tables over and over and over
and over and over and over. And I didn’t get to negative numbers until eighth
grade or graphing. They are doing so much of that in the early grades now
that it is, it is quantity over quality. They don’t master anything.
Q. Right.
A. So that is the same thing we are doing to the teachers here. We are
throwing so much at them. So I think that the Central Office plays a critical
role in trying to monitor what is coming out. You can’t always help
everything; but there is such an overload.
Q. Find two or three big rocks and stick with them, and quit -- when other
things come, you have got to just say --
A. You have got to know when to say “when.”
Q. Right.
A. You know, there is just – the teachers get overwhelmed; I get
overwhelmed; and nothing gets done. You sit there spinning wheels. You
ain’t going nowhere. You are putting forth a lot of effort, but you are just not
accomplishing it. So if we could have focused on PLCs solely and got that
right where it needed to be before we went on to the next project, that would
be very beneficial. I think that is a big key thing that Central Office could
have impact on.

A prominent recommendation from principals was the need for continuous training to
orient new teachers and principals. Each school and each district faces turnover to some
degree. New teachers enter a school without the background knowledge experienced
teachers have. New principals take the helm of schools and do not have the prior knowledge,
experience and training other principals have had. Because of this, every principal
interviewed noted the need for some type of training mechanism for new principals and
teachers.

A. You know, whenever there is a new principal, I think there needs to be
something in place to train them. You know, I guess, find out to begin with if
they have had any training in PLCs, what training they have had. Like I said,
I had some with Dave Benson, but not to the extent that we had here. I think in any situation, if you are wanting everybody to move in the same direction, they need to hear the same information and get the same expectations and know, you know, this is where it should be in your school; this is how long we have been doing it; these are some of the things that you should be seeing. You know, you were a principal at different schools. You know every time you go to a different school, you have got a different culture. And you have got to see where you are at. But if there were something there that that principal would have as a guide in some training in what is expected in that area, you won’t lose ground.

Q. What about the teachers? Can the team members take care of them? Or do we need to maybe have a once-a-year workshop with them?

A. I think you need to at least have a refresher for whoever your Team Leader is in each of those grade levels because, again, if a principal comes in new, if somebody doesn’t like something – I remember the first time I was a principal, within the first two or three days I was at that school, I had more visits from teachers and parents because if they – and I think for the most part it was very genuine – but they were also wanting to lay groundwork for something that they wanted.

Q. Right?

A. You don’t want the train derailed before it leaves the station.

(Elementary Principal)

Another of the middle school principals noted the need for this due to the turnover in his staff.

A. Well, like at my school, about one-third of my staff, they are beginning teachers. Hopefully that number is going to get lower as we go along. But about one-third of my staff is beginning teachers. I want them to have the same opportunity to get first-hand knowledge of someone that really knows PLCs. I can do the best I can to share it with them, but I think they need to hear at some type of workshop or staff development about what PLC is. And for the leaders at my school, they are doing a good job. But I still think that every now and then they need to hear a staff development or something about PLCs just to keep them motivated as well.

Q. Okay.

A. New teachers come in and they are excited about everything. But something as serious as this, I don’t want them to get – and I will use the word lacksidosical, and just kind of let it fall by the wayside, and say, “Well, it is just a meeting that we are going to.” But I want them to see the importance of
that. And just keep that in their minds that this is something very important for you to keep going.

Additionally, principals expressed the need for principal’s meetings to at least devote some time to the initiative to support the development of professional learning communities or at least provide time for principals of schools with the same grade levels to meet to discuss the development of professional learning communities. A high school principal notes this point:

Q. Do you think we have a congruent picture within the District of what PLCs look like? And you have kind of already --
A. I don’t think so. I do and I don’t. I mean, we all had the same training. We all know the purpose and the procedures and all. But we all have our own different ways of doing it. You know, it is – what I have done this year might work at another school. Another school might not have any problems letting the teachers run with it. This year, my teachers didn’t run with it. So next year, there is going to be support there, more structure and support. So we are not all doing it the same way necessarily, but we all have the purpose and the process, I think, as an understanding. So that congruence – we are not all on the same page, but we all are going in the same direction, I think.
Q. But we probably need to work on the congruent picture with everybody have an understanding how --
A. Yeah, the understanding, you need to make sure everybody has that understanding in the process. And that is what I think those little – if the Central Office says, “By this time and this time, you need to have this done,” as a checkpoint; I think that would provide that congruence there. But, again, not everybody is going to do it the same way.
Q. Right.
A. And I don’t think they should. I don’t think they should because every school is different.
Q. Right.
A. But I do think – and, you know, really that is where – you know, I said earlier that we really don’t need to put something in every principal’s meeting. But every now and then, maybe in every other principal’s meeting it wouldn’t be a bad idea. Especially, like just the high school principals when we meet, for us to have as a discussion, “How are PLCs going right now? What obstacles are you facing?” These questions that you are asking right now would be great leading questions in a high school principals – and I say “high
school” because what we are facing is completely different than the elementary and the middle school.
Q. Right.
A. We are going to face similar obstacles. They are going to have other obstacles themselves. But, like I said, I think it works well in all; but it is a lot easier there than it is in the high school, I think.
Q. Then if the high school people were together, they would be facing similar problems in how to get your essential learnings or your --
A. And Mr. ______ might have a solution. “Yeah, we hit that, and this is what I did.”
Q. Right.
A. And so basically the result: We are having a PLC meeting of the high school principals, looking at what is working, what is not working, what are you doing, that collaboration time among principals would be very important. So I think that is important, you know. If we do what we ask them to do it would help us too.

Three of the principals expressed the desire for central office staff to attend the professional learning community meetings in the school buildings with teachers. In fact, the elementary director in the district did so and noted that he felt he had a better understanding and connection with the teachers he was supposed to help assist as the elementary director.

