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Recommendation Ten Professional Learning

“Four characteristics distinguish professionals in any field. Professionals (1) act on the most current knowledge that defines their field; (2) are client-centered and adapt to meet the needs of the individuals whom they serve; (3) are results-oriented; and (4) uphold the standards of the profession in their own practice and through peer review. . . . School leaders need to create job requirements that make learning *about learning* mandatory.”¹

Recommendation 10 — Professional Learning. Build and sustain professional learning communities through recruitment, training, coaching, and interdependent collaboration. Use data, research, the [California Standards for the Teaching Profession](#), and best practices as the basis for continuous professional growth and improvement in instruction and student achievement.

Professional Learning is one of the Recommendations in the Focus Area on [Organizational Structures and Processes](#).

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Footnote

¹Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, "Examining the Teaching Life," *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 63 (March 2006), 26-29.

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The Middle Grades Community—Focused on Learning

Often, when people discuss teams or professional learning communities at a school, they are referring to the teachers. However, in the broader sense, all adults at a school constitute a learning community—they work together to support student learning. In this broader context, teachers, counselors, library/media center directors, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, teachers' aides, administrators, classified staff members, and volunteers are all members of a learning community. Many of them are members of teams that work collaboratively to support student learning. For example, individual teachers might be members of the school safety committee or the school site council in addition to serving on a departmental team and on the Parent/Teacher/Student Association (PTSA). Each of these “communities within a community” work collaboratively to improve either the school climate or the instructional strategies that support student learning.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform developed criteria for high performance. The [School Self-Study and Rating Rubric](#) (DOC; 413KB; 9pp.), is a tool designed by the [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#) program to help schools analyze their progress toward excellence based on the National Forum's criteria. The rubric states that a high-performing middle school “is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm. School leadership fosters and supports interdependent collaboration. Expectations of continuous improvement permeate the school culture. Everyone's job is to learn.”

The [Single Plan for Student Achievement](#) acts as a road map for coordinating the work of a school learning community. Ideally, the Single Plan consolidates the decisions contained in the school's separate plans for safety, professional development, and other concerns. According to the template for developing a single school plan, the members of the school community must analyze student achievement and the instructional program before finalizing their Single Plan.¹ In addition, the Single Plan must describe how all members of the school community will gain the skills they need to achieve the goals in the Single Plan.

For the school and professional learning plans to be effective, both must reflect the best thinking of the entire staff. Each member of the learning team must commit to the planning process and to the resulting plan. Their ownership of the work ensures their participation in strategies to implement the goals outlined in the plan.

The professional learning plan provides a coherent approach so that everyone has a map showing his or her path toward “continuous improvement in instruction and student achievement”—the focus of the Recommendation on professional learning. Creation of the professional learning plan allows the members of the learning community to prioritize what needs to be done and to show how they will implement the plan. For example, if assessment results show that many students need additional reading skills, then the professional learning plan helps each adult in the learning community link their goals, objectives, and lessons to those goals.

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¹ [2010 Single Plan for Student Achievement: A Guide and Template for Creating/Updating the Single Plan for Student Achievement—A Resource for the School Site Council](#) (DOC; 1.3MB; 62pp.). Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2010.

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What is a Professional Learning Community?

Dr. Rick DuFour defines a professional learning community (PLC) as “a group of people working interdependently toward the same goal.”¹ Interdependence is an essential element because it:

- Provides equal access (equity, or universal access) to quality teaching by strengthening each teacher's practice through collaboration, coaching, and shared planning
- Ends teacher isolation (thus reducing burnout)
- Helps teachers work smarter by sharing the tasks of analyzing data, creating common assessment tools, and devising other strategies for both students who struggle and those who need more challenge
- Enables teachers on grade-level (interdisciplinary) teams to devise lessons that teach reading and writing across the curriculum
- Provides teacher professional growth and job satisfaction through intellectual renewal, new learning, and cultivating leadership²

Although counselors, library/media instructors, and special education teachers are important members of the schoolwide learning community, teachers are the primary members of professional learning communities that focus on instruction. The PLCs are critical for improving instructional practice. According to education researcher Mike Schmoker, professional learning communities are the surest, fastest way to instructional improvement. He characterizes two main practices that distinguish them:

- Teachers establish a common, concise set of essential curricular standards and teach to them on a roughly common schedule.
- They meet regularly to analyze teaching methods and their consequences (common assessment results).³

Professional learning communities are central to the middle grades philosophy. They look at student needs, learning styles, and grade level standards as parts of a whole and collaboratively improve their professional practices to achieve specific results in student learning.

Many middle school faculties do not use the term PLC, although they collaborate on teaching teams. However, the term teaming has evolved into a more strategic approach, bringing all elements of developmentally responsive, standards-based education together instead of allowing individuals or groups to work in isolation from the larger community. A PLC approach includes decisions that all members of the team support about scheduling, staff development planning, and when and how to include interventions. Teaming in the new sense, often reflected by the term PLC, draws on the resources of all members of the school staff, thus strengthening the outcomes. The collaborative discussions build on the expertise of knowledgeable, caring staff members who understand the dynamics of the school community and student needs.

Other types of teams can continue to operate alongside the larger professional learning community by using the interdependent focus of a professional learning community. Each type of team serves students in a different way. In many middle schools, there are two major types of teaching teams:

- [Interdisciplinary teams](#) provide the small learning community connections across a grade level that help students feel connected.
- [Departmental teams](#) help to ensure consistency in delivering grade-level, standards-based content. They can achieve DuFour's three Big Ideas: what students should learn, how data-driven results (from *common* assessments) inform teachers about student learning, and which interventions will help students who do not meet standards.

According to the National Middle School Association (NMSA), interdisciplinary team teaching:

Consists of two or more teachers from different subject areas and the group of students they commonly instruct. Team teachers plan, coordinate, and evaluate curriculum and instruction across academic areas. Teams cultivate meaningful and regular communication with families. Teams often share the same schedule and the same area of the building. For teachers, teams provide a collaborative and supportive work group. For students, teams offer stable relationships with teachers and peers.⁴

Researchers describe three advantages of interdisciplinary teaching for students.

First, because teachers share the same groups of students, they can discuss the strengths and weaknesses of individual students, making it easier to meet their needs. Second, interdisciplinary teams of teachers can facilitate connections across different disciplines. Finally, there are more opportunities for positive peer and teacher-student relationships because teachers on the same team teach the same groups of students.⁵

A key component of both interdisciplinary and departmental team teaching is common planning time (refer to Recommendation 3—Time, for a more complete discussion about flexible scheduling that allows [time for team planning and preparation](#)). Team members have the same free period for planning, coordinating, and discussing learning needs together. One of the key roles of the PLC is to determine how to provide instruction to meet the goals of student learning. The State Board of Education-adopted content standards define what students need to know and be able to do. How to provide instruction to ensure that students master the content of the standards is the realm of the teacher and the professional learning community. Discussion about the standards, the texts, and the tests helps all teachers to be on the same page about what students need to learn and what constitutes evidence of learning. That, in turn helps the teams to develop **common assessments** (refer to a discussion about [common benchmarks assessments](#) in Recommendation 2—Instruction, Intervention, and Assessment) to determine if all students in a particular grade level or course actually learned what teachers taught.

A discussion about what students need to know should include what PLC members mean by *rigor* (see Recommendation 1—[Rigor](#) for more on this topic.) The ongoing discussion about rigor includes:

- Definitions and perceptions about rigor (William Daggett's [Rigor/Relevance Framework](#) Outside Source).
- Training and practice grading sessions (calibration) so each teacher on a team is using rubrics in the same way
- Dialogues about homework, its uses, and grading standards (refer to the [homework](#) discussion in Recommendation 2—[Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention](#).)
- [Professional Learning Community Resources](#) are available to help teams establish norms and learn about strategies that work.

