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Commitment of Leadership Teams: A District-Wide Initiative Driven by Teacher Leaders

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Professional learning communities allow groups of colleagues to unite by their interest in common topics about their school operations, functions, and practice. Recently, traditional top-down management styles have been overshadowed by shared leadership models, such as professional learning communities, which stress collaboration through the distribution of leadership. This autoethnographic study uses personal narratives to chronicle one district's journey toward full implementation of a teacher-led, district-wide initiative. Through the use of professional learning communities as a standard practice for engaging school professionals in problem-solving, all teachers are vested in collaboration and joint problem solving using a shared knowledge base about students, teaching, and learning. From the perspective of teacher leaders immersed in the effort, the authors trace the school reform process from its inception sharing the challenges, successes, obstacles, and joys that emerged. Based on their work, the authors also provide suggestions for future practice and research.

School reform efforts have inundated the United States' educational system for more than a quarter of a century. Sparked by the National Commission on Excellence in Education's *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983), education restructuring began focusing on building a 'capacity' for change within schools. Today, successful school reform relies solely on the abilities of individual stakeholders within school settings to manage change as the organization. According to Muijs and Harris (2006), "building the capacity for school improvement requires paying careful attention to how collaborative processes in schools are fostered and developed" (p. 961).

As teachers begin to collaborate, analyze current functions of their schools, and adjust their practices, they become participants in whole school change. They become aware of and concerned about school-wide issues and are able to brainstorm possible solutions and act to make change happen (Lieberman & Miller, 2007; Little, 2007; Vernon, 2003; Vernon-Dotson, in press). School reform issues and other wide-spread changes in schools that have been documented as successful were achieved, in part, through effective teaming and collaboration (Harris, 2008; Hord, 2004, 2009; Vernon-Dotson, in press).

Distributed Leadership Model

In today's schools, traditional top-down management styles are being overshadowed by shared leadership models which stress collaboration through the distribution of leadership and participative decision making by teams of stakeholders within the school (Copland, 2003; Gronn, 2002; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). According to Spillane and Diamond (2007), distributed leadership is best understood as a practice distributed over leaders, followers, and their situation. Although this type of approach often describes leadership as being performed by the entire educational community instead of by a few designated leaders at the top of the administrative chain (Copland, 2003), it does not mean that all

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members are leaders (Harris, 2008). "The core assumption is that each member has some leadership abilities that will be needed by the group at some time" (Harris, 2008, p. 174). When teachers are provided the opportunity to collaborate and actively engage in a distributed leadership model, it enhances organizational change, promotes teacher development, and supports school improvement (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2007; Vernon-Dotson, in press).

Although much of the literature on distributed leadership emphasizes the positive aspects, Harris (2008) cautions, "it is not simply assumed that distributed leadership is automatically a good thing" (p. 178). According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006):

> Distributed leadership can enhance the sustainability of deep and broad learning for all students or disintegrate into the kind of turmoil that sucks the energy and enthusiasm out of students and staff. Distributed leadership can be guided by an inspirational leader…; develop and evolve organically…; emerge as a dynamic community practice…; or take on an assertive and activist character…. Alternatively, distributed leadership…can sabotage a school's efforts at improvement, or it can destabilize the leadership of inexperienced administrators. (p. 136-137)

Despite these warnings, the daily interactions between school leaders and members of the school organization allow decision-making to be managed and directed by individuals vested in the education process (Gronn, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Harris, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2007; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Therefore, "Distributing leadership across schools and other organizations isn't just common sense; it is the morally responsible thing to do" (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 97).

Professional Learning Communities

Distributed leadership plays an important role in identifying and understanding practices that initiate the conditions for professional learning communities (Harris, 2008; Hord, 2009; Spillane, 2006). Professional learning communities are defined as organizations within schools that afford staff and administrators opportunities to actively engage in shared leadership practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Grossman, Weinberg, & Woolworth, 2000; Hord, 2004; Little, 2007; Lieberman & Miller, 2007). Members of professional learning communities meet regularly to engage "in joint work, critical reflection, and problem solving" (Lieberman & Miller, 2007, p. 105). They collaborate toward a common purpose and take collective responsibility for achieving their goals in a collegial manner (Hord, 2009; Lieberman & Miller, 2007; Little, 2007).

Professional learning communities do not spontaneously transpire in schools (Grossman et al., 2000). They are guided by administrators who are willing to distribute their power and engage in democratic, collegial dialogue surrounding meaningful topics. In effective professional learning communities, teachers and leaders consistently use "data to make decisions about what to learn, how to learn it, how to transfer and apply it to their classrooms, and how to assess its effectiveness" (Hord, 2009, p. 43). The professional learning community structure, therefore, is an essential component for organizational development, teacher development, and improved student learning (Little, 2007).