Finally, most of the administrators felt the roll out and implementation efforts of the district were in general very effective. However, maintenance of the initiative and development of the professional learning communities require continual commitment. The most experienced of the administrators in the district perhaps gives the best insight to what the future must hold if the professional learning community development is to continue.

I could say that of all the things that we have experienced as a system, I think that this particular, the PLC Model, was rolled out more effectively than anything else I have experienced. And I think that is because everybody received basically the same training on it, and there was support along the way, and there was follow-up. I think if there was anything that could improve it, is what you have already said; and this is, as we need to, -- if you
wait too long to get people retrained or refreshed on things, it takes a backseat. So by having that reminder or that refresher or somebody come in and do a little bit of extra training in it, I think that it is something that you are bringing it back to their minds of, you know, like Total Instructional Alignment. When everybody came back, they were excited. You know, we did a little follow-up with it. But every now and then you may hear Lisa Carter’s name. But I still hear the conversations among the teachers of moving students from where, you know, looking at where they are when you get them to where they are at the end of the year. So, I mean, there are pieces of it that you keep hearing.

Q. And the Revised Blooms Points is still going to be from Lisa Carter. If nothing else, we understand that part of it?

A. That is right. That is right. And I think there is still some need with the Revised Blooms. I know we did – I took several of my teachers over for the training, one from each grade level. They came back and did some training. But I think sometimes those that didn’t receive that one-on-one would need it as well.

Q. There has been in the principal’s meetings when we were first implementing it, you know, we would spend some time talking about PLCs and what the next steps were. For this year, we have not done that. Do we need to build back in the principal’s meetings some time to do that?

A. I think so.

Q. Okay. And kind of lay out, explain exactly what the points are and how you implement it?

A. That’s right. Because in a lot of the comments I have made on my teachers’ Summary Rating Sheets, you know, the things that they have to look at for next year, I am seeing a lot of the things that they, in order for them to reach Distinguished in some of those areas, I am having to put down active participation in Professional Learning Communities because that is where they are going to affect those changes.

Q. How much time -- you know, as an administrator you are pulled in a lot of directions. If you are going to run PLCs at your school, how much time do you have to spend on making sure you have got meeting times and you’re following up? How long does that -- how much time would that take you a week, on average, to do that?

A. To do it effectively, and I can tell you, it is, you know you have got, like you said, things that pull you away, but I think to do it effectively you would need to devote, I would say, a good three, four, or five hours a week in it. You know, we set up our schedule of meetings. You know, it is expected that each grade level has a PLC meeting a week. You know, that is there common time that they all meet together. That is their PLC meeting. Then, you know, twice a month we have the Leadership Team, which is, you know, the School Improvement Team is a PLC. And then we have got it built in once a month, but sometimes with things coming up, it has gone to once every other month,
is that Vertical PLC. What I have seen that has made the most difference is that Vertical PLC in the school because that is where everybody gets to plan and understand things that are going on across grade levels. And it takes time to get the things prepared for that meeting. If you go in there and, you know – that is why we decided that the Leadership Team would help drive the discussions in that Vertical PLC.

Q. That was another thing I was going to ask you. You know, when we listened to Anthony Mohammed and them, they would say that as a principal you have got to back off and let them run the meetings. But there is a fine line. If you don’t give them some direction, then it is not going to work?

Although the initial steps were effective to implement professional learning communities, there is a maintenance phase to the effort to implement professional learning communities. And, if professional learning communities are to be effective, the conversations in the building must be changed. This can only occur if the district continues to maintain the development of professional learning communities with continued staff development, support and priority from the central office, and a continued commitment to devote time to professional learning communities. It almost seems apparent that a district would incorporate a three to five year plan to continue to develop professional learning communities. From this researcher’s experiences, professional learning communities must evolve. This evolution takes time and cannot be forced and the culture itself must be forged and not forced. Teachers begin to work within a particular grade level, but as they develop the conversations become vertical as well as horizontal conversations where grade levels are communicating with those above and below them. All of this takes time, effort and resources to maintain. And, it takes time to evolve. The cultural shift we sought through professional learning communities must change the conversations in the building, but these changes take
time, development personally and as an organization is required and progress and productivity are often hard to quantify.

DIRECTLY ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The three research questions in this research endeavor were:

1. What are principal’s conceptions of, or definitions of professional learning communities?
2. What are principal’s perceptions of a school’s culture that hinder or enhance the implementation of professional learning communities, and how can they be better equipped to address these perceived challenges?
3. How do professional learning communities being part of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Instrument, the North Carolina Principal Evaluation Instrument, and Standards for North Carolina Superintendents affect implementation efforts?

Principal’s conceptualizations of what learning communities are, how they function and their role in improving instruction and building time into the school day to focus on instruction for the teachers was apparent with all administrators. Although different administrators had different levels of understanding and there was some variance of understanding of the different components, the general premises behind professional learning communities and their role in the school building was well understood by all principals that were interviewed. Principals involved in this research effort seemed to understand PLCs are a great tool for change even if they have been legislated by the State Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction. All principals interviewed understood PLCs to be an effective tool for positive change. This could be due to the district’s consistent staff
development for all administrators early in the race or could be simply that the concepts are graspable by most principals. Perhaps some of both were at play. Nonetheless, the district’s principals had a general conceptual understanding of the professional learning communities, the components of professional learning communities, the potential of resistance in navigating change and how to begin to move forward to put professional learning communities in place at their schools.

