

## **Sustaining Change Through School-Wide Leadership Professional Learning Communities**

Every member of the school community has an impact on the success of a school's ability to change positively towards school improvement for student achievement. Considering schools are always in a change process, in that initiatives are introduced, monitored, revised, enhanced, and evaluated, it becomes clear that the more unified the vision, belief and drive towards that initiative, the more likely a school will be able to adopt change. Though administrators may be the change agent in their schools to initiate the process, those who can lead leaders develop a partnership in whole school growth and sustainability.

Before we discuss “the how”, let's consider a successful historical perspective of a “leading leaders” society. Upon reflection, one will find that leading leaders was modeled by the Most Beloved of Allah – sallallahu alayhi wasallam as he prepared the sahaba – alayhum assalaam - with leadership skills for the fast-growing ummah, who passed this tradition to the tabi'een and the future generations. Consider:

*“There are other cases where a person would come to the Prophet sal Allaahu alayhi wa sallam with a legal issue and he would tell a certain companion to get up and make a judgment between them. That companion would say, ‘Ya Rasul Allah, shall I judge between them while you are here, in our midst?’ The Prophet sal Allaahu alayhi wa sallam would respond in the affirmative. These are the companions who later became Muslim judges, and they were the ameers that went out to Yemen, Egypt, and other places. The Prophet sal Allaahu alayhi wa sallam had trained them in his midst and then they went on later to become the qudaa’ (judges).” (Alshareef, 2007)*

He - sallallahu alayhi wasallam, could have easily responded to the legal issue, but since he was a model leader and visionary for the world, he trained and encouraged others to respond to situations while guiding, and supporting them.

The sahaba, radhi Allahu a'nhum and those after them governed, taught, and took initiatives to sustain a growing ummah. This growth brought new challenges and issues not faced before, as seen during the caliphate of Umar Al-Farooq, radhi Allahu anhu, who established and organized departments for governance (Khan, 1992).

These leaders – alayhum assalaam were equipped to handle the changing societies because Rasool Allah sallallahu alayhi wasallam prepared an ummah during his time until the end of time.

Islamic Schools are relatively new, growing organizations in the U.S. dealing with varying challenges beyond that of a fiscal one. Professionalism and societal challenges require that our best hearts, minds and skills are brought together for creating organizations that are sound, and able to address these challenges to take our schools to new levels.

Establishing such an environment that fosters growth can be challenging. School reform is complex, and previous disappointments make sustaining school initiatives difficult. When trying to improve our schools, there are common mistakes evident in the change process:

1. Allowing too much complacency
2. Failure to create a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition
3. Underestimating the power of a vision
4. Under-communicating the vision
5. Permitting structural and cultural obstacles to block change process
6. Failure to create short term wins
7. Declaring victory too soon
8. Neglecting to anchor change firmly into culture

The challenge of change sustainability is to create a critical mass of educators within the school who are willing and able to function as change agents. A change agent is a catalyst that ignites changes for a specific purpose (Dufour, Eaker, 1998). They are the facilitators, visionaries, designers, monitors, evaluators, and implementers of initiatives for increasing student achievement.

Creating a school culture of leaders leading leaders, is a component of a professional learning community. A Professional Learning Community, or PLC, is characterized by “the collaborative work of educators to continuously seek, share, and act on their learning in order to improve their practice for the purpose of improved student outcomes” (DuFour, Eaker, 1998). It is a learning organization in which “people continually expand their capacity to create desired results, where new and expansive

patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free...”(Huffman, 2001). This school community model brings benefits from the school wide leadership:

1. Sustaining change as a whole body
2. Invested staff = committed staff
3. Empowerment leads to creativity
4. Shared responsibility
5. Succession planning for future leadership

How do we start this process? First by understanding it is just that – a process. This is not an overnight quick fix. To create a positive school culture, time is necessary. **Patience, Passion and Persistence** is the PLC mantra. Begin by assessing the foundations of your organization: Mission and Vision and Shared Values and Norms.