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Footnotes

¹ Richard Dufour, Critical Priorities in Building a Professional Learning Community. Cybercast presentation to the Curriculum and Instruction Steering Committee of the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, March 2006.

² Pamela Grossman, Sam Wineburg, and Stephen Woolworth, [What Makes Teacher Community Different from a Gathering of Teachers?](#) (PDF; Outside Source), Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy and Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) (December 2000), 49-53.

³ Mike Schmoker, Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006, 106-108.

⁴ S. B. Mertens and N. Flowers, [Research Summary—Interdisciplinary Teaming](#) (PDF; Outside Source), Columbus, Ohio: National Middle School Association (May 2004).

⁵ Jaana Juvonen and others, [Focus on the Wonder Years: Challenges Facing the American Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Prepared by the RAND Corporation. Arlington, Va.: Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, 2004, 21.

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NCLB and California Requirements for Highly Qualified Teachers and Principals

[Title II, Section 2101 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#) (Outside Source), of 2002—Preparing, Training, and Recruiting Highly Qualified Teachers and Principals—emphasizes the importance of professional development for both administrators and teachers. It provides grants to state educational agencies, local educational agencies, state agencies for higher education, and eligible partnerships. The grants are intended to (1) increase student academic achievement through strategies such as improving teacher and principal quality and increasing the number of highly qualified teachers in the classroom and highly qualified principals and assistant principals in schools; and (2) hold local educational agencies and schools accountable for improvements in student academic achievement.

[California's response to NCLB and definition of highly qualified teachers](#) are on the California Department of Education (CDE) Web. In addition, [Essential Program Component](#) number four (EPC #4) calls for fully credentialed teachers, and SB 472 (Chapter 524, Statutes of 2006) provides [professional development for teachers of mathematics and reading](#).

California requires all teachers to complete a [California Teacher of English Learners \(CTEL\)](#) (Outside Source), Certificate for teaching English learners. In addition, the possession of a Bilingual, Cross-cultural, Language, and Academic Development (BCLAD) credential or equivalent, authorizes a teacher to provide instruction to English learners in a language other than English, though this is not a requirement for a teacher to meet the definition of **highly qualified teacher** under NCLB.¹

The Alliance for Excellent Education made the following recommendations for middle school professional development:²

- States should make certain that new and veteran teachers receive specialized middle school professional preparation, in either university or college education programs or through high-quality induction and professional development programs. This preparation would provide them with the knowledge and skills to meet the developmental needs of young adolescent students.
- States should provide veteran middle schools teachers who do not have an academic major or the equivalent of an academic major with the professional development resources they need to meet the state's high objective uniform standard so that high-quality teachers can remain in the classroom.
- States should ensure that the criteria for major equivalents in teacher-preparation programs are rigorous in content and will enable teachers to have the necessary academic knowledge to instruct students at high standards.
- States should end the practice of requiring add-ons for teachers seeking middle school certification, which only makes it harder for middle schools to attract highly qualified teachers.

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¹ [NCLB Teacher Requirements Resource Guide](#) (PDF; 998.17KB; 77pp.). Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2004, 17.

² [NCLB and Middle Schools: Confronting the Challenges](#) (DOC; Outside Source), Policy Brief (July 2003).

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Professional Learning for Those Who Support Middle Grades Educators

From federal and state legislators down to county offices of education and local school districts, many layers of bureaucracy support the efforts of middle grades educators. At each level, the people who make decisions need to understand how those decisions will affect middle grades students and their preparation to succeed in school and life. Because the middle grades play a critical role in engaging students as lifelong learners, it is important for all organizations, districts, counties, and institutions of higher education to provide information and support that will prepare school board members, administrators, and teachers to be effective in helping middle grades students to succeed.

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For school board members

Although the focus of Recommendation 10 is on teacher and administrator training, visionary district leaders seek to provide quality professional development opportunities to all levels of the educational hierarchy.

School board members in effective districts recognize the critical role middle grades play in secondary school success and thus in dropout prevention. As a result, the board members work with the superintendent and district staff to ensure that every board member is knowledgeable about:

- Middle school test scores
- Percentage of eighth-grade students taking algebra
- Percentage of middle grade students scoring proficient on CSTs (indicating readiness for high school)
- Percentage of middle grades teachers who are considered **highly qualified** under NCLB requirements
- The condition of middle grades facilities, instructional materials, and technology supports
- The types of articulation strategies employed in district middle schools to ensure successful transitions from elementary schools and to high schools
- The professional development plans to help middle grades teachers focus on implementing the California Department of Education's (CDE) Twelve Recommendations for Middle Grades Success

In addition, school board members can ensure that parent and student leaders participate in training offered through the [California State PTA \(Parent Teacher Association\)](#) (Outside Source), and [California Interscholastic Federation \(CIF\)](#) (Outside Source).

Related Links

- [California School Boards Association](#) (Outside Source)
- [National School Boards Association](#) (Outside Source)

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For superintendents and district staff members

Effective district staff members ensure that specialists work with middle grades professionals to ensure that they are not caught in the middle. In addition to the middle grades knowledge listed under school boards, district staff members ensure that they understand how well middle school professional staff members understand and implement the California Department of Education's (CDE) Twelve Recommendations for Middle Grades Success. Superintendents and district staff members should be able to answer the following:

- What are the needs in middle grades counseling, health support materials, and staffing?
- What funding and resources do middle grades professionals need to support:
 - Ongoing teacher learning

Middle school structures such as adequate staffing in academics and co-curricular offerings

Flexible scheduling—ensuring that district bus schedules accommodate middle school needs for extended learning time to support student interventions and success

Articulation issues within any of the following configurations: K-8, 7-12, K-5, 6-8.

Related Links

- [Association of California School Administrators \(ACSA\)](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Association of School Business Officials \(CASBO\)](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Association of School Counselors \(CASC\)](#) (Outside Source)
- [TechSETS: People supporting technology in schools](#) (Outside Source)

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For middle grades principals

California schools are facing an influx of both new principals and new teachers as the baby-boom generation retires. Professional development is critical so that new professionals receive the skills and mentoring they need to succeed.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform developed criteria for high performance. The [School Self-Study and Rating Rubric](#) (DOC; 413KB; 9pp.), is a tool designed by the [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#) program to help schools analyze their progress toward excellence based on the National Forum's criteria. The rubric recognizes the importance of leadership and states: "Adults have time to plan, select, and engage in professional development," and "the school devotes resources to content-rich professional development."

Middle grades principals balance many roles. In addition to being an instructional leader, they must be able to build strong teams that support professional learning throughout the school day and year. In addition, middle grades principals also set the vision for a developmentally responsive school where all adults seek to build positive relationships with and among young adolescents.

New administrators need training and ongoing coaching or mentoring to be able to fill these many responsibilities. Some skills are unique to the middle grades experience and will help the school implement the California Department of Education's (CDE) Twelve Recommendations for Middle Grades Success. Among those skills, middle grades principals must know how to:

- Help staff members recognize and meet the developmental needs of adolescents.
- Create caring communities within the larger school community.
- Develop and support teacher leaders within the teaching teams.
- Articulate with feeder elementary and destination high schools.
- Initiate flexible scheduling that provides enrichment, standards-based curricula, electives, relationship-building, and interventions.
- Communicate high expectations and help young adolescents rise to the challenge of increased rigor at the middle grades level.
- Connect parents and the community to support student achievement.
- Provide counseling and health supports for students who need them.
- Ensure safe and welcoming facilities.
- Provide technology, library/media centers, and state board-adopted, developmentally appropriate instructional materials.
- Plan and provide professional development experiences that will equip teachers to deliver relevant and engaging standards-based lessons, differentiated instruction, and interventions.
- Lead teacher teams in analyzing and using assessment data to guide instruction.
- Manage fiscal resources to maximize learning.

For more about the principal's role as an educational leader, see the section on [instructional leadership](#) in Recommendation 9—Leadership.