All principals noted certain aspects of their school’s culture hindered implementation. Some noted some teachers were reticent to come on board with the movement to professional learning communities but principals interviewed stated in general, things went reasonably well with teachers in implementing professional learning communities. Further studies could illuminate teacher’s navigation of the change in culture. It should be noted this district is relatively young in implementing the initiative and more resistance or adaptive challenges may surface in the future. It should also be noted that the district’s results on North Carolina’s Teacher Working Conditions Survey showed measureable improvements in the area of leadership during implementation. Although there were variances among schools, the collective score in the area of leadership rose with respect to the staff having a shared vision, teachers being supported by leadership, teachers being held to high standards for delivering instruction. Noticeable improvements were also in the percentages corresponding to new teacher support, the use of time at the school and facilities and resources. Most notable was a 27% percentage point increase on the Teacher Working Conditions Survey in teachers being trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.
All principals noted that inclusion of professional learning communities in the North Carolina Teacher, Principal and Superintendent Evaluation Instruments were positive influences to aid in implementation of professional learning communities. The fact that implementation coincided with inclusion in the principal, teacher and superintendent evaluation instruments gave credence to the decision to implement professional learning communities. Nonetheless, no principal expressed that resistance to the implementation effort had come to the point of using the evaluation as leverage to change teacher behaviors and use it as a tool for resistant teachers. Although DuFour, Dr. Anthony Muhammad and Ken Williams have spoken about resistance being handled by removing teachers from the school who did not “get with the program” this district was not at this point to date. This could be due to the district being early in the implementation efforts or it could be due to the principals in the district choosing a non-aggressive approach and implementation schedule. All principals except one chose to let professional learning communities emerge and saw the emergence as a three to five year process. Only one noted they felt as if they were in a critical situation and urgent situation and moved aggressively forward with implementation. Further study in this area is needed, especially with professional learning communities being in the North Carolina Teacher, Principal and Superintendent evaluations. Measuring or quantifying the level of teachers, principals and superintendents commitments to professional learning communities and the degree to which they are implemented in their schools or districts will be difficult.
Chapter Six

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At its essence, implementing professional learning communities involves changing the culture of a school and of a community. Generally, people will not authorize someone to make them face what they do not want to face. Schools that do not wish to undergo cultural change will resist if forced from administration. Linsky and Heifetz note that in general, “People hire someone to provide protection and ensure stability, someone with solutions that require a minimum of disruption” (Linsky and Heifetz, 2002, p.20). Changing school cultures is adaptive work. And, adaptive work creates risk, conflict, and instability because addressing the issues underlying adaptive problems may involve upending deep and entrenched norms thus, leadership to change culture will require disturbing people. This must be done at a rate they can absorb. DuFour (2008) notes that implementing PLCs will involve change and confrontation.

For change to occur, there will have to be conflict. Yet, conflict is dangerous. In fact, there’s a proportionate relationship between risk and adaptive change: The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and thus, the greater the danger to those who lead (Linsky and Heifetz, 2002, p. 14).

BIG IDEAS FROM PRINCIPALS INVOLVED IN IMPLEMENTATION

This district’s implementation indicates minimal resistance after one year in moving toward professional communities. Responses from participants were analyzed in terms of
experience, grade level, race and gender but participants agreed in general on the ideas noted below regardless of race, gender, experience or school level. The ideas noted appeared to be universal despite grade level, experience, gender or other demographic factors. Although different grade levels may have distinct problems with implementation, little was made of the differences with the principals interviewed. A few big ideas have emerged from the interviews with building level administrators who moved forward with implementation in their buildings.

The first idea that emerges from the interview data was that principals in this district advise school administrators to go slowly and build consensus. All the principals interviewed seemed to understand that change was a three to five year process. All faced some form of push back or resistance but all seemed to understand that push back was part of the change process. All of the principals interviewed seemed to understand that building trust and consensus was vitally important. Resistance must be dealt with respectfully, professionally and the relationship must be maintained. The move to become a professional learning community can never override the necessity of the relationships among teachers and the principal in the school building seemed to be the emerging theme with these administrators. This slow, step by step movement is congruent with Sallis’ (1993) findings for TQM approaches in education via TQE.

The second big idea for future districts to note is that it will take a tremendous amount of time, support, focus, prioritizing and planning to successfully implement professional learning communities. Resources include funding, staff development and
developing and creating new knowledge. Phases of implementation need to be developed. This district took some positive steps initially, however a plan to maintain and further develop PLCs must be created and part of the strategic plan and focus if it is to continue and professional learning communities will continue to grow.

Principals face competing demands for time. Professional learning communities take time and cannot be lost in the shuffle if true learning communities are to emerge. The district and the principals must make it a priority to develop it in their buildings. This will mean allocating resources such as time, staff development funds and effort. And, the amount of effort will be considerable. Of the principals interviewed, most indicated that approximately twenty percent of their time was devoted to professional learning communities as the school year begins. This declined as the school year progressed, but most indicated that several hours per week were devoted to professional learning communities.

This will require administrators in implementing districts to reallocate how they spend their time, and something they have been doing will most likely have to be let go. In addition, the district must develop practices to support the development of professional learning communities and principals must create time for teachers to meet. It will also mean the implementing district will need to establish guidelines, timelines and expectations that are common for all schools in the district. Of all principals interviewed, only one did not like expectations and timelines from the district level. This will mean district level personnel must understand the initiative and its conceptual framework but allow flexibility for all schools in the district to adapt to and meet those expectations, timelines and produce the
products that are generated when professional learning communities are functioning.

The purpose for the expectations is for improved results for students. “In leadership, as with curriculum, less is more. Effective leaders,” writes Jim Collins in Good to Great, “—see what is essential and ignore the rest” (2001, p. 91). Collins, although not an educational researcher is a prominent business consultant, who urges us to “—focus on what is vital—and to eliminate all of the extraneous distractions . . . stop doing the senseless things that consume so much time and energy” (2001, p. 104). The same is true with professional learning communities. Districts must eliminate the clutter that sometimes takes the focus off of teaching and learning and make it a priority for teacher’s time to participate in professional learning communities if they are to emerge.

