

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN PRISONS

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ABSTRACT

In 2016, the Office of Correctional Education in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation embarked on a process of implementing professional learning communities (PLCs) in all 35 California state prisons. The American Institutes for Research provided professional development and consulting on the PLC process. Through working to implement the building blocks of PLCs in a correctional setting, lessons were learned about how to address some of the particularities of the prison environment. This article describes some of the issues and strategies surrounding time and space for meetings, standards, engaging all staff, and distributive leadership.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016 the American Institutes for Research (AIR¹) teamed up with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), Office of Correctional Education (OCE²) to work toward improving equity in education across California's state prison system, which serves between 48,000 and 52,000 students daily. OCE envisioned a system in which a student would receive the same high-quality education in any of the 35 state prisons that offer education services. When an inmate was transferred from one institution to another, OCE sought to ensure that their educational program could be continued at the same level and quality. Ninety-seven percent of inmates will be returning to life on the outside at some point, with a need to earn a sustainable wage and to avoid returning to prison. Education is a critical path to assisting these returning citizens in making a living wage, a proven component in reducing recidivism (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013).

To focus on increasing equity for all inmates receiving education services, OCE created the Student Success Initiative. This initiative took a three-pronged approach to professional development: (1) Transformative Correctional Communication—an approach OCE developed to improve communication with students in a correctional environment; (2) data-driven decision-making specific to the types of instructional assessments

1 From this point forward, AIR refers to AIR staff who were part of this project.

2 From this point forward, OCE refers to OCE staff who were part of this project.

used within CDCR schools; and (3) implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) statewide. AIR was brought in to provide professional development for staff and to support the PLC process. Using the PLC model, the goal of the training was to increase student learning outcomes, extend collaboration among staff, and provide educational equity across the system.

THE CALIFORNIA PRISON EDUCATION SYSTEM

The California prison system is large, housing approximately 128,000 inmates in 2018, which accounts for 9% of all state prison inmates in the United States. About 5,000 California inmates participate in adult education programs. As new inmates arrive from county detention centers, or are sentenced by the courts, those with a demonstrated academic or career technical need are assigned to education. Fifty-two percent of these inmates are in adult basic education, 17% of students are taking college courses either on site or via distance learning, 16% are taking career and technical education (CTE) classes, and 15% are taking high school equivalency or high school diploma classes.

As of August 2018, CDCR employed 100 administrators, 720 academic teachers, 304 CTE teachers, 47 physical education teachers, 173 library staff, 100 field support staff, 36 television specialists, and 41 education staff at the state headquarters. OCE was no stranger to PLCs prior to this project. Quite a few CDCR schools across the state had begun the PLC implementation process in the years leading up to the project. OCE's prior PLC work was a critical asset to the initiative, especially considering the overall size of the prison system.

THE PLC MODEL FOR PRISON EDUCATION

The PLC model was pioneered by DuFour and Eaker (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2016) and focuses on four critical questions:

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if they have learned?
3. What will we do if they don't learn?
4. What will we do if they already know it?

Teachers work together in job-alike groups to create and share common formative assessments, look at their assessment and outcome data together, and determine together how to address areas where students have not mastered competencies by sharing lessons and instructional strategies. DuFour and Eaker's PLC model suggests that the following seven building blocks are needed in order for a PLC to be sustainable:

1. Shared mission, vision, values, and goals
2. Collaborative teams, essential standards, and use of common formative assessments
3. Distributive leadership
4. Collective inquiry
5. Action orientation
6. Analysis of learning gains
7. Results orientation and continuous improvement

Professional learning communities are not a new concept, having originated within K–12 education in the 1960s. What is new is the application of the concept in a prison setting. Prison education programs have some unique characteristics that require creative thinking. Collaboration can be a challenge in any education setting, but in prisons there are additional barriers. For example, moving from one yard to another for a meeting may require permissions, paperwork, and transportation. Within many prisons, the inability of inmate students

to move between locations and the various sign-in and sign-out security processes required for staff to move between yards means each separate yard in a prison operates like a separate, small school. However, because the PLC process has been shown to be effective in increasing student learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006), OCE has made a serious commitment to that goal.

There are also some unique barriers to finding the time to meet in a prison setting. Within CDCR, there are no substitute teacher positions, so when teachers are not present in their classrooms, classes must be canceled. Because CDCR assigns inmates to education classes and custody personnel coverage is planned based on anticipated inmate programming, when meetings interrupt regularly scheduled classes, custody coverage is affected and inmates are left with no other planned activities. Understandably, administrators are sometimes reluctant to cancel class time in favor of meetings or professional development because of the impact on the rest of the institution. However, OCE has designated specific times for staff meetings and professional development, such as the first Wednesday of every month, and institutions are encouraged to dedicate some of that time to PLC meetings (in addition to other times during the month).