Essential Program Component #3 calls for principals' instructional leadership training (AB 430, 2005). It supports professional development that focuses on building principals' and vice

principals' leadership skills and the capacity necessary to serve effectively in their complex roles. The training consists of three modules:

- **Module 1:** Emphasizes full implementation of standards-based instructional programs, including the ability to plan, monitor, and act on assessment data for improving instruction and student achievement.
- **Module 2:** Leadership & Management for Instructional Improvement focuses on how to align resources to improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement.
- **Module 3:** Focuses on technology applications that support Module 1 and Module 2, in addition to serving a key role for process and systemwide improvements.¹

Many districts and county offices of education offer administrator training. Although it is somewhat rare to find institutions of higher education that specifically train educators for the middle grades level, the [New Teacher Center \(NTC\)](#) (Outside Source), at the University of California, Santa Cruz, offers leadership training through its [School Leadership Development Division](#) (Outside Source).

Related Links

- [Administrator Training](#), California Department of Education.
- [California League of Middle Schools](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Middle Grades Partnership Network](#), California Department of Education.
- [Middle Grades Advocacy](#) (Outside Source), Middle Grades Council of the Association of California School Administrators.
- [Middle Grades Leadership Resources](#) (Outside Source), Association of California School Administrators.

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¹ [AB 75 Information Memo](#) (DOC; 124 KB; 7pp.), California Department of Education, 2005.

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Professional Learning for School Staff Members

Good professional learning is reflective—it helps all members of the school community examine their practice in light of outcomes, or student learning. For example, professional development activities lead staff members in analyzing data about student learning to identify needs and brainstorm possible improvement strategies. This process works whether the strategies involve instructional practice, school climate, or the effectiveness of assessment tools. In each case, the reflection activity asks practitioners to reflect on their efforts to determine “Did this work?”

All adults at a middle school benefit from collegial professional development opportunities that include reflection about how well the school as a whole is achieving the goals for student achievement. Reflections by professionals also need to consider the needs of young adolescents and the overall learning climate of the school. Teachers look at how their instructional practices help students learn. Counselors reflect on how they are helping students set personal and academic goals for success. Library/media instructors examine how they are helping students develop research skills and a love of reading. Custodians, lunch monitors, volunteers, and paraprofessionals examine their daily interactions with students to see how their practices affect student attitudes and behaviors as members of a community filled with respect for others.

Each adult in the school needs these opportunities to reflect. Considering the wide range of duties and daily schedules of the adults in any given school, administrators need to make every effort to provide learning opportunities for all staff members within a time frame that works for them and that allows opportunities for non-classroom personnel to participate. To optimize training effectiveness, professional development opportunities should fit into the regular school calendar and within the school day. For example, effective schools create a modified schedule that builds regular time each week for professional learning. In addition, scheduling for professional learning should avoid the following times whenever possible:

- Before or after school times that are not included in the contract
- Conflicts with the testing calendar or holidays to make sure people are not distracted
- Semester, trimester, or quarter deadlines for finals and grade reporting

In addition, administrators need to consider the learning styles of adults so they can respect their needs—particularly when developing half- or full-day training sessions. Teams responsible for creating professional learning activities can work with local district, county office of education, or higher education experts to learn how to address adult learning styles in each training session.

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How school design fosters professional learning

The middle school philosophy, and the California Department of Education's (CDE) Twelve Recommendations for Middle Grades Success, come to life by building relationships. In both small learning communities of students, in teacher teams, and in the schoolwide programs, effective middle grades practitioners use strong relationships to foster learning. When remodeling or building a new school, communities that build teaming into the facility design give student and faculty team members easy access to one another and promote professional learning on a daily basis.



In the Spotlight

Silverado Middle School, Dry Creek Joint Elementary School District, a 2003 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage 2003 Model School

A team of parents, teachers, students, and district office representatives who understood middle school philosophy designed the Silverado campus. The school buildings cluster around team “pods” that share a common planning room where members of the teaching teams can meet during breaks to share both materials and ideas. Likewise, students who are a part of the pod’s “family” see all of the team’s teachers daily and feel like part of a community.

- [Silverado Middle DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Dry Creek Joint Elementary DataQuest District Profile](#)
- [Silverado Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School-Visitor Guide: Silverado Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Dry Creek Joint Elementary School District](#) (Outside Source)
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Professional learning about team processes

One of the main benefits of teaming, according to researcher Mike Schmoker, is social. Teams create accountability within a community of people who care about each other.¹ He goes on to list four important “assurances” for teachers who participate in a PLC:

1. Teachers will work within the contract day.
2. Common assessments results will not affect teacher evaluations in a punitive way. For example, both the administrators and team members look at results and decide how to change them rather than blame each other.
3. Common assessment results will be used for team planning, not for publication.
4. Each teacher will be able to retain much individual autonomy in terms of instructional strategies and teaching style.²

Effective middle grades team members have discovered the importance of teaming norms. The norms for the adults on the team, both certificated and non-certificated members, include being on time for meetings, listening respectfully before responding, and following the agendas. In addition, schoolwide teams share norms for student behaviors. Faculty members post school and classroom norms in each room for the benefit of both students and staff. In this way, each member of the school staff knows and conveys consistent rules and expectations for behavior and academic performance. The result is that students know what is expected—they do not face different standards in different parts of the school.

Team members can establish systems to organize themselves according to major goals. For example, the following focus areas are common to many middle grades teams: structure, instruction, incentives, and discipline. To accomplish their goals, PLC members assign rotating responsibilities for the following:

- **Team Leader:** maintains a calendar of team activities and the team database (on testing results and other team data); represents the team to administration; and enforces team norms (for example, talking about tardiness with members who violate that norm.)
- **Team Recorder:** takes minutes of each meeting, organizes the spirit bulletin board, and sends minutes to PE teachers, librarians, resource teachers, etc.
- **Fund-raiser:** arranges for spirit activities, maintains accounts of funds, and organizes fund-raisers (including parent and community volunteers)
- **Discipline Person:** maintains discipline files, makes sure all discipline updates go to teachers, and counsels students on progressive discipline consequences.

In a discussion about effective professional learning practices in California middle schools, members of the [California Middle Grades Partnership Network](#) (CMGPN) suggested the following ways to begin building a culture of collaboration.

1. Collaboratively choose a team song, mascot, or other theme to reinforce team bonding.
2. Read *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning*

Communities (2002). Discuss significant culture shifts that have happened in the school and what needs to be in place to protect them.

3. During a staff meeting, write, "All students can learn . . . on the board and ask the teaching team members to discuss how they would finish that sentence. Discuss beliefs that underlie their sentences.
4. As a follow-up to item three, discuss how a shared mission, vision, and values change the culture—an expression of prevailing beliefs. Discuss how the faculty communicates a belief that all students can learn. For example, how does the faculty:

Encourage students to talk about the values of the school?

Treat students with kindness, honesty, dignity, and respect?

Model relationships by treating each other with kindness, honesty, dignity, and respect?

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Footnotes

¹ Mike Schmoker, "Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements In Teaching and Learning.", Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006, 114.

² Ibid., 135.

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Professional learning about sharing time

As noted in Recommendation 3—[Time](#), effective middle grades programs use flexible scheduling to create multiple opportunities for teachers to discuss instructional strategies that improve student learning. This flexible scheduling is also critical for involving members of the extended school team into important planning sessions. For example, flexible scheduling will allow time for physical education teachers, special education resource teachers, counselors, and library/media instructors to attend teaching team meetings or professional learning sessions that affect their work with students. Likewise, creative scheduling ensures that school secretaries and custodians participate in professional learning exercises about school safety, student behavior expectations, or schoolwide events.



In the Spotlight

Olive Peirce Middle School, Ramona City Unified School District, a California Middle Grades Partnership Network School

The master schedule provides a rotating-block schedule with extended time twice a week for team planning and collaboration. Instead of holding faculty meetings, staff members devote every Wednesday to professional collaboration in interdisciplinary, leadership, horizontal (subject-area), or all-staff team meetings. The use of substitute teachers allows team members release time to score and analyze quarterly benchmark assessments and to develop SMART (strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, time-bound) goals.