The third big idea garnered from the research was that it is necessary for principals to develop a change strategy and plan. It would be wise for principals to understand the difference of technical and adaptive challenges so as not to become the target of resistors.

Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people's habits, beliefs, and values. It asks them to take a loss, experience uncertainty, and even express disloyalty to people and cultures. Because adaptive change forces people to question and perhaps redefine aspects of their identity, it also challenges their sense of competence. Loss, disloyalty, and feeling incompetent: That's a lot to ask. No wonder people resist. (Linsky and Heifetz, 2002, p. 30)

This change must occur at the rate the organization can absorb it and the principal is the thermostat who must gauge the temperature and the rate the school can move forward. Principals must balance tight/loose leadership and understand what they must be tight about
and what they can be loose about. Few principals will have a change strategy or philosophy and few will understand “tight/loose leadership” that DuFour advocates for with professional learning communities. This change strategy or philosophy should be emphasized, explained and part of the planning and training by the district to building level principals because few principals will have a change strategy or philosophy.

Administrators interviewed had a rudimentary understanding of the change process and navigating cultural change within the school building. Most were not equipped with a tangible philosophy or process whereby they would hold to navigate the change of culture. However, most principals had some instincts and insights into at least parts of the change process. Different principals were strong in different areas. But a complete outlook and strategy as well as understanding of cultural change was lacking.

Professional learning communities look different in different places is the fourth big idea. Although there can be common components and actions taking place in different schools in the district, because of the difference in schools, difference in conceptual understandings, and difference in staffs, professional learning communities and their operation will be somewhat different in each school. One analogy to understand implementation is the swing analogy. You could imagine as a district that everyone is on one big swing and you are trying to get everyone in the district to lean forward and back in unison to move the swing forward. However, timing and coordinating this collective movement is awfully difficult. The variance in staffs, schools and leadership makes this almost an unwise idea. A better approach and analogy is to see each school having a separate
swing, and they are equipped with the conceptual understanding, staff development and resources. Each school will then be attempting to move in unison to swing their own swing based on the talent resources and conceptual understandings they have in the building. They are attempting to move with their own staff, resources and talent. Each school’s swing will be moving at different rates, rhythms, and heights based on the culture in place, the leadership at the school and capacity of the staff. This means central office staff must understand that within a district different schools will be swinging at different heights, rhythms and the central office must understand that the difference is acceptable and provide support where needed.

Big idea five is that data is key to success. Professional learning community teams must use data to measure their results. Most principals indicated that student performance data drove the discussions in the beginning. Whether those discussions were about moving to professional learning communities from the principal to the staff or about student learning in professional learning community meetings, school performance data and individual student performance data was the means to determine success. The professional learning community process allows for teachers to discuss formative data, school performance data and common formative assessment data and create SMART goals as a team, all of which must be measurable. Most of the principals indicated this was of great value to their schools. However, most principals also indicated that teachers need more training in how to use assessment data and school performance data and a process by which teachers could evaluate data.
Big idea six would be learning is required. Teachers will have to learn how to work collaboratively and grow into sharing personal practice. Working collaboratively is not a skill developed in teacher education programs nor is it the nature of traditional work of a teacher. Teaching is a somewhat isolated endeavor (Lortie, 1975). Sharing personal practice with others requires trust and trust does not develop overnight. Developing trust requires professional exposure and develops over time. Districts will have to provide staff development and training for teachers on how to work together collaboratively and how to make decisions as a group. They will also have to allow time for trust to develop.

Moreover, districts must also consider the concept of priority and focus. Too many initiatives and change efforts at one time can overwhelm teachers. As the number of initiatives migrate down the organizational chain, the “to do” list increases more for those at the lower part of the organizational ladder than at the top. Although implementing professional learning communities may require a small degree of work for central office staff, the workload increases greatly for teachers and principals. The greater the number of initiatives, the greater that likelihood that nothing gets done. Peter Drucker (1990) admonishes us to recognize that “the easiest and the greatest increases in productivity in knowledge work come from redefining the task and especially from eliminating what need not be done” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 151). Professional learning communities must be a strategic priority if districts are to successfully implement them.

Big idea seven would be implementing professional learning communities is hard work. It is not complex work, but it is at times difficult. We are asking people to learn new
skills, new behaviors and new ways of being. That makes implementing and operating as a professional learning community difficult work. Peter Drucker (1990) stated, “No institution can survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organized to get along under a leadership of average human beings.” Implementing professional learning communities is hard work but it is work that the average school and school administrator can tackle. Of all the administrators interviewed, all indicated they understood the endeavor and the components and what to do to successfully implement professional learning communities. It appears implementation is a doable endeavor. The initiative is not so technically challenging or difficult that districts should fear the endeavor or their capacity to successfully implement professional learning communities. Nor should it become so complicated or so complex that average, everyday educators cannot implement and function.

While the parts of professional learning communities and the concepts behind professional learning communities are relatively simple, the work is hard. Because the work is hard, pseudo-PLCs often emerge and few schools and school districts seriously attempt implementation. Implementing districts will need a great degree of sustained focus and commit to seeing it through. Yet, they must understand that just because the components are simple and the work may appear simple, true implementation that indeed changes culture is hard to do. The ultimate goal is to change the conversations in the building and build conversations among teachers about teaching and learning. These represent changes in traditional school culture. One way to note the change is to note if these professional conversations are occurring.
OTHER CONCLUSIONS FROM THE RESEARCH EFFORT

The major conclusions were noted above. However, based upon this research effort smaller themes could be drawn from interviews with this particular district’s principals. One thing that was evident is that principals are exceptionally busy. Because of this, most principals will have very little time to do outside research and study on professional learning communities. The importance of local staff development efforts must be understood. The majority of knowledge and conceptual understanding will be generated from these local professional development efforts. For that reason, quality staff development should be the focus, not the cost. Poor staff development can hurt implementation as was noted by two of the principals in this study. Quality staff development will go a long way to building a common conceptual understanding of what a professional learning community is within the district and give administrators and the central office the tools and knowledge needed to move the initiative forward.

