

## Collegial Circles: A Closer Look

In the last several issues we have devoted space to an introduction of professional learning communities (PLCs) and a discussion of their rationale and benefits. In this and subsequent issues we will examine each of the five collaborative models more closely with the goal of showing you, the reader, how to initiate the creation of professional learning communities in your school and district.

We'll start with Collegial Circles (also known as faculty study groups), since that is the model with which most readers have some familiarity. Many of our annual PLC grant winners began with collegial circles. An advantage to collegial circles is that they are more easily started than other models with minimal outside training of staff and administration.

We are all aware that isolation from one's colleagues is an occupational hazard for teachers. Support and advice is most often sought and given in quick hallway discussions or while gulping down lunch in the faculty room. But there's a better way to learn from and with colleagues. Collegial circles provide teachers with *structured time* for collegial support and an opportunity for *collaborative* reflection on classroom practices.

Collegial circles enable teachers to identify needs for professional growth and to satisfy these needs through sharing in group problem solving. They are particularly meaningful because they are teacher-driven and focus on actual student work.

Collegial circles can serve many functions. Some or all of the following may be included:

- √ To support the implementation of instructional and curricular innovations.
- √ To integrate and give coherence to instructional strategies and programs.
- √ To target a school-wide need.
- √ To study the research and latest developments on teaching and learning.
- √ To monitor the impact of innovations on students and on changes in the workplace.
- √ To serve as a high-quality model of professional development.

Increasing student learning is *always* the primary purpose of collegial circles and teacher collaboration is the means to that end.

### Getting Started

Although there are guidelines that work well, there is no right or wrong way to compose your circle. There are usually some growing pains involved. Just remember that those pains are worth enduring. To help you organize, here are some components of collegial circles.

- Facilitation of the group.
- Four to eight members.
- Regular meetings.
- Professional readings and discussion of them.
- Classroom application of learning and follow-up discussion.
- Materials development and sharing.
- Examination of student work.
- Journal or other reflective writing.

- Presentations of learning to group and/or other faculty members.
- Classroom observations by colleagues.
- Written reports describing teacher learning and corresponding classroom change.
- Celebration of success!

### Member roles

*Facilitator:* helps group select a subject of study and keeps the group focused on it, starts sessions promptly and professionally, maintains attendance and paperwork related to course of study, serves as mediator during group discussions, provides necessary materials for the group's work, invites outsiders when appropriate, closes each session with some group reflection on what was accomplished and expectations for the next meeting.

*Time Keeper:* starts session promptly, watches the clock and stays tuned to the agenda, monitors the amount of speaking time of members to avoid dominance.

*Recorder:* keeps notes for the group's records, provides a summation of the session.

*Refreshment provider:* keeps it just to a snack!

*Resource Provider:* finds materials for the group to read and research.

It is suggested that these roles be voluntarily rotated for each session or several sessions. Roles are always determined prior to the next session.

### Choosing a Topic

Since improving what students know and do is always the desired end result of the collegial process, a good course of action (*continued on page 2*)

*“It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it.”*

- Lawrence Stenhouse

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## Collegial Circles: A Closer Look (cont.)

to determine the topic is to examine student data and identify areas of student need. Professional development consultant Dr. Catherine Battaglia describes this as “finding an itch.” The topic needs to be important enough to lead the teachers forward to investigation and resolution, to “scratch the itch.”

### Writing an Action Plan

Though not essential, a good action plan will help the group accomplish hands-on learning by describing what the members are going to do. A plan typically begins with an action word that tells what actions the members will take as they work together. Some excellent words to describe what a group *does* are investigate, research, demonstrate, practice, share, train, critique, design, collect, explore, search, construct, read, plan, search.

It gives the reader a visual image of their activities, and is always aligned with student needs. It does **not** describe what the teachers or students will do in their classrooms.

### Professional Readings

Research is conducted on the group's topic through what is currently going on in the field. Whether using books, journals, articles, or the Internet, the group discusses the materials and decides what classroom actions to take as a result of their study.

### Classroom Application

When applying their new learning in the classroom, teachers keep records of the effect on student learning. These records are shared for member suggestions and comments (when invited). Many teachers have praised the focused discussion about student learning as one of the most valuable professional development experiences they've had.

### Reflective Writing

At the conclusion of the circle each member may submit a journal or other evidence of reflection about the learning.

There are excellent resources at the teacher center. Be sure to contact us for more information. And then jump in!

*Primarily excerpted from How to Conduct a Collegial Circle, Facilitating Collegial Circles, and Creating Opportunities for Collegial Conversations, all available at the teacher center.*

## Finding Time for Faculties to Study Together

*Excerpted from an article in the Journal of Staff Development authored by Carlene Murphy.*

“But there's just no time.”

That's a refrain you hear in many schools. No time for teachers to routinely learn together. No time to share expertise. No time to provide support to each other as they implement new initiatives. It is the first issue mentioned by faculty and administration alike. So how do faculties find that single hour a week that is needed for ongoing staff development? If all school personnel and their unions agree that schools are learning organizations for adults, they innovate to make staff development a continuous feature of the workplace.

For example:

- Use teaching assistants to cover classrooms for the first or last hour of school.
- Use teams of business partners and/or parents to release teachers for one hour.
- Begin classes 30 minutes late with teachers arriving 30 minutes early one day a week.
- Pair teachers to combine classes while each of the pair participates in staff development.
- Hire substitutes one day a week to move each hour to classes of all participating teachers.

The message is clear. Where there's a will there's a way to work out a viable schedule.

## Useful Websites: It's Easy Being Green

[www.kidsgardening.com](http://www.kidsgardening.com) Kids learn to plant pollinator gardens to preserve birds and bees.

[www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org) Eat your veggies! Meat production is energy-inefficient and uses up natural resources.

[www.stopglobalwarming.org](http://www.stopglobalwarming.org) Use recycled paper and save a tree. The paper industry is

the third largest contributor to global warming.

[www.cristina.org](http://www.cristina.org) Recycle your old electronics. The National Cristina Foundation will hook you up with a nonprofit organization that can use them.

[www.eartheasy.com](http://www.eartheasy.com) Household chemicals contribute to both indoor and outdoor pollution. Here are some great tips on

green cleaning.

[www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov) Increase your energy efficiency by trading in your incandescent for fluorescent lights which use about 70 % less energy and last 10 times longer.

[www.greendimes.com](http://www.greendimes.com) For a dime a day restore our forests and your sanity. This site stops your junk mail for a small fee.