- [Olive Peirce Middle DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Ramona City Unified DataQuest District Profile](#)
- [Olive Peirce Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Ramona City Unified School District](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Middle Grades Partnership Network](#)

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Professional Learning for Teachers

“Educating people for a democratic society is cultural work. . . . We need to be creatively flexible because even if curriculum is standardized, our students are not. Teaching is more than methodology. It begins with understanding, and it depends on personal connections that honor the identities of learners. Conceptual borders are places to make new meanings—to explore different ways of thinking and being, to muck about with difficult questions and to be unafraid of wrong answers.”¹

Education researcher Mike Schmoker joins other noted researchers such as Richard DuFour in saying, “If there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: The right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting.”² Working together, teachers in effective middle schools examine student assessment data, discuss instructional techniques that helped students learn, and coach each other to improve their educational practices.

This collaborative focus on positive results in student learning is the purpose of professional learning communities. According to Hayes Mizell, a noted middle grades expert for the [National Staff Development Council](#) (Outside Source), educators will always need to understand policies, laws, and administrative procedures, but acquiring this information is not the same as professional learning. As a result, the weekly, structured time devoted to professional learning should focus on one thing: results in student learning.³

Members of effective middle grades learning communities build strong relationships within the team. These collegial relationships provide daily professional development through shared discussions on curriculum, instruction, assessments, interventions, and student engagement strategies. Among teachers whose schools dedicate time for team planning, 40 percent say it improves their teaching “a lot.” Another one-third says it improves their teaching “moderately.”⁴

According to research, school-based professional learning is one of the most potent ways of building collegial norms among teachers and principals. Colleagues who work together daily learn about one another’s strengths and weaknesses and develop relationships based on collaboration and trust. Such norms depend on colleagues who respect the confidentiality of their peers, are good listeners, facilitate reflective thought, are honest and open, respect new ideas and opinions, and are committed to one another’s success.⁵

Roland S. Barth, founding director of the Principals’ Center at Harvard University, says that the quality of relationships among adults at the school is a powerful influence on school quality and student accomplishment. Barth states that there are four categories of adult relationships: parallel play (side-by-side but not interacting), adversarial, congenial, and collegial (working well together). He states that the best schools are able to move beyond the parallel play and adversarial stages toward the congenial and collegial stages, which are prerequisites for productive professional learning and positive growth.⁶ (For more on [school climate](#), refer to the section in Recommendation 9—Leadership.)

Professional development improves classroom practice by empowering teachers to make changes in their everyday instruction so that students continue to achieve higher levels of proficiency. Professional learning communities are the most effective delivery method for professional learning because they embed learning in peer relationships on the job, are sustained over time, and are interactive.

Research indicates that there is a direct relationship between a school's effectiveness in implementing standards-based education and the skill levels of the school's professional staff. The effective middle school is one that provides a significant portion of the professional development needed by its staff . . . following the model found in teaching hospitals, where interns and seasoned practitioners grow together in their knowledge and skills, professional collaboration is the norm, and peer review is expected.⁷

Research by the [Consortium for Policy Research in Education](#) (Outside Source), (a collaborative effort by University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison) demonstrates that carefully designed professional development, if supported and sustained over time and focused on instructional content and materials, can change what happens in classrooms. Researchers found that impacts on teaching were evident after approximately 30 hours of professional development, and further impacts appeared after approximately 80 hours of professional development. The report stressed that effective professional development delivers a coherent set of strategies to develop teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge.⁸

Not surprisingly, *Similar Students, Different Results* states that teacher preparedness is critical to school success. "API performance was higher in schools where principals reported that a higher proportion of their teaching staff had the following qualities (listed roughly in descending order of importance):

- Demonstrated ability to raise student achievement
- Strong content knowledge
- Good fit with the school culture
- Training in curriculum programs
- Ability to map curriculum standards to instruction
- Supportive of colleague's learning and improvement
- Able to use data from student assessments
- Familiar with the school community
- Excited about teaching
- Familiar with state standards"⁹

Unfortunately, research is still sparse about effective professional development programs.¹⁰ Nonetheless, high-performing schools and districts place a high priority on ensuring that school professionals are part of a community that is committed to learning. As professionals, school and district staff members continue to learn together about how to improve teaching and learning. Members of PLCs can conduct on-site professional development throughout the year by:

- Discussing education reform books
- Having honest discussions about classroom practice
- Sharing successful lessons and strategies
- Examining student work together
- Reviewing test data and revising lessons to cover concepts students did not understand

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Footnotes

¹ Doug Noon, "About Borderland," a blog (Web log, opinion piece) for educators.

² Mike Schmoker, "Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in

Teaching and Learning." Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006, 177

³ Hayes Mizell, "Know 'High Quality' When You See It," *The Learning System*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (February 2007).

⁴ Kirk Winters, [Teacher Quality: Report on Teacher Preparation and Qualifications](#) (Outside Source), Internet news release by the U.S. Department of Education (January 28, 1999).

⁵ *Taking Center Stage*. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2001, 234.

⁶ Roland S. Barth, "Improving Relationships Within the Schoolhouse" (Outside Source), *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 63, No. 6 (March 2006), 8-13.

⁷ Adapted from *Taking Center Stage*, California Department of Education, 2001, 232.

⁸ Iris R. Weiss and Joan D. Pasley, [Scaling Up Instructional Improvement Through Teacher Professional Development: Insights From the Local Systemic Change Initiative](#) (PDF; Outside Source), Consortium for Policy Research in Education *Research Brief* (March 2006), 5-6.

⁹ [Similar Students. Different Results: Why Do Some Schools Do Better?](#) (PDF; 1MB; 20pp) (Outside Source), Mountain View, Calif.: EdSource, 2006.

¹⁰ Michael Allen, [Eight Questions on Teacher Preparation: What Does the Research Say?](#) (PDF; Outside Source), Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States, 2003.

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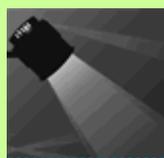
Professional learning for beginning educators

“Teachers join the profession hoping to inspire students, but their training doesn’t fully prepare them for the realities of the classroom. What’s more, the lifelines administrators provide to new hires aren’t always reliable. Most veteran teachers mandated by state or local officials to serve as mentors are not given time or money to provide more than a cursory orientation to their new peers. Cast adrift to sink or swim, many first-year educators quickly lose confidence or grow disillusioned, then quit. One-third of new teachers leave the profession within three years, and nearly half are gone within five years.”¹

New teachers need the support of successful veteran teachers so they can translate their commitment to teaching into effective classroom practices. According to the original *Taking Center Stage*, good middle grades teachers are masters at capturing the attention of young adolescents and delivering a high-interest, youth-centered curriculum based on standards. Staffing middle grades schools with caring, competent, teachers who understand standards-based learning takes a special commitment by districts. The skills and strategies to manage classrooms, maximize instructional time, and plan and deliver engaging, lively, youth-focused, standards-based instruction require ongoing professional development that includes coaching and collaborative work. These skills and traits should be the hallmarks of a standards-based school.²

The [Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment \(BTSA\)](#) (Outside Source), program is cosponsored by the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC). It provides professional development for newly credentialed, beginning teachers to help them fulfill the requirements for the California Clear Multiple- and Single-Subjects Credentials. However, the issue of teacher preparation for the middle grades remains unsolved. In California, there is no middle grades teacher certification, and new principals and new teachers need orientation to the learning needs of young adolescents, middle grades standards, and effective practice at the middle grades level.

The [New Teacher Center \(NTC\)](#) (Outside Source), at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is working with the California [Commission on Teacher Credentialing \(CTC\)](#) (Outside Source), to develop a program for a clear credential for the middle grades. In addition, the NTC offers a variety of professional development opportunities for educators who support beginning teachers.