The purpose of this article is to document one district's journey toward full implementation of a teacher-led, district-wide initiative: implementing professional learning communities via a distributed leadership model known as the Commitment of Leadership Teams (COLT). From the perspective of teacher leaders who were immersed in the process, the authors trace the school reform initiative from its inception through full, district-wide implementation sharing the challenges, successes, obstacles, and joys that emerged throughout their journey.

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Methodology

Findings here are part of a larger district wide multi-method study exploring the impact of teacher leadership teams, embedded teacher professional development, and professional learning communities on student learning and outcomes in four schools within one district. For this study, the lead researcher was approached by six teachers (three from the high school and one each from the middle, intermediate, and primary schools from one district) and asked, *"How can we tell our story?"* All of these teachers (the co-authors) are members of their respective school-wide leadership teams and facilitators of their schools' communities of learners known as the "COLT teams." This study uses an autoethnographic approach with the teacher-researchers as the participants in their own study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). These personal experiences offer reflections of "the flow of thoughts and meanings that persons have in their immediate situations" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 636). This collection of personal experience narratives documenting the history of COLT at the individual school and district levels offers "lessons for further conversations rather than undebatable conclusion" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744).

Over the course of a three month period in the fall of 2008, the team of researchers met bi-weekly to document their lived experiences. Through the use of archival data (e.g., meeting minutes, newsletters) and ongoing dialogue, the authors were able to recollect and document the history of their "COLT teams." After each session, they returned to their respective schools to verify their own memories and interpretations of past events with others who also experienced that history. This type of data collection, first-person accounts, naturally raises the question of truth as a limitation. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), "narrative truth seeks to keep the past alive in the present" (p. 745). Personal narrative is used in this study as a means of "self-discovery or self-creation, for the author[s] as well as for those who read and engage the text" (p. 746).

Context

Chartiers Valley School District is a suburban district located in southwestern Pennsylvania at the urban fringe of a major city. Approximately 3500 students attend the four schools that span kindergarten through 12th grade. Of those students, 90 percent are Caucasian, five percent are African-American, four percent are identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, and less than one percent are Hispanic (compared to the state averages of 75 percent, 16 percent, two percent, and six percent, respectively).

More than 240 teachers staff the classrooms of the four schools: Primary School, Intermediate School, Middle School, and High School. The Primary School serves 750 kindergarten through second graders. At this school 50 teachers serve on eight COLTs. The Intermediate School has just over 50 teachers educating 750 students in grades three through five. Nine COLTs are at the Intermediate School. Approximately 830 sixth through eighth graders attend the Middle School where 60 teachers serve on 13 Middle School COLTs. At the traditional ninth through 12th grade High School, 1100 students are taught by more than 90 teachers. These teachers are the members of 12 High School COLTs.

Background

The thrust behind COLT lies in the history of reform initiatives that began at Chartiers Valley High School prior to the new millennium. The High School launched two major reform initiatives that served as the impetus to address the increased awareness nationally for schools to alter the way they did business. These two school-wide initiatives provide insights to the internal workings of the High School and the District:

- The *Integrated Studies Block* created cohorts of ninth and tenth grade students with two teachers in a double-block arrangement integrating English and the Social Studies. The flexibility of time (85 minutes) allowed for creative interdisciplinary lessons. The Integrated Studies Block directly involves over 50 percent of the students in the school and 14-16 teachers.

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- The *Future Life EXperiences (FLEX)* program created a senior year performance exhibition along with a four year progression of career and community service preparation as a graduation requirement. The school and community have embraced Senior Exhibition Day as one of celebration. This initiative directly involves 100 percent of the faculty in various ways as teachers of the process, mentors to students, and judges of the exhibitions.

As a result of these initiatives, teachers began opening their classroom doors and working collaboratively toward student success. Further, the school gained recognition from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Department of Education for being comprehensive, highly organized, monitored, and of high quality.

A number of interesting characteristics about the initiatives of the 1990s surfaced. First, they have been sustained and maintained. They were carefully launched, nurtured, piloted, and revisited for consistent upgrading. Second, they were teacher-driven and teacher created. The change process was carefully navigated and the administration, School Board, students, and community were brought on board in a slow, but lasting manner that is indicative of successful and sustaining work. Third, these efforts created the capacity for continuous improvement and strong teacher leadership. The teachers owned the process and the products. Embedded in the culture of Chartiers Valley High School was a teacher's role which included taking ownership of good practice, working closely with administration, and addressing student achievement in thoughtful and meaningful ways.

With a strong tradition already established, a group of teacher leaders sought another way to galvanize the faculty and put this culture to more good work. In 2000, the High School principal and one teacher leader visited another high school in the region where leadership teams were in place. These teams were composed of teachers and built around teacher created topics concerning the school and student achievement. A structure that could be replicated was observed. This observation was seen as a means of providing more venues for existing teacher leadership and serving as a laboratory to nurture new teacher leadership.