### **Mission and Vision**

Though your school already has one, how is it being used in your school? Are decisions based on your school's mission and vision? Are they evident in classroom instruction and school programs? Does your mission statement fit your school? Revisit your mission statement, and consider these questions:

Mission =

- Why do you exist?
- What are we here to do together?
- What is the business of your business?

Vision =

- Do we have directionality
- If we are true to our purpose (mission) now, what might we become at some point in the future?
- What is a realistic, credible, attractive future for our organization?
- Is it articulated vividly to the organization's future so compellingly that the school's members are motivated to work together to make it a reality?

Once missions, visions and beliefs are established, we need to ask tougher questions that will jumpstart the development of school improvement goals:

- Are we acting in accordance with our fundamental mission?

- Have we clarified what we want all students to know and be able to do?
- What is the most effective response for students who are not succeeding?
- What are the discrepancies between actual conditions in our school and the school we hope to become?
- What are our specific plans to reduce these discrepancies?
- Are the proposals under consideration consistent with our vision and values?
- What steps are we taking to advance vision and values in the day to day operation of the school?
- What results do we seek, and what evidence are we gathering to assess our effectiveness?

Though there are different factors that impact how and when to start the process of dealing with these school issues, a school's culture will be the most important variable in the success of a school initiative and because of this, teachers, parents, students and staff must move forward together. Even the best of administrators cannot sustain a school's change alone until it is systemic. Administrative energies must be refocused on the development of a positive school culture by preparing leadership throughout the school community.

### **Shared Values and Norms**

Taking ownership for student achievement is more likely to be fostered in a school culture where there exists shared values and norms. When teachers pursue a clear shared purpose for all student learning and engage in collaboration activities to achieve purpose, they take responsibility for student learning. These shared values are embedded through the 3 C's – Communication, Collaboration, and Culture.

### **Communication**

One of the most common causes of failure of change initiatives is insufficient attention to communication. (Dufour, Eaker, 1998). Missions, visions and goals remain on paper and collect dust, while foundationally vital for the process to move forward. Taking initiatives from paper to action requires clear, constant communication in support

of the school's objective. A communication audit can be done to assess what your schools pay attention to and the effectiveness of their communication:

- What do we plan for?
- What do we monitor?
- What questions do we ask?
- What do we model?
- How do we allocate time?
- What do we celebrate?
- What are we willing to confront?

Articulate specific plans to advance its vision and values to achieve goals; this will aid in prioritizing the school's needs. Keep in mind effective communication does not mean complex communication. It can be as simple and effective as using metaphors, logos, analogies, verbal pictures of a change initiative. Logos, for example are a very effective tool to remind everyone where you're headed. They are easy to remember, simple, yet profound; i.e. "Success for every student" – "The little school with a big heart" – a clear metaphor that serves as a benchmark for improvement initiatives. Communication through modeling is a key to a change effort; the modeling as leaders is the single most powerful mechanism for creating a learning environment" (DuFour, Eaker, 1998).

"You cannot have students as continuous learners and effective collaborators without teachers having the same characteristics". (Sparks, 2003). We cannot expect children to be life-long learners if the teachers are not learners themselves. We cannot expect children to behave, be organized, punctual, love their deen, lead, etc, unless this is first embodied by the school. No other way is this evident to a child, than through our actions.

The Prophet - sallallahu alayhi wasallam, was a model mentor (Abu Ghuddah, 2003). He was the first to do and the first to stop something when it was commanded by Allah a'za wa-jalla, before expecting others to do so. He, (peace and blessings upon him), practiced what he preached, encouraged everyone to work on themselves (by modeling and his own actions), and supporting him/her in doing so.