In the Spotlight

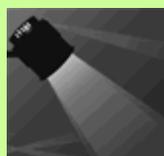
Richard Henry Dana Middle School, Wiseburn Elementary School District, a 2006 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage 2006 Model School and a California Middle Grades Partnership Network school

The district elected to enhance the practice of beginning teachers by pairing them

with a consulting teacher by using the Peer Assistance and Review Program. Like each school in the district, Dana now has several teachers who have volunteered (and received training) to support new teachers as they come into the school system and during certain times such as parent conferences, testing, and preparing report cards. Veteran teachers provide the support during grade-level release days.

- [Richard Henry Dana DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Richard Henry Dana Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School-Visitor Guide: Richard Henry Dana Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [California Middle Grades Partnership Network](#)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)
- [Peer Assistance and Review Program](#)

Knowing how to implement standards-based lessons that engage special education students, English learners, average learners, and gifted students requires high levels of skill. Veteran teachers on a teaching team play a critical role in helping newer teachers understand how to differentiate instruction without lowering expectations. The U.S. Department of Education's [Survival Guide for New Teachers](#) (Outside Source), provides new teachers with many suggestions about how to work with veteran teachers, principals, parents, and institutions of higher education.



In the Spotlight

Olive Peirce Middle School, Ramona City Unified School District, a California Middle Grades Partnership Network School

PLC members engage in peer coaching and observing as TIPS (Teacher Induction Program for Success) team members.

- [Olive Peirce Middle DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Olive Peirce Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Middle Grades Partnership Network](#)

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Footnotes

¹ Denise Kersten, "Watch Over Me," *Teacher Magazine*, Vol. 17, Issue 04 (January 1, 2006), 9-10.

² *Taking Center Stage*. Sacramento, California Department of Education, 2001, 26.

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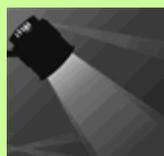
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Ongoing professional learning for teacher satisfaction and retention

Teaching is a challenging job. According to a 2007 report from the California State University system, [A Possible Dream: Retaining California Teachers So All Students Learn](#) (PDF; Outside Source), 22 percent of California teachers leave the profession after their first four years in the classroom, and ten percent of teachers transfer away from high-poverty schools each year. High teacher turnover negatively affects the educational experience of students due to loss of continuity, experience, and expertise.¹

Job satisfaction in teaching depends on a feeling of competence in managing classroom behavior and in helping students achieve grade-level standards. As a result, effective middle schools place a high priority on developing professional learning communities that will support teachers and provide them with the particular skills they need to succeed. For example, teachers need to know the “how” of pedagogy as much as the “what” of curriculum and standards. District policymakers must provide the fiscal resources and qualified personnel to support teachers if they hope to improve student learning on a systemwide basis. Teachers as well as principals must be involved in the development and implementation of districtwide initiatives to improve instruction if those initiatives are to have any real impact on teaching and learning.² Recognizing the importance of this type of strategic support, California's [Essential Program Component](#) (EPC) number six calls for ongoing instructional assistance and support for teachers.



In the Spotlight

Carlsbad Unified School District

Teachers in the Carlsbad Unified School District routinely participate in professional development that is differentiated according to teacher need and interest. Teachers receive a minimum of 22.5 hours of professional development per year through an online fee-based system called PD Express. Individual teacher progress is tracked and a certificate can be printed when course completion is verified. Teachers are provided with an electronic transcript that can be used for credential renewal.

- [Carlsbad Unified School District DataQuest Profile](#)
- [Carlsbad Unified School District](#)

The 2005 issue of the *Issues Report* highlighted research about the effectiveness of standards-based professional development. Researchers found that the professional development opportunities most likely to affect teacher practices and student achievement positively are:

- Of considerable duration
- Focused on specific content and/or instructional strategies rather than general
- Characterized by collective participation of educators (in the form of grade-level or school-level teams)
- Coherent (all parts are logically connected; consistent)
- Infused with active learning, rather than a stand-and-deliver model³

In a study on teachers who were effective in helping Latino students, researchers found that:

Almost all of the teachers in the study schools regularly participated in professional development activities (including attending college courses) to improve their teaching. In addition, they cultivated and maintained positive relationships with their students, showing concern for their welfare and displaying student work in school hallways. The teachers seemed to know their students well, demonstrating both respect and high expectations for them all. These teachers were successful in maintaining both a high level of discipline and a caring culture.⁴



In the Spotlight

Oliver Wendell Holmes Middle School, Los Angeles Unified School District, a 2007 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage 2007 Model School
The faculty at Holmes has expanded a co-teaching program that was initially designed to improve the educational outcomes for students with disabilities. However, after careful data analysis, the team realized that co-teaching had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the entire student body. Overall classroom performance and standardized test scores for the school's underachieving students improved dramatically after the co-teaching model began.

Torch Middle School, Bassett Unified School District, a 2008 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage 2008 Model School
Staff members attend professional development events. After they return, they are responsible for teaching the content to their peers.

- [Oliver Wendell Holmes Middle DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Oliver Wendell Holmes Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School-Visitor Guide: Oliver Wendell Holmes Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)
- [Torch Middle DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Torch Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School-Visitor Guide: Torch Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

School administrators and leadership teams can use a variation on the three-tier approach modeled by Response to Intervention (RTI) to design professional learning experiences (see the RTI section in Recommendation 2—[Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention](#)):

- **Benchmark professional learning** is a “one-size-fits all” approach to professional development for all teachers and provides basic strategies such as classroom management and differentiated instruction.

■

Strategic professional learning focuses on specific subjects and practices for teachers who are struggling.

- **Intensive professional development** is for teachers or administrators who are at risk of dropping out because they lack certain skills needed for success.

Many schools focus their professional development efforts on hiring outside experts. Often these outsiders assume teachers come to the sessions with no prior knowledge. Letting teachers work together to create professional development modules that fit their needs is often more effective.⁵

In addition to school, district, and county professional development opportunities, both professional associations and the Internet offer many ongoing learning options for teachers.

Related Links

- [California Teachers Association](#) (Outside Source)
- [CLMS Professional Development Events](#)(Outside Source), California League of Middle Schools.
- [Hire and retain qualified teachers](#), Recommendation 9—Leadership, TCSII.
- [Math and Reading Professional Development Intro](#), California Department of Education.
- [National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform](#) (Outside Source)
- [Professional Development](#) (Outside Source), National Middle School Association.
- [SB 472 Frequently Asked Questions](#)," California Department of Education.

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Footnotes

¹Ken Futernick, [A Possible Dream: Retaining California Teachers So All Students Learn](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Sacramento: California State University, 2007, vii, x.

²*A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom Practice*. Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2005, 4.

³Ravay Snow-Renner and Patricia A. Lauer, [McREL Insights: Professional Development Analysis](#) (PDF; Outside Source), The McREL Web site (2005), 6.

⁴Dan Jesse, Alan Davis, and Nancy Pokorny, [High Achieving Middle Schools for Latino Students in Poverty](#) (PDF; Outside Source), *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, Vol. 9 (2004), 33, 34.

⁵Linda Christensen, [Teacher Quality: Teachers Teaching Teachers](#) (Outside Source), *Rethinking Schools Online*, Vol.20, No. 2 (Winter 2005/2006).

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Professional learning from content experts

Most teachers want and need direct support in implementing standards-based instruction in difficult classroom contexts. The following list incorporates some of the many items school teams can build into their plans for site-based professional learning. In some cases, the experts will need to come from “outside” the school, while in many cases the expertise exists among team members. Team members might start with a discussion of the the California Department of Education's (CDE) 12 Recommendations for Middle Grades Success to determine which of the following relate to current school priorities:

- Subject matter competency
- Lesson design/backward mapping
- Effective use of planning and collaborative time
- How to develop team and classroom norms
- How to develop common assessments
- How to differentiate instruction for English learners
- How to differentiate instruction for special education and gifted students
- Strategies for classroom management
- How to run [student-led parent conferences](#) (refer to the section in Recommendation 11 —[Accountability](#))
- How to analyze school practices using the [School Self-Study and Rating Rubric](#) (DOC; 413KB; 9pp.).
- How to teach reading and writing across the curriculum
- How to involve parents
- How to include real-world and service-learning in class projects
- How to work as an interdisciplinary team

For an extensive list of other professional development topics, refer to [Idea Bank: School-Based Professional Development](#) from Appendix 14 of the original *Taking Center Stage* (2001).