The PLC process relies on a commitment to educational standards. Prior to the current project, OCE had already designated the College and Career Readiness Standards as the standards that instructors would adhere to, and appropriate textbooks had been purchased. But because of prison practices and priorities that are focused more on safety, security, and operational concerns than on classroom instruction, and due to insufficient numbers of educational administrators at certain times, it was a challenge to provide observation and coaching of instructional staff. The PLC training was designed to develop instructional leaders at each site who could help lead the collaborative process of collecting formative data on student learning and focusing instruction on the areas of need. A focus on standards and the evaluation of learning in relation to standards is a critical part of the PLC approach. Part of the PLC training provided by AIR introduced the College and Career Readiness Standards as well as strategies for unpacking and implementing the standards and for assessing learning with the standards framework. Work with the standards supports equity by creating common expectations for each course and level regardless of location.

ENGAGING ALL STAFF

The goal of the PLC training project was to engage all staff in a collaborative process focused on student learning outcomes through direct interaction and participation with teams or via support. In addition to teachers, the trainers focused on engaging librarians, coaches, TV specialists, and support staff. Traditionally, people in these roles did not see themselves as part of the instructional process. The library staff provide an example of this. Where traditional K–12 education often sees the library as the center of any successful school, CDCR libraries vary between those institutions where the library functions as a law library where inmates are provided court-mandated access to legal materials, and those where libraries are recreational and have book clubs, poetry readings, and other supportive services. OCE hosts leadership councils for the various job groups, including librarians, and invited AIR staff to attend these meetings and discuss ways that would make sense to include participants in the PLC process. AIR staff met with both the Library Leadership Council and a statewide meeting of library staff. In these meetings, librarians explained why they felt excluded from the PLC meetings and brainstormed ways in which they could work more closely with the teachers. Suggestions included finding out what textbooks were being used and ordering copies for the library, helping inmates research topics they were studying in class, providing activities like puzzles and a “problem of the day” in support of topics being covered in class, bringing book carts to the classes, and providing tours of the library for both learners and teachers. Not all of these ideas could be immediately implemented, but initiating the conversation about what

was possible became a positive first step. Developing libraries and librarians as important allies in academic and career technical education growth continues to be a priority for OCE.

In meetings with the CTE Leadership Council, CTE teachers shared ideas about how basic skills instruction could support CTE goals, and vice versa. CTE teachers were particularly interested in addressing the deficits some of their students had in basic reading and math, as improving these skills would help inmates pass the national certification exams in the various trades. They proposed having joint PLC meetings with the academic teachers and hoped for regional professional development days in order to hear from programs at other institutions about how they address some of the same challenges. With 21 different CTE programs available at different sites ranging from construction trades to computer coding, bridging this gap remains a priority. Administrators from OCE report that the experiences and perceptions of the AIR team are helping them to plan more inclusive professional development and to develop integrated education and training models where academic support is offered for CTE students through blended approaches to class design.

DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP

Distributive leadership is an important component of PLCs. It means that all members of the community have a shared commitment and mutual responsibility to identify essential standards, develop curriculum and assessments, and make collective, data-driven decisions geared toward improving student learning outcomes. Administrators are challenged to implement both tight and loose control; for example, they require all staff to participate in the PLC while allowing instructional decisions to be made by the group. This is a challenge for any school administrator, but especially so in a correctional setting where the structure—and main function—of prisons is a paramilitary, “vertical” structure that emphasizes titles and roles that are “top down” and where directives are given and compliance is expected. In addition, within CDCR, the hiring authority for principals is the warden rather than the OCE administration, which means that principals are pulled between the necessary demands of custody for security and safety and the educational requirements of collaboration and shared decision making.

Even given these competing priorities, there were many schools in which the administrative staff excelled at distributive leadership and supporting the PLC process. Some principals put a lot of effort into building trust among their team members. One principal conducted a feedback activity with staff that ended up revealing that some of the team-building efforts had actually further isolated staff from one another, which was the opposite of the intended effect. The development of the PLC process is not without risks and growing pains.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Implementing the PLC process in prison education precipitates a major cultural shift for all involved, and it does not happen quickly. Through the Student Success Initiative, teams from all 35 institutions spent four days in training with colleagues in their regions and had opportunities to implement goals that they developed for themselves between sessions. Goals ranged from holding a PLC meeting, agreeing on group norms, engaging in at least one team-building activity, or unpacking a standard, to creating and administering a common formative assessment and sharing assessment data. Sometimes the goals were met in the two months between training sessions and sometimes they were not, as many other priorities and requirements intervened. Regardless, teams continued to revise and reconfigure their goals and to persevere in meeting them.

OCE plans to continue supporting the process by providing PLC coaching at the institution and even classroom level. They are currently implementing a Distinguished Schools program in which schools apply for

this distinction by meeting a set of requirements, of which effective PLC functioning is an integral part. Six academic coaches have been hired to cover the three regions of the state. Among other things, these coaches will support education staff in their PLC endeavors. These steps reflect continuing support for the PLC process and a commitment to provide whatever support is needed until professional learning communities become part of each school's culture and are not affected by staff changes due to transfers, retirement, and attrition. ☘

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