It is through these local trainings that administrators and staff have the opportunity to learn and study about professional learning communities. They gain information from attending staff development sessions and are able to ask questions and discuss the ideas and concepts. Professional development opportunities are critical to the principals and teachers understandings of professional learning communities and their operation. Local staff development efforts are critically important and must be of high quality.

Districts must also understand that principals must go through the change process as well. Principals need time to digest, study and learn about professional learning communities.
Seeing themselves in different roles than the traditional principal is new for many administrators and requires an adaptation as well. Principals needed time to digest the conceptual idea of professional learning communities themselves, but also needed strategies to overcome initial negative reactions by the staff. They will also need an understanding of what protocols are important and what they need to be “tight” and “loose” about. For only two of the principals was the understanding of the conceptual theory and premises behind professional learning communities easy. And, they will need an understanding of the leadership needed to change a culture.

Districts implementing professional learning communities should note that labeling the adoption of the new concept can create aversion. One strategy used by two principals who were successful was not label the movement, but to simply indicate they were incorporating best practices into what was already working in their schools. One principal extensively noted that she begin to identify practices already in place as a starting point.

Another understanding that is needed in districts choosing to implement professional learning communities is that professional learning communities won’t be all you do. Although many principals in this survey noted they liked the idea that this particular district focused upon two or three initiatives it is important to understand that if a district chooses to implement professional learning communities that will not be all they do. The can “weed the garden” and do away with some things but for the most part the school business requires we do more than professional learning communities. Professional learning communities are important but cannot do it all. They provide a focus for efforts on teaching and learning and
provide you time built into the school day or week for these discussions to occur. But professional learning communities will not be all you ask of teachers.

Finally, building trust is critical. Faculty members look for the walk and talk to be congruent and for consistency with what the administrator says and what they do. Most principals need more training in how to build trust within the organization. Although the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey vaguely addresses the trust issue, it does little to indicate where the trust misgivings lie. They could be a lack of trust between the principal and staff, but trust issues could also be among the staff members themselves. Although all principals see trust as important, only one took actions they thought could build or create trust. And, no administrator indicated they knew how to build trust except at the rudimentary level. Building trust is critical for leadership. Faculty members look for the walk and talk of the leader to be congruent and for consistency with what the administrator or district says is important and what they do. They make leaps of abstraction when leaders do not provide explanations for their actions. These leaps often hinder trust because teachers often draw the wrong conclusions for actions of the principal or district. Communication about the implementation, the scope of the endeavor, the timeline and expectations are critically important for districts implementing professional learning communities. But underlying this is an understanding of the role trust plays in the developments.
In this researcher’s opinion, the implementation of professional learning communities initiative is almost too bold an initiative to begin to address on a school level basis because of the staff development needs and support requirements. A school focused on creating professional learning communities will find competing demands for staff development time which is already greatly limited. Most individual schools, especially in these economic times, would need several thousand dollars to devote to the staff development required to support the initiative. In addition, a school seeking to create professional learning communities at just their site would inevitably be a part of larger initiatives at the district level that would take certain staff development days. This may limit the devotion needed for professional learning community implementation. Individual schools seeking to move in this direction should consider these costs and potential conflicts before proceeding.

A key element of success will be support of the initiative from the Superintendent. One principal who worked in another school district noted it had become a priority in that district. And, that priority was evident from the very first interview he had with the Superintendent for a principal’s position.

Q. Right. Okay. How much study, training, staff development have you had with PLCs?
A. Like I said, I have been to – I have seen Rick and Becky (DuFour) twice, so probably those were a couple of hours each, I guess; I can’t really remember. But I know that when I was in Wake County as a principal for six years that was right when I was getting into it. In fact, my interview with Bill McNeil, I remember him asking me about it, and luckily I had been, you know, and seen, you know, the conference that I had gone to, and knew enough to kind of say something about it, intelligent. But I remember him asking me a question about PLCs when he interviewed me. So that was kind
of when, I think, Wake County really starting focusing on it. So I would say every year that was the focus of staff development, with other things kind of added in. You know how it goes.

Q. Right.
A. But for the most part, they really hit PLCs hard, whether it be formative assessments or whatever. Do you want me put a number on it?
Q. No, you don’t have to put a number. That’s enough.
A. Six years of constantly talking about, you know, all the different aspects of it.
Q. So in a District as large as Wake, McNeil interviewed everybody he was going to hire as a principal?
A. Yes, he sure did.
Q. And he asked about professional learning communities?
A. Yes.

It is apparent that professional learning communities were a priority in the district above and the concept of professional learning communities were a large part of the district’s conceptual framework. This must be the case if PLCs are to fully evolve in a district. From the experience of this researcher, without the support, understanding and knowledge of the effort at the superintendent and central office level, it will be hard for mature, generative PLCs to evolve.

More importantly, superintendents must understand the time it takes for professional learning communities to evolve. It is not a quick fix and requires significant investment and commitment to lead. Superintendents interested in quick wins in a school district will not see professional learning communities as a priority. A three to five year focused effort will be required. Nonetheless, districts can build professional learning communities. The work required can be done and most importantly, it is critical work. The things that help schools improve are not outside our grasp. And, once learning communities emerge in a school, it should result in more good teaching by more good teachers a greater percentage of the time.
This fact should improve results for our least advantaged students, which have been the focus of improvement efforts and reforms for many years. But, it should also improve achievement results for every student, even the most capable, which also need greater attention.