## ***Collaboration***

Sustainability can only succeed collectively. Creating a collaborative environment has been described as the single most important factor for successful school improvement initiatives for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their school. It raises the ceiling of one's personal limitations by drawing on each other's expertise and wisdom. It transforms the privatized, isolated practice of teaching by establishing the structures and expectations for public, reflective, ongoing discourse on the challenges of teaching and learning as a school body. By making their work "public," practitioners define—and continually redefine—the meaning of good teaching and classroom practice. Opportunities for collaboration and teamwork include:

1. Jointly develop curriculum and assessment practices
2. Work together to implement new programs and strategies
3. Share lesson plans and materials
4. Collectively engage in problem solving
5. Share ideas from workshops
6. Plan peer observation and feedback (Peer Coaching)
7. Discuss and analyze success
8. Developing schedules
9. Serving a mentors for new colleagues
10. Assessing student achievement
11. Selecting instructional materials
12. Planning and presenting staff development programs
13. Brainstorming on a particular problem, develop recommendations and present findings to the faculty

Teams are the building blocks of intelligent organizations. They provide a focused arena to tackle specific areas needing improvement. Teams can be organized in such a way that best addresses the initiatives at hand:

- Team concept by grade level or subject
- Team concept on the basis of shared students
- Team concept in a school wide task

## ■ Team concept by area of professional development

It will become evident whether school teams are effective or need to be re-assessed on how and where to improve. Evidence of effective teams:

1. Share beliefs and attitudes
2. Have high levels of trust that in turn result in open communication, mutual respect for people and opinions and a willingness to participate
3. Believe that they had the authority to make important decisions and a willingness to assume responsibility for the decisions they made
4. Effectively manage meetings with clear operational rules, agendas, get input from everyone, define roles for members and minutes to provide continuity
5. Continually self-assesses the functioning of their team

### **School Culture**

A school culture is the hidden curriculum in the environment, the assumptions that are not seen, the attitudes or behaviors the school community has towards the school.

What does your school's culture say? Picture a stranger walking into your school, not involved in any activity, just walks through and makes observations. Does the visitor see the stress of your school's maintenance and cleanliness program? Is the dedication to your art curriculum evident in the student's displays throughout the school? Does the administration have a closed office door? Do they *hear* learning? Is there a sense of cohesiveness in the school? In order to gauge whether your school is ready for a change, one must assess their current school climate. A good tool for assessing a school's climate can be determining how time is used in a school. Allocation of time is a litmus test of what is important to the organization.

This assessment is important; if you intend to introduce a change that is incompatible with the organization's culture, you have only three choices:

1. Prepare to fail
2. Modify the change to be more in line with the existing culture
3. Alter the culture to be more in line with the proposed change

The following are strategies to develop a positive school climate through establishment of professional learning communities:

1. Shared Values Shapes Cultures - Commit to certain attitudes and behaviors in order to advance the collective vision of what the school might become will be visibly manifested in the school's culture. Redevelop your school's vision WITH the staff, commit to striving for excellence, and be consistent and repetitive with those commitments.
2. Reflective Dialogue - Meet with your teams or mentors on a regular basis to engage in reflective discussion on the practices of the school and classrooms and to evaluate new concepts and ideas that bear upon those practices; examine school's operation and their practices with a critical eye (no more passive routines). Remember that a naseeha – sincere advice, provides constructive critiquing of the behavior that needs to be improved, and not an attack on an individual person.
3. Use stories that we tell ourselves to rationalize poor achievement to come up with different ways of addressing problems and finding solutions. For example “this is a computer video game culture preventing students from thinking...” is an excuse for not being able to address the real problem. How can we then stimulate strategies for students for higher order thinking?
4. Celebrate more! Attention to detail for appreciation reinforces shared values and signals what's important. If you committed to excellence and a staff member does something that is evident of that, show gratitude and support.

School climate and conditions impact the development and sustainability of a professional learning community: When we realize this and work towards it, leadership characteristics become evident:

**School leadership characteristics:**

- ➔ The school leader plays multiple roles, such as a facilitator, rather than the main architect, of professional learning community.
- ➔ They distinctly understand that leadership is TRUSTEESHIP – that this honor is a responsibility in that they are accountable for this amana (*trust*).
- ➔ They actively support shared decision-making through distributive leadership.

