

Chapter 7

District–Wide Transformation Using Intentional Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter details a rural cooperative school district’s eight-year journey to transform its professional culture using intentional learning communities as a cornerstone framework. The district study began with professional learning communities and then, with the support of a dedicated assistant superintendent and ongoing coaching, invested time and resources to dramatically shift the professional learning culture to be collaborative and reflective. Their process is detailed before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and evidence of how their culture shifted is shared using a transformational learning framework created by the authors.

DISTRICT-WIDE TRANSFORMATION USING INTENTIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

This chapter shares the authors’ perspective on the journey of one school district as it works toward district-wide transformation with Intentional Learning Communities (ILC) as the cornerstone structure. ILCs are a specific type of learning community and the authors use the definition developed by educators working with The School Reform Initiative (now CLEE): “At their best, SRI’s Intentional Learning Communities (ILCs) are places where educators work together to learn the skills of reflecting, collaborating, deprivatizing practice, and exposing and exploring fundamental assumptions. ILCs by definition are where groups build shared norms and values and hold each other accountable for being faithful to them” (School Reform Initiative, n.d.).

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When this work began, the authors of this chapter were the executive directors of, respectively, The School Reform Initiative and the Q.E.D. Foundation, two organizations with long histories of supporting schools with collaborative processes. Both authors are also facilitators of professional development related to Intentional Learning Communities and have extensive experience supporting schools to develop collaborative practices. In 2014, the authors of this chapter were fortunate to be part of a grant-funded Transformational Learning Collaborative that took up the challenge of identifying impact metrics to effect substantive and sustainable learner-centered change. This collaboration consisted of leaders from four strategically aligned organizations - Q.E.D. Foundation, School Reform Initiative, School Project Foundation, and the Center for Learning Differences. This collaborative team spent years together, learning about transformational schools through school visits, shared reading and research, and reviewing relevant literature on school transformation. Through this collaborative work, three pillars were identified that are required for a district to move from traditional to transformational: Learner-Centered Paradigm, Professional Culture, and Reflective Leadership. This chapter utilizes this three-pillar framework as a lens to document how the district in question shifted its practice from traditional to transformational through Intentional Learning Communities (ILC).

In 2016, the authors began a consulting relationship with a rural cooperative school district with approximately 2200 students K-12. The assistant superintendent contacted the Q.E.D. Foundation to explore ways to strengthen their teaching and learning work, having had experience with collaborative, reflective practices from earlier training and involvement with the School Reform Initiative. The district had a history of training in Professional Learning Communities (PLC). As in many school districts, the PLC implementation was inconsistent. While faculty and staff used the name PLC to refer to their professional meetings, it meant different things to different teams. Some used their PLC time to do school- and district-directed work, and some used it to catch up on routine team communications and tasks. One of QED's goals was to infuse the professional culture of the district with the mindset for collaborative improvement by utilizing the Intentional Learning Communities (ILC) model. This model elevates teacher-directed work while also developing skills, knowledge, and dispositions that impact the larger professional culture of the district.

After talking with Q.E.D., a three-pronged proposal was suggested. The first was to build a professional learning culture using the School Reform Initiative (now CLEE) work of protocol-supported ILCs. The second prong was to provide learner-centered training, specifically at the middle school level, utilizing the All Kinds of Minds™ neurodevelopmental framework, and the final prong focused on providing leadership support for district and building leaders to help weave together the work being implemented. This three-pronged approach aligned with the three pillars identified through the Transformational Learning Collaborative work and allowed the opportunity to support a thoughtful implementation.

Creating the Foundation

In the summer of 2017, the first four-day professional development for teacher leaders was held. The agenda focused on introducing the teacher leaders to ILCs and helping them learn how to build collaborative practices and facilitation skills, and grounding their experience in the research related to the use of protocols as structures for conversations, including utilizing excerpts from *The Power of Protocols* (McDonald, et. al, 2013). The opportunity was opened to elementary, middle, and high school teachers interested in learning more about collaborative practices. The 25 attendees at this first training were the 'early adopters,' teachers in the district willing to expand their professional capacity in service to their

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