In the Spotlight

A. C. Stelle Middle School, Las Virgenes Unified School District

At A. C. Stelle Middle School the English/language arts (ELA) department has transformed how they teach writing to their students. Beginning in 2003, ELA teachers believed their students could improve their writing yet felt unsure of which best practices to employ. Supported by their principal, Mary Sistrunk, and using school improvement monies, the English team developed an extensive two-year staff development effort to improve student writing. The new plan centered on implementing the six-trait model popularized by Vicki Spandel, teacher and author or more than 25 books including *Creating Writers*.

As commonly understood and used today, the six-trait writing model teaches students how to write well while giving teachers a common language for grading the following traits:

Ideas and Content (clear main idea, focused, interesting, complete).

- Organization (good opening, logical sequence, strong conclusion)
- Voice (energetic, engaging, consistent tone)
- Word Choice (active verbs, precise nouns and qualifiers, imagery)
- Sentence Fluency (smooth flow, varied sentence structure)
- Conventions (correct spelling, punctuation, grammar)

On the 2005 seventh grade writing proficiency test, student test results showed:

- Three percent scored eight out of eight.
- Twenty-five percent scored six out of eight
- Sixty-seven percent scored four out of eight
- Six percent scored two out of eight

On the 2008 test, scores showed:

- Thirty-nine percent scored eight out of eight
- Fifty percent scored six out of eight
- Zero percent scored four out of eight
- Less than one percent scored two out of eight

How did they make such impressive gains? Beginning in school year 2003-04, the English/language arts and the history social-science departments began with two days of on-site training on the six-traits writing model (board members, principals, district assistant superintendent and deputy superintendent participated in parts of the training to model district support). The teachers used the rest of the year to practice implementing the model and used staff planning time to assess the effectiveness of their strategies.

In the second year, the school administration used school improvement funds to hire Fred Wolff, a writing consultant who specialized in the six-trait model. Working with teachers during two weeks of in-classroom training, he modeled lessons using the six traits, then observed and critiqued as teachers conducted their own lessons. Wolff met with several middle school principals, the district assistant superintendent of education, and English department chairs from all three middle schools to develop a five-year plan for continued improvements in student achievement.

As a next step, teachers studied how to conduct student conferencing from Carl Anderson, literacy consultant and author of *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferencing with Student Writers*. As a result of the conferencing, teachers have noticed writing is stronger and more authentic.

[Alice C. Stelle DataQuest School Profile](#)

[A. C. Stelle Middle School](#) (Outside Source)

[English/language arts](#)

[How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferencing with Student Writers](#) (Outside Source)

Each teaching team needs veterans who know middle grades content and understand the unique needs of middle grades students. In addition, each team needs access to specialists who can help them develop intervention strategies. For example, members of a grade-level teaching team can use some of their common planning time to learn how to apply literacy strategies in all of the content areas (math, science, the arts, and social sciences).

The teaching team members can also learn from experts and one another about how to weave learning concepts and strategies into their lessons. For example, Howard Gardner's work suggests that schools must develop the following thinking capacities for America to survive as

a global economy. PLC members challenge each other to analyze how their teaching encourages students to develop:

- **A disciplined mind** – One that can think well and appropriately in the major disciplines.
- **A synthesizing mind** – One that can sift through a large amount of information, decide what is important, and put it together in ways that make sense personally and for others.
- **A creative mind** – One that can raise new questions, come up with novel solutions, and think “outside the box.”
- **A respectful mind** – One that honors the differences among individuals and groups, trying to understand and work productively with them.
- **An ethical mind** – One that thinks beyond selfish interests and aspires to be a contributing worker and citizen.¹



In the Spotlight

Serrano Intermediate School, Saddleback Valley Unified School District

The Orange County Department of Education has provided content experts to assist Serrano Middle School teachers through on-site professional learning exercises. In addition, the county offers many seminars on a wide range of topics related to improving student performance. Teachers at Serrano have used the concepts from those seminars to improve their instructional practices.

Alvarado Intermediate School, Rowland Unified School District, a 2004 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School

Delivery to special education students is different from delivery to students with limited English proficiency. As a result, the school staff uses targeted professional development so that teachers know specific skills for delivering curriculum to special populations at each grade level and in each content area. They also receive training so they understand how to use accommodations, tutors, supplemental materials, and scaffolding for students with special needs.

Rincon Intermediate School, Rowland Unified School District

Teachers add lessons and project ideas into a best practice binder that is organized by subject and grade level and is available for all team members to use.

[Alvarado Intermediate DataQuest School Profile](#)

[Alvarado Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)

[Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School-Visitor Guide: Alvarado Intermediate School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)

[Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

[Rincon Intermediate DataQuest School Profile](#)

[Rincon Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)

[Serrano Intermediate DataQuest School Profile](#)

[Serrano Intermediate School](#) (Outside Source)

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Footnote

¹Howard Gardner, [Beyond the Herd Mentality: The Minds That We Truly Need in the Future](#) (Outside Source), Education Week, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Sept. 14, 2005), 44.

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Professional learning from instructional coaches

Many educators believe that coaching institutionalizes effective instructional practice. Coaches are experienced peers who guide less-experienced colleagues on effective practice. Although some educators say external coaches are more effective because they can say things internal coaches may feel politically constrained from saying, others prefer the model of coaches who are onsite and can help during breaks and in regular team meetings. PLC team members, district office staff, and outside consultants play a valuable role in coaching teachers on instructional techniques that will improve student learning. Coaches are particularly helpful in several key areas:

- Knowing how to use differentiated instruction to deliver standards-based lessons
- Understanding classroom management
- Using lesson and course pacing schedules
- Making lessons developmentally appropriate for young adolescents
- Developing literacy skills (refer to Recommendation 1—Rigor, for more on [literacy](#)).

The [Peer Assistance and Review Program](#) (PAR) is a teacher peer assistance and review program that links employment policies and procedures with activities for professional development.



In the Spotlight

Aliso Viejo Middle School, Capistrano Unified School District

The PLC approach enables the special education team and general education teachers to work together to understand the learning styles and challenges of certain students and to share ideas that work best in classrooms.

Richard Henry Dana Middle School, Wiseburn Elementary School District, a California Middle Grades Partnership Network School and a 2006 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School

The school's "peer coaching" program enables instructors to visit other classes to gain an appreciation of one another's work and ideas for their own lessons. Shared lunch periods offer opportunities for informal professional sharing. Richard Henry Dana DataQuest School Profile.

- [Aliso Viejo DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Aliso Viejo Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Richard Henry Dana DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Richard Henry Dana Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Middle Grades Partnership Network](#)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School-Visitor Guide:](#)

[Richard Henry Dana Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)

- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

Each year, departmental teams in effective middle schools review what worked in pacing and delivering the grade-level content within the school year. Coaches from schools that experienced student achievement gains in a specific content area can work with departmental teams from district schools during pre-session in-service days to help them develop effective pacing schedules.

Adolescents today require a high degree of literacy to understand complex texts. As a result, many middle schools use “literacy coaches” to support academic area teachers who may not have learned about effective reading instruction. Literacy coaching includes many features common to effective professional development:

- It is grounded in inquiry and reflection.
- It is participant driven and collaborative, involving the sharing of knowledge among teachers within communities of practice.
- It is sustained, ongoing, and intensive.