It appears apparent that professional learning communities promise positive results for all students. That is something we have not done successfully in education to date. We have failed to educate every student. PLC’s appear to improve the learning for all students and we know what is good for our students. But knowing what to do and implementing and actually doing are two different things. There is ample skill, knowledge and talent, even in rural Southeastern districts to accomplish the task of implementing professional learning communities. One of the great mysterious things is why we don’t do it. If PLCs are good for our students and improves learning outcomes for all students and good for our teachers because it builds their professional capacity, and great for our administrators because we have a strategy we can follow that is comprehensive, yet flexible why not do it?

In this researcher’s opinion, PLCs give a clear strategy for success that incorporates many of the best practices we want in our schools. From evaluating data, focusing on SMART goals, developing clear learning goals, assessment and intervention, PLCs give educators a strategy to stick with over time and allows educators to quit shifting from one reform effort or innovation to another every few years, which has been a common complaint. The key is to stay after it long enough and hard enough to make it work. Persistence pays off and results in gains for students, staff and administrators. Yet, persistence with change efforts is not something educators have been very good at.
When I began exploring PLCs as an administrator, I wanted an implementation plan. I wanted a simple, defined methodology that was planned for me. I wanted to implement PLCs in a year and have them in place. I was trained as an educator to do this. As a researcher I have learned that there is no one implementation plan or process. Schools evolve at different rates based on the current culture, leadership and support from the central office and board of education. The key to implementation is to learn by doing and be persistent. And, in doing, those choosing to implement must understand we learn from each other. As one district implements…we learn from them. When the next district implements, we learn from the combination of the two efforts. And, as implementation progresses, we develop a knowledge base or community concerning implementation. In the end, we create a community of learners concerning implementation. This researcher is hopeful this effort in some way can enable or help a future school or district that decides to move forward and add to the knowledge base concerning PLC implementation.

The key to understanding implementation is that doing or implementing is what is the missing link between research and practice. Implementing will involve learning as a staff and as a leader. Implementing will involve introspection, engaging in dialogue and debate, and not forcing or coercing staff into PLCs as and administrator but allowing them to evolve. It will involve development and insuring principals are focused on the implementation for several years. It will also involve administrators insure the “well-being of the crew” as described by Fullan (2007) as the crew undertakes the journey. It will involve the staff and the leader acting as learners. The leader must model the way and lead and learn as well and expose himself or herself as a learner with the staff. And, just as Heifetz and Linsky (2002)
recommend when facing adaptive challenges, leaders 1.) Make observations, 2.) Ask questions, 3.) Offer interpretations and 4.) Encourage others to take action. The key to leadership is encouraging others to take action.

Implementing professional learning communities is multi-faceted, dynamic, and messy work at times. It will require patience and the development of trust. Trust is a critical component that allows the work to move forward. Schools, principals and teams must be patient with each other and realize the work is progressing as one person, one team, and one school develops. The only option that does not exist is that we do not persist or do not make an attempt to implement. The challenge has been legislated and it is clear that implementing something where all kids learn at high levels is worthy and will take a great deal of time and effort. Nonetheless, the bottom line is that if as a school leader you know professional learning communities create a place where all kids can learn at high levels, and if you know it makes and builds the capacity of your staff, and you know it makes a better place for your staff and students….how can you not do this work?

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

There are many opportunities for further research with professional learning communities and their implementation, their effectiveness and their development. The major ideas for further research would be to discover how much change in academic achievement professional learning communities are responsible for. Further efforts to creating phases of implementation and the development of professional learning communities and how to
monitoring the success and progress of professional learning communities beyond the early stages of implementation is an area for further research. This is especially true in view of the fact that professional learning communities and being a part of their operation is part of the teachers, principals, directors and superintendent evaluation process in North Carolina. Implementation in the later stages beyond the initial implementation lies in the future.

Measuring and quantifying the progress of professional learning communities is difficult. Means and measures to determine a school’s progress and the development of individual teams is difficult. Education has moved to more focus upon school performance data and individual student performance assessment results and further development and research in this area would be quite helpful. An even larger question is do students learn more because schools become professional learning communities? Being able to determine the amount of impact professional learning communities have on student learning as compared to other factors would be exceptionally helpful for educators and administrators.

Finally, three concepts bear further research. Teachers invest a lot of time participating in professional learning communities when they are operating properly. Most will participate for one hour per week with their professional learning community team. A big question is does participation in professional learning communities save teachers time? Research to determine if this investment is efficient would provide great insight and possibly leverage for teachers and administrators seeking to invest further in building professional learning communities. If teachers understood their investment produced results and saved time in the long run, their adaption and embracing of professional learning communities would be a much easier sell.
As noted by Williamson (2008), the professional learning community movement fails to address the complex nature of leading cultural change. Further research and development on how best to equip building level administrators and how to support teachers in the transitions and cultural transformations required to become professional learning communities is an area open for further exploration and study. Nonetheless, incorporation of professional learning communities into the daily practice of our schools is no longer optional. It is expected and included in the evaluation instruments for teachers, principals and superintendents. These transformations and transitions should be taking place in all school districts in North Carolina.

The development of knowledge and support information would fill a gap that currently has to be garnered from areas outside education. In essence, a community of knowledge must be created to equip North Carolina teachers and administrators as they face this adaptive challenge. Moreover, although “the movement fails to address the complex nature of leading cultural change,” the skills and knowledge to make this transition is easily learned, practiced and improved upon by the skillful leaders in our school buildings. The task is not undoable, unlearnable and although it may be difficult, our school administrators can tackle this successfully. It will require quality staff development efforts and support of the transformation at the district level.