- The school leader ensures organizational structures and resources to support professional community (time, personnel, schedule, etc.)
- The school leader negotiates the politics of reform within the local context (e.g. board, masjid, parents)
  - Empowers, inspires, supports all staff
  - Models life long learning
  - Communicator and LISTENER
  - Delegates wisely and differentiates leadership
  - Networked, resourceful and connected

### **School autonomy:**

- Staff should have authority to make decisions about resources, hiring, and management of classroom school-wide issues.
- Staff define and structure staff development based on their needs (rather than as administrators define them).
- Educators accept responsibility for learning. They are self-motivated and have a sense of self-efficacy and an internal locus of control. They believe that they can achieve their goals and improve their situation through their own efforts, even when presented with obstacles or personal difficulties. No self-pity or using their problems as an excuse for failure to act. And what is true for individuals is true for organizations – self-efficacy of faculty significantly supports a school's change process. Schools most likely to create a collaborative learning community are those with educators who are willing to accept responsibility for doing so.

### **Shared decision-making:**

- Staff play an integral role in the decision making process.
- Teaching teams meet to discuss, plan and initiate activities with support from the administration
- The school understands that “Change is always a threat when it's done to people, but it's an opportunity when it is done **by** people.” (Dufour, Eaker, 1998).
- Information, training and parameters are established to make good decisions.

Principals do more than delegate, empower and hope for the best. They provide staff with relevant background information and research findings to help them arrive at informed opinions. They also provide guiding principles and boundaries to direct their work and assess their decisions and actions.

→ As the Chinese proverb goes: “TELL ME...and I forget; SHOW ME...and I may remember; INVOLVE ME...and I’ll understand.”

#### **Time for teacher planning & analysis:**

- Are teaching schedules designed to allow for team meetings?
- Are additional personnel (i.e. aides, interns, volunteers) and partnerships (i.e. business apprenticeships, service learning) used to create more planning time for teachers?
- Are Professional Development funds allocated to provide release time (i.e. for meetings, retreats, summer projects)?

#### **Professional development:**

- Are PD opportunities structured both for the whole faculty as well as individualized for specific teachers needs?
- Do schools provide spiritual and professional growth opportunities?
- Do PD activities draw upon both internal and external expertise?
- Is PD embedded, ongoing, and connected to the school’s mission and priorities?
- Are new teachers provided with supports and induction into the professional learning community through mentoring?

The outcomes of a professional learning community result in a school-wide leadership that drives and sustains change. Some evidences of this benchmark are:

#### **Teacher Leader Characteristics:**

1. Life long learners
  - a. District staff development
  - b. In-services provided by school
  - c. Furthering studies as a professional
2. Involved on committee teams and/or chairs at least one committee
3. Fearless to bring concerns to the table while providing insight, ideas, and

commitment for improvement

4. Mentor and peer coach

**Parent Partnerships:**

1. Communication is regular, 2-way and meaningful
2. Parenting skills are promoted and supported
3. Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning at home
4. They are sought out for volunteering and sit on committees
5. Making decisions – parents as full partners in decisions
6. Collaborating with the community, using resources to strengthen schools, families and learning