Related Links

- [International Reading Association](#) (Outside Source)
- [Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse](#) (Outside Source)
- [Mathematics Specialists and Mathematics Coaches: What Does the Research Say?](#) (Outside Source), National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.
- [Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches](#) (PDF; Outside Source), International Reading Association.

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Professional learning through lesson studies

Many PLC team members join fellow teams from their school, district, or county to conduct lesson studies—a process where teachers:

Systematically examine their practice, with the goal of becoming more effective. This examination centers on teachers working collaboratively on a small number of 'study lessons'. Working on these study lessons involves planning, teaching, observing, and analyzing the lessons. To provide focus and direction to this work, the teachers select an overarching goal and related research question that they want to explore. This research question then serves to guide their work on all the study lessons.¹

Teams wanting to do a lesson study usually start with an existing lesson—something easy for all members to understand. Steps in the lesson study are as follows:

- Teachers work together to plan the lesson.
- Team members help each other set up for the lesson.
- One team member agrees to teach the lesson; others observe how well the students understand the main goal of the lesson.
- Shortly after the teaching session, team members reflect on the lesson together and make needed changes.
- Using the revised lesson plan, a second teacher conducts the lesson for a second class. Team members observe the lesson and then meet to discuss and refine it again.
- Teams share the perfected lessons with others in their school, district, or county.
- University partnerships can use the lesson to train new teachers.
- To make time for lesson studies, most schools hire substitutes or use professional learning days to conduct the lesson.

The point of lesson study is to observe student *learning*, not to comment on teaching. Teachers who are observing the developing lesson ask questions about student learning. For example:

- Are a majority of students staying engaged in the lesson?
- If not, at what point do they disengage?
- Is the vocabulary working for EL students?
- What other words might convey the concept without confusing English learners?

The "5 E Lesson Plan" is one type of lesson study format. It leads participants through five levels of study: engage, explore, explain, extend, and evaluate. The Internet includes many sample 5 E lesson plan templates. For example, see the [5 E Lesson Plan for Long Lesson](#) (DOC; Outside Source).



In the Spotlight

Kennedy Middle School, El Centro Elementary School District, a 2005 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage 2005 Model School

Teachers at Kennedy Middle school make use of lesson studies to improve instruction for the school's English learner population, which makes up 98 percent of the student body.

- [Kennedy DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Kennedy Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School-Visitor Guide: Kennedy Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

In his book, *Results Now*, Mike Schmoker gives a “pared down” version of the lesson study that he calls “The 20-Minute Team Meeting.” Using the shorter version, teachers become aware that even in a short time, they can collectively “craft fairly coherent, effective standards-based lessons and assessments.”²

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Footnotes

¹[What Is Lesson Study?](#) (Outside Source), Lesson Study Research Group, Teachers College, Columbia University online (2002).

²Mike Schmoker, *Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006, 112.

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Professional learning about classroom management

Classroom management in the middle grades depends heavily on creating engaging, active, and cooperative lessons. Team members need regular access to content experts who have developed skills in presenting the lessons in an engaging way to catch the interest of young adolescents and minimize classroom disruptions.



In the Spotlight

Toby Johnson Middle School, Elk Grove Unified School District, a 2006 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage 2006 Model School

Each year the school staff members participate in on-site professional development series. One year the series focused on classroom management. To make the series engaging, the staff members called it, "Lord of the Class Ring—Battle for Middle Earth." The next year the series was about "Cognitive Coaching" and the book, *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Marzano). The title of that series was "Tool Time —Instructional Strategies That Work."

- [Toby Johnson DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Toby Johnson Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School-Visitor Guide: Toby Johnson Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

Related Links

- [Classroom management](#), Recommendation 8—Safety, Resilience, and Health, TCSII.
- [Classroom Management: A California Resource Guide](#) (PDF; Outside Source), California Department of Education and Los Angeles County Office of Education.

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Professional learning through peer observation

Less-experienced teachers can gain a great deal of insight by observing how a skilled teacher manages student interactions while delivering a standards-based, grade-level lesson. When teams plan such observations, they can use substitute teachers to cover a class period and then use their regularly scheduled planning time to discuss major findings from the observation. When structured somewhat like a lesson study, peer observations help to improve practice for all teachers on the team. The benefits are as follows:

- Veteran teachers learn to articulate how they achieved specific results.
- New teachers observe a carefully planned lesson.
- All teachers on the team discuss effective strategies and brainstorm how to improve them even further.



In the Spotlight

Granite Oaks Middle School, Rocklin Unified School District

The team structure helps teachers to continue learning and growing in their profession. Four core teachers form each interdisciplinary team in a grade-level academy. They work collaboratively to develop interdisciplinary lessons, help each other solve problems, and give the academic and social support students need. Teams integrate special education students and resource teachers so that students receive the core curriculum.

Teachers also work in departmental teams. For example, three math teachers form a departmental team and work together to ensure that the students learn the subject.

Two times per month, the whole staff meets and works as a team. Two times per month, the leadership team meets. It includes the curricular leaders by subject area, the counselor, librarian, and academy leaders.

The flexibility and interdependence of the teams in creating their own schedule, and in working in different configurations helps in solving problems. The teachers work together to help each department succeed. They want the *whole* to work, not just the pieces.

- [Granite Oaks DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Granite Oaks Middle School](#) (Outside Source)

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Professional learning about data review and use

As mentioned in the section on [common benchmark assessments](#) in Recommendation 2—Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention, effective middle grades teachers develop common assessments so they can ensure that all teachers evaluate student work by using the same measures. District specialists can be very effective in helping a new school team to develop and then analyze the results from common assessments. Steps include the following:

1. Establish pacing guides for one year or one semester of grade-level course work.
2. Set a vertical articulation planning day for all academic teachers to meet and discuss the pacing, expectations, and preparation needed for students to move from one grade level and to the next (for example, to move from fifth through eighth grade in English language arts).
3. Using the pacing schedule for one grade, establish a four- to six-week assessment calendar.
4. Using the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) [CST blueprints](#) as a guide, develop a pacing guide for the standards-based concepts that must be covered within each unit.
5. Establish proficiency levels for each standard.
6. Develop an assessment for each unit of study or use the embedded assessments in the state-adopted instructional materials.
7. Develop (or adapt) a standards-based grading [rubric](#) (Recommendation 2—Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention).
8. Set a calendar for dates when the teams will analyze results from each assessment (by grade and content level—i.e., seventh grade social science).
9. After analyzing results by classroom and by question, discuss how to adjust instruction to:

Help students who did not master the concepts.

Reteach concepts that most students missed.

Improve instruction by teachers whose students did not reach proficiency.

During data analysis discussions, members of PLCs examine how well each subgroup of students is progressing toward mastery of the standards. The team members learn from teachers whose students made significant progress and collaboratively design new lessons to assist students who struggle or those who need more challenge. (See the discussion about [differentiated instruction](#) in Recommendation 2—Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention”).



In the Spotlight

Lee Mathson Middle School, Alum Rock Union School District, a 2006 On the Right Track school

The staff and students at Mathson Middle School made a 198-point gain on California's Academic Performance Index over three years and moved from a statewide decile ranking of 1 to a 5. Ongoing improvement at the school included Mathson's extensive staff collaboration around data and changes to their instructional program based on test results.

- [Lee Mathson Middle DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Lee Mathson Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Lee Mathson Middle School On The Right Track](#) (Outside Source)
- [On the Right Track 4 Symposium](#)

Related Links

- [Data management](#), Recommendation 2—Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention, TCSII.
- [Lead data analysis](#), Recommendation 9—Leadership, TCSII.
- [Local assessment data collection and analysis](#), Recommendation 2—Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention, TCSII.
- [Test interpretation](#), Recommendation 2—Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention, TCSII.

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Educational technology for professional learning

New technologies and the Internet provide a wide variety of professional learning and instructional supports for teaching and learning.