Professional learning communities evolve, slowly over time. Principals and teachers learn about professional learning communities and how the operate as a professional learning community over time. One high school principal states this best:
(Ken Williams) He said he learned with them. I think principals have to expose themselves as learners and be willing to learn with the teachers and admit that you don’t know it all. And if you can develop that respect and mutual trust, then I think you are going to be much more successful than just saying, “Oh, we are doing PLCs; go run with it.” It is a learning process, and it is probably at least a two-year process before you feel like your teams are established and you can actually do some work that is effective. So I would get that book and go at it.

(High School Principal)

Edward Sallis (1993) noted that “TQM is hard work, it takes time to develop a quality culture” (1993, p.30). It will be no different with the development of professional learning communities. There are great parallels with the Total Quality movement and professional learning communities. Just as TQM believed quality cultures take time to develop, so will cultures required for professional learning communities. The principle of kaizen was important to TQM and will be important as district implement professional learning communities. Kaizen involves the idea of continuous, incremental improvement. This is most easily translated as ‘step-by-step improvement’ where by each element of a process or practice is examined and evaluated in hopes of improving the process or practice.

The philosophy of TQM is large-scale inspirational and all embracing, but its practical implementation is small-scale, highly practical and incremental. Drastic intervention is not the means of change in TQM. Grandiose schemes are not the way forward, because they flounder for lack of resources, and their demise can breed cynicism and discontent.

(Sallis, 1993, p. 25)

The essence of kaizen is to begin with a small project that seeks to build success and confidence, and develop a base for further ventures in improvement. The same approach must be taken with professional leaning communities.
A final area for exploration is technology. Technology can enhance, assist and make professional learning communities more efficient. Technology not only can assist within the school building, but it can expand the professional learning community network among several schools, several districts and allow educators to truly capture the collective wisdom of a large span of experience. This researcher believes that technology may well be a tool that provides greater efficiency, garners greater collective wisdom and increases exponentially the potential impact of the professional learning community concept as the web of schools, teams and districts involved with professional learning communities continues to grow.
References


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Nebraska Department of Education
http://www.nde.state.ne.us/WFSG/ProfessionalLearningCommunities.htm


Appendix A
Interview

Interview Outline
Semi-structured Interview
I. Professional Learning Communities—Background knowledge

A. How did you first learn of Professional Learning Communities?
B. What did you like about the PLC concept? What didn’t you like?
C. How much study, training and information have you had concerning PLCs?
D. What are areas of PLCs that you would like additional training or insight on?
E. The district made the decision to implement PLCs throughout each school in the county and year one of this effort was concluded just recently, looking back was this a wise decision? Why or why not?
F. How much planning had the district done concerning implementation and what could they have done differently that would have helped?
H. How did teachers respond to the idea of implementing PLCs?
I. What knowledge and expertise do you have in bringing about change within a school. What do you believe is critical to bringing about change?
J. What would you have done differently knowing what you know now?
K. Does the implementation of PLCs change or influence your leadership style or approach?
L. What specific needs and issues do you perceive as being unique to elementary, middle, or high school principals with implementing PLCs?
M. What advice would you give principals aspiring to implement PLCs? How should they be prepared for the task? Professionally? Personally?
O. What do you see as the role of the school system in assisting you to meet you and your staff’s professional development needs?
P. How would you design staff development for building level administrators for PLCs?
Q. How would you define a professional learning community and what would you see the purpose of it to be?
R. What are the components of a professional learning community and which elements are most difficult to navigate? What gave teachers the most difficulty?

II. Implementing Professional Learning Communities

A. Critical Events That Have Shaped Implementation:
Now I am going to ask you to tell me about some critical events or critical incidents that have occurred in the implementation process. List events that have had a profound impact on implementation in a positive or negative fashion.
1) Event #1:______________________________________________________________
2) Event #2:______________________________________________________________
3) Event #3:______________________________________________________________

Now that you have listed the three most significant impacts on implementation, I would like you to tell me a little about each event.

1) Tell me about Event #1. When did this occur and what impact did it have on your implementation? What changed as a result of this event?

2) Tell me about Event #2. When did this occur and what impact did it have on your implementation? What changed as a result of this event?

3) Tell me about Event #3. When did this occur and what impact did it have on your implementation? What changed as a result of this event?

B. What was similar concerning these three events? What was different?

C. At some point when bringing about change, there is resistance, how do you navigate resistance?

D. What protocols and practices accompany the implementation of professional learning communities and which were easy to understand and implement with staff and which were difficult to understand and implement at the school level?

E. What training, texts, staff development and materials are vital to implementation success?

F. Would an implementation plan with action steps in terms of be developed?

G. Do you believe there is a congruent picture of a professional learning community and what it should look like across the district?

H. How do teacher’s attitudes affect implementation?

I. How does PLCs being part of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Instrument affect or aid implementation?

J. What aspects of a school’s culture hinder or enhance the implementation and what difficulties do you face with implementation?

K. How important was trust and how do school leaders build trust to enable implementation?

L. How could the LEA be more helpful or supportive?
M. In an ideal state, what might the LEA have done?

N. Tell me the biggest challenge and how did you address it?

O. Tell me the biggest benefit.

P. What else should I know?
Appendix B
Principal’s Permission Letter

November 1, 2010

Principal’s Name
School Address
Town, Zip

Dear (Name)

I hope things are going well for you at (Name of School) as you are in the midst of another school year. The purpose of this letter is to request your assistance. I am working on my dissertation for my doctoral program at North Carolina State University. The focus of my study is to gain a better understanding of the implementation of professional learning communities. To gather data, I would like to interview administrators who are implementing professional learning communities in their schools. The interviews are designed to be informal – a time for you to reflect on your experiences with implementing professional learning communities and explain the success you have had as well as the challenges.

