

# LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

"Research shows that teacher quality is the single most powerful influence on student achievement, and yet teachers in the United States receive far less professional development, mentoring, and planning time than teachers in the world's high-achieving nations."

—*Professional Learning in the United States*

## What Are Professional Learning Communities?

We know that great teachers can change a student's life. And every day, we are finding out more and more about what makes great teachers great. Excellent teaching is also the foundation of our best schools, since the quality of our schools cannot—and does not—exceed the quality of its instruction. Yet how can we make sure that every student receives the best teaching possible every day?

The answer is not as simple as **we need more great teachers**—what we need, it turns out, are **strong communities of teachers** working cooperatively and productively. When educators discuss what works and what doesn't, when they share their best lessons and techniques, and when they work together instead of working in isolation, student performance not only improves, but schools become more energized and fulfilling places to work.

## What We've Learned

A large and growing body of research has revealed that teacher-driven "professional learning communities" may just be the most effective, affordable, and sustainable school-improvement strategy around.

- ✓ **Effective professional learning for teachers shares four high-impact attributes:**  
(1) it is intensive and ongoing throughout a teacher's career; (2) it is focused on specialized instructional techniques and academic knowledge; (3) it is connected to and integrated with other school initiatives; and (4) it builds strong working relationships and a culture of trust among teachers. The colleague-to-colleague learning that takes place in professional learning communities shares all these characteristics.
- ✓ **Conferences and workshops can help, but teacher collaboration really works.**  
Conferences, seminars, and workshops can be important learning experiences for teachers, but they are often one-off events that are not always relevant to the specific day-to-day instructional challenges teachers face. The most effective professional learning—the kind that really helps to improve critical skills such as classroom management or lesson design—is sustained over time and directly connected to a teacher's subject area and to the learning needs of individual students.
- ✓ **More professional learning time for teachers means better outcomes for students.**  
Studies have shown that teachers who get close to 50 hours of professional development every year tend to get much better results in the classroom. Unfortunately, teachers in the United States receive far less professional development than teachers in other countries—and rarely 50 hours worth. If we really want to improve student performance, increasing the amount of time teachers are given to learn and plan together would be a great place to start.
- ✓ **Professional learning communities value the expertise of working teachers.**  
Just like students, teachers don't just want to be lectured to—they want to share what they know and learn practical skills that are relevant to their work and interests. Every teacher brings unique experiences, expertise, and insights to the table, and when they share what works and what doesn't, they get more confident in their skills and their students learn more.

## Want to Learn More?

Visit the [Leadership in Action website](http://Leadership in Action website) and download *I Want to Know More*, a selection of information and resources for those interested in reading more about how today's students learn.