**Student Leadership:**

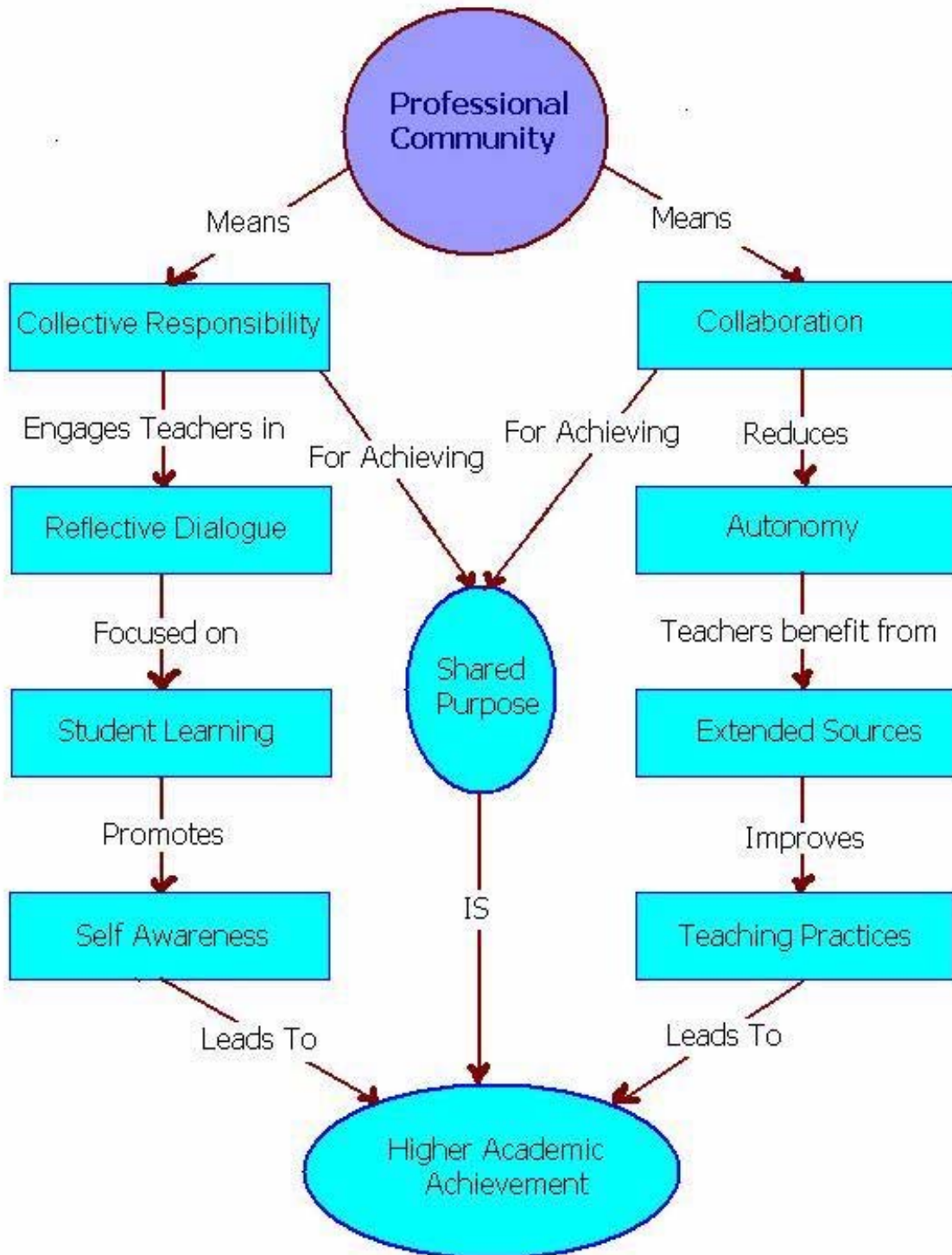
1. Children feel honored and respected
2. They are included on committees as members
3. Complete youth leadership hours
4. Student-driven Council and Government
5. School Improvement Committee reps
6. Surveys allow for their feedback
7. Having a strong guidance counseling program where students take initiative for self- or peer-referrals
8. Self-initiated community service

Remember, when we talk about sustaining change, we are not thinking about going through a process to its anticipated completion date. Schools need to be in continuous growth mode; dynamics are always forcing school leaders to create, innovate, and update. Initiatives continue to be worked on until it becomes SYSTEMIC, a part of the norm. Even upon reaching systemization, initiatives still need monitoring to gauge whether it's relevant, meaningful in meeting the needs of the students.

In summary, not until we realize that change always begins with oneself, can we begin the process of school-wide changes, as we are reminded when Allah subhana wa-ta'ala says: *“This, because God would never change the blessings with which He has graced a people unless they change their inner selves: and [know] that God is all-*

hearing, all-seeing.” (8:53)(Asad, 1980).

### THEORY MAPPING OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (Ahmed, 2003)



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