As an administrator, I am aware of how busy you are and realize that your time is valuable. I plan to conduct my interviews during May and June at a time that is most conducive to your schedule. To minimize your time involved, I will travel to your school. The interview should take no more than one hour.

All information will be confidential, as pseudonyms will be used in my dissertation. I hope the findings will be valuable not just to myself, but to fellow administrators. I will gladly share my final product with you if you would like.

This research project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of North Carolina State University (IRB). The IRB may be contacted by writing:

North Carolina State University Box 7514 Raleigh, North Carolina

I will be calling in the next few days to answer any questions you may have and to make an appointment with you to conduct the interview. If you do not feel that you can participate, please feel free to let me know. I will certainly understand. Thank you very much for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Ben Thigpen
Appendix C
Informed Consent

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH
Title of Study    Building PLCs: The Challenge of Changing Culture

Principal Investigator       Ben Thigpen        Faculty Sponsor (if applicable): Kenneth H. Brinson, Jnr.

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above. You can withdraw from this study as a participant at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
This study will garner administrator perspectives on the implementation of Professional Learning Communities within a particular school district. This qualitative project will attempt assess and ascertain difficulties school administrators face when implementing Professional Learning Communities at the building level.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 45-60 minute interview and then review a transcript of the interview. The purpose of the review is to insure things are portrayed as you wish. The questions for the interview will focus on professional learning communities and implementation of PLCs. The interviews will be done in your office, the library, at your home or wherever you feel most comfortable. It is recommended that interviews be done off the school site. The researcher will conduct the interviews. The interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed. Once transcribed, the tapes will be erased and you will review the transcription to insure anything you do not want in there is removed. The interviews will be conducted off site at your convenience and with strictest confidence. Participants will be informed of the purpose of the study, the interview process and that they can end the interview at anytime if they feel uncomfortable, stressed or apprehensive. Neither your name nor the school’s name will be included in any responses or reports written concerning this project.

Principals will be identified as Principal A, B, C, …simply to allow the researcher to track interviews and allow participants to review transcripts. Names of principals will not be used. School will be identified or labeled with pseudonyms. Schools will be labeled using tree names: Pine, Sycamore, Oak, Magnolia, Maple, Elem, Popular, etc… . Principals will be encouraged to provide honest, accurate information and will be insured their responses will in no way be connected to them and held in strictest confidence. The Superintendent assures not that no response will in any way be held in any manner against a principal in terms of employment or reputation. Moreover, all efforts will be made by the researcher to insure principals will not be identified in any manner of the write up by the researcher. Any reference to a particular idea or statement will be identity neutral and will simple say “...one principal noted that x....” or “....several principals felt y....”.

In addition, all principals will be able to review transcripts and the researcher will remove any information they feel may put them at any risk. In addition, the researcher will be the only person who has any idea who made what statements and this information will reside only with the researcher and he will share that with no one in the organization.

At the end of each of the interviews, you will be thanked for your time and participation and a card will be given to them with the researchers name, phone number and email address and they will be informed that they or their parents can call at anytime should they have questions concerning the interview or the study.

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Risks
Some risk is anticipated. Our school district is small and indirectly, someone reading the dissertation may be able to identify you. This in turn may affect your reputation or your job. However, all reasonable efforts will be made to insure this does not happen. The researcher will use pseudonyms and coding methods to attempt to mask the identity of research subjects and of schools.

It is anticipated there will be a loss of approximately 60 minutes of time for the interview and transcription review. Principals who have attempted implementation of professional learning communities will be encouraged to provide honest, accurate information and will be insured their responses. The researcher will make all efforts to insure those responses will in no way be connected to the school or the principal and held in strictest confidence.

In addition, all principals will be able to review transcripts and any information they feel may put them at any risk will be removed upon request. In addition the researcher will make sure all transcripts, recordings and information regarding this study will be held in strictest confidence.

Taking part is voluntary
Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to be in the study you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may choose to leave for a particular question, or simply not contribute to the discussion for a particular question. Participating in this study does not mean that you are giving up any of your legal rights.

Your answers will be confidential
The records of this study will be kept private. Data will be kept on tape recorders and then destroyed once the discussions have been fully transcribed. Transcriptions of the discussion will be kept on a personal computer to which only the researcher has access. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified.

Benefits
The research and LEA hope to begin to assess the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities and how to better implement them in the district. This effort should provide feedback on how to better support implementation in the future.

Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in the researcher’s home office. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

Compensation
You will not receive compensation for participating.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Ben Thigpen at 626 Quinn Store Road, Beulaville, NC 28518, or 910.298.3480 or 910.271.4727

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).
**Consent To Participate**
I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.

Subject's signature_______________________________________ Date _________________

Investigator's signature____________________________________ Date _______________
Appendix D
IRB Approval

From: Deb Paxton, IRB Administrator
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board

Date: April 19, 2011

Title: Implementation of Professional Learning Communities: The Challenge of Changing Culture

IRB#: 1974-11-4

Dear Mr. Thigpen,

The project listed above has been reviewed by the NC State Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research, and is approved for one year. This protocol will expire on April 4, 2012 and will need continuing review before that date.

NOTE:

1. You must use the attached consent forms which have the approval and expiration dates of your study.

2. This board complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU the Assurance Number is, FWA00003429.

3. Any changes to the protocol and supporting documents must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

4. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days by completing and submitting the unanticipated problem form on the IRB website.

5. Your approval for this study lasts for one year from the review date. If your study extends beyond that time, including data analysis, you must obtain continuing review from the IRB.

Sincerely,

Deb Paxton
NC State IRB