Related Links

- [California Educational Technology Professionals Association \(CETPA\)](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Learning Resource Network \(CLRN\)](#) (Outside Source)
- [EdTechProfile](#) (Outside Source)
- [Educational Technology \(Ed Tech\)](#), Recommendation 2—Instruction, Assessment, and Intervention, TCSII.
- [Integrating technology](#), Recommendation 4—Relevance, TCSII.
- [Open Educational Resources \(OER\) Commons](#) (Outside Source)
- [Promoting Technology Integration School-Wide: What the Research Says about What Works](#) (Outside Source), Technology Information Center for Administrative Leadership (TICAL).
- [Technology Information Center for Administrative Leadership \(TICAL\)](#) (Outside Source)
- [TechSETS](#) (Outside Source)

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Professional Learning for Other Certificated Staff Members

Library/media center staff members, school counselors, special education resource teachers, and visiting content experts (for example, roving music, art, or foreign language teachers) are important members of the school faculty. To help them incorporate their lessons and practices into the overall school mission, plan, and goals, these professionals need to be included in faculty planning sessions. Although they could not possibly attend every grade-level or departmental team meeting, it is also helpful for them to join in strategic team discussions, particularly as they relate to school climate, student motivation, and behavioral expectations.

These non-classroom staff members also need professional development opportunities that are specific to their role and expertise. In addition to district, county, and higher education learning opportunities, several organizations provide professional development for adjunct faculty members.

Related Links

For library/media professionals

- [American Association of School Librarians](#) (Outside Source)
- [American Library Association](#) (Outside Source)
- [Library Research Services \(LRS\)](#) (Outside Source)
- [School Libraries](#), California Department of Education.

For school counselors

- [American School Counselor Association \(ASCA\)](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Results-Based School Counseling and Student Support Guidelines \(2007\)](#) (PDF; 872KB; 85pp.)
- [Counseling/Student Support](#), California Department of Education.
- [Professional Associations and Ethical Standards](#), California Department of Education.

For special education teachers

- [Special Education](#), California Department of Education.
- [Teachers—Special Education](#) (Outside Source), Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition, U. S. Department of Labor.

For other educational professionals

- [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages](#) (Outside Source)
- [California Foreign Language Project](#) (Outside Source), Stanford University.
- [California Language Teachers' Association](#) (Outside Source)
- [Education](#) (Outside Source), National Gallery of Art.
- [Internet Activities for Foreign Language Classes](#) (Outside Source), California Language Teachers' Association.
- [Lesson Plans](#) (Outside Source), The Teacher's Corner.

- [Lesson Plans and Resources for ESL, Bilingual, and Foreign Language Teachers](#) (Outside Source), California State University, Northridge.
- [Visual & Performing Arts](#), California Department of Education.
- [World Language](#), California Department of Education.

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Professional Learning for Paraprofessionals and Other Classified Staff

Educational aides provide an increasing amount of instructional support to middle grades students through tutoring and after-school enrichment centers. As a result, it is critical for these paraprofessionals to “stay in the loop” of team planning **and** to receive professional learning opportunities so that they know how to coordinate learning supports with classroom lessons and assignments.

According to the federal No Child Left Behind Act, a paraprofessional is defined as any employee who:

- Provides instructional support, even if it is only part time
- Is under the direct supervision of a teacher
- Is in a program supported with [Title I, Part A](#) funds¹

Any paraprofessional serving in a Title I school must have a high school diploma or “recognized equivalent unless he or she is proficient in English and a language other than English, acts as a translator for parent/guardians, works in a non-instructional setting (such as food services), is an unpaid volunteer, or works in a program that does not receive Title I funds.”²

Lesson planning support and articulation with classroom teachers is critical for people who run tutoring and after-school centers. Several strategies can help teachers and paraprofessionals collaborate even when scheduling joint meetings is difficult:

- Teachers can post daily lessons on the school's Web portal so that personnel in the tutoring or after-school centers can access every student's lessons and assignments.
- Copies of classroom books and computers will help the paraprofessionals keep students on task even if they forget to bring their classroom materials.
- A database showing students' name and classroom schedules will help paraprofessionals check (either in person or on the Web) with teachers about student learning needs, behavior problems, or assignments.
- Adjust the learning center schedule to allow paraprofessionals to participate in team meetings.

Unlike paraprofessionals, most classified staff members such as office staff and custodians do not directly affect instruction. However, these school support personnel can have a powerful impact on the school climate and student connectedness. In addition, they often serve as informal ambassadors to the parent/guardians and community members who visit the school.³ In recognition of their importance to the school climate, effective middle grades faculty members make every effort to include classified staff members in schoolwide planning, especially at the beginning of each school year.

For example, classified staff members often have insights that will add to the effectiveness of the positive discipline or school safety plans. In addition, their awareness of and participation in schoolwide initiatives and celebrations contributes to students' perceptions about the school as a caring community. This community “feeling” often helps students feel more connected and

safe.

In addition to participation in schoolwide planning and goal-setting meetings, classified staff members often have access to district, county, or union professional learning opportunities.

Related Links

- [California Association for Bilingual Education \(CABE\)](#) (Outside Source)
- [Education Support Professionals](#) (Outside Source), National Education Association.
- [National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals](#) (Outside Source)

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¹ [No Child Left Behind: Paraprofessional Quality—Action Guide for Parents and Communities](#) (PDF; Outside Source). Washington, D.C.: Public Education Network, 2002, p. 2.

² Ibid., 3.

³Vital Links—Classified employees are crucial piece of parent-school partnership, California School Employee Association online (April 2007).

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Conclusion

Students who attend schools where the adults are excited about learning receive invaluable modeling about the importance of education. PLC members not only convey the excitement of continually improving their professional skills, but they also serve as a catalyst for schoolwide improvement by continually sharing best practices. In every meeting, PLC members analyze results to determine what factors led to improvement in student learning. Through honest discussions and reflective practice, they learn from mistakes and share successes, thus providing continuous professional development throughout the year.



In the Spotlight

Frank Wright Middle School, Imperial Unified School District, is a 2007 Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage Model School

The staff members at Frank Wright Middle School have instituted many organizational structures and processes to ensure that their students have the best education possible. Some of the organizational strategies include the following:

- a. The school has created a culture of common vision and shared decision-making.
- b. Each team of teachers has a common prep time to facilitate planning, communication, and coordination.
- c. Teams collaborate and use assessment data to develop intervention programs.
- d. Coaching (both formal and informal) is a school-wide norm.
- e. The school schedules interventions daily both during and after school.
- f. The leadership team members act as instructional coaches for the other members of the staff.
- g. A distributed leadership team meets two times per month, trains one day per month, and coaches other staff members as needed.
- h. Grades are updated in student planners every two weeks.

- [Frank Wright DataQuest School Profile](#)
- [Frank Wright Middle School](#) (Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage—Model School-Visitor Guide: Frank Wright Middle School](#) (PDF; Outside Source)
- [Schools to Watch™-Taking Center Stage](#)

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell recognizes the importance of professional learning in education. In 2004, he convened a group of teachers, administrators,

parents, business leaders, and students called the [P-16 Council](#). Its purpose was to better coordinate and integrate education in California, from preschool through college. In the first year, the council made recommendations on academic rigor. In the second year, Superintendent O'Connell formulated four essential questions to guide the P-16 Council subcommittee discussions about professional development for teachers, administrators, and instructional staff. The four questions focus on:

1. Recruitment: How can California attract a high-quality and diverse workforce to the education profession to fill the demand created by retiring staff and growing school districts?
2. Preservice education: How can we work to ensure that California's preservice programs develop fully prepared teachers and administrators and other instructional staff?
3. Beginning educators: How should we support new teachers, administrators, and instructional classified employees?
4. Continuing educators: How should educational institutions support continuing educators through professional development?

The [P-16 Council](#) Web site will continue to host results from the ongoing dialogue about professional learning. Likewise, the *TCSII* Web portal will add new information about successful professional learning practices at local schools.

The appendixes at the end provide a recommendation and resources on the topic of professional learning.

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