A teacher leadership team was formed with guidance of a regional initiative, the Agenda to Promote Educational eXcellence (APEX). APEX was a private, nonprofit organization that promoted leadership from the ranks. Initially, the goal of this project was to launch an effort to achieve a Blue Ribbon Award at the High School. During the same time, the High School was preparing for an evaluation by its accrediting body and, nationally, the concept of teacher leadership began to surface more prominently. The implementation of teacher leadership teams moved to the forefront of the conversations of the teacher leaders involved in APEX. It was a natural movement for a school with a decade of culture in teacher leadership. By the 2003-2004 school year, the High School COLTs (also the mascot of the school) were born.

The successes of the early teams varied but the process was invaluable for rooting COLT into the culture of the High School. The principal was strongly supportive of the teams, seeing it as a means of tapping into the wisdom and understanding of classroom teachers. It became apparent that teacher leadership must have support from the administration. Without this support and validation, morale would breakdown.

During 2005, the district saw wholesale changes in the Central Office administration. The Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent retired and new ones were hired. If these new administrators balked at the concept of teacher empowerment and teacher leadership, a dozen years of work could be in jeopardy. The previous administration had not blocked efforts and allowed the COLT to function. They witnessed the previous successes in teacher-led initiatives and understood the value in the process.

Being proactive, the original High School leadership team from APEX initiated a meeting with the new administration. During the meeting, the leadership team communicated their interest of improving student achievement in the school and placing themselves in a position to earn the Blue Ribbon Award via COLT. Essentially, the team informed the new Central Office administrators that "in our school, teachers are leaders" and declared, "We *Are* Chartiers Valley!" The reaction to this was stunning. The Central Office Administrators were astonished and pleased that this quality of teacher

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leadership existed at the High School. In turn, they were prepared to enhance those efforts in tangible ways. After over a decade of work, the efforts of the High School teacher leaders were poised to take off even further.

"*Their Stories*"

As promised, the Central Office encouraged the teacher leadership team to continue with COLT. The enthusiasm for this teacher-led, leadership team initiative was invaluable and exhibited the importance of teacher leadership in Chartiers Valley School District. First, the superintendent shared his vision of having teacher leadership teams and COLT in all four schools within the district. Instituting the teams district-wide allowed for the entire district to embrace teachers as leaders. Second, it helped to align all teachers from kindergarten through the 12th grade.

Recognizing the value in COLT, when the idea of a monthly two hour delay was presented by this High School leadership team, Central Office embraced it. In fact, the School Board approved a district-wide schedule change for the yearly calendar. One day per month, a delayed start of two hours for students was added. This time was explicitly reserved for COLT planning. Other support from Central Office included the Superintendent holding regularly scheduled monthly meetings with the original leadership team and providing release time for COLT members to attend leadership conferences at the state and local level. The Superintendent was a member of Duquesne University's Superintendent Research Collaborative, which served to align university faculty with superintendents interested in research.

Initiated by the High School COLT leaders, teachers throughout the district volunteered to join a writing group with the university faculty member. The purpose of this article is to disseminate the valuable information gathered during their journey through the implementation of teacher leadership teams and professional learning communities as a district level, teacher-led initiative. These are their stories. A personal narrative from each school documents the beginnings of their journey.

High school leaders' perspective. Once the idea of forming teacher leadership teams took off, the next step was to involve the faculty in creating the actual COLTs. The original leadership team surveyed the faculty regarding student achievement which was and remains the overarching goal of COLTs. Based on these survey results, ten teams were formed with approximately ten teachers per team.

Though COLT got off to a good start, it was not without some very common and expected reactions from some of the faculty. For the most part, the buy-in was very successful; however, some teachers reacted with skepticism. A few believed that the new COLT work and responsibilities were actually issues that should be handled by the administration. "We are doing administration's job!" was an oft-used, general complaint by a small number of colleagues. Clearly, as with any change, some did not see the value immediately; they needed evidence and proof first. Still others believed that teachers and administrators should maintain distinctly separate roles regarding decision making. The team leaders listened to their thoughts, addressed them, and more importantly, moved on.

From 2003-2005, COLT met once a month on days designated for mandatory professional development hours in accordance with teacher contracts. This system worked well for the first two years of COLT, but when a new contract was approved the first roadblock was hit. Since teachers were no longer contractually obligated to complete the yearly 30 hours of professional development (which paralleled previous state certification requirements), finding time to hold COLT meetings became difficult. The principal allotted some faculty meeting time and some time on in-service days, but this system was not consistent and created a lot of stopping and starting with the teams. Most of COLT teams reported spending nonproductive time during the meetings due to catching up from the last meeting, which may have been more than two months prior. Despite these challenges, the leadership team continues to take great pride in the variety of initiatives and policies changed through the work of High School COLTs, including the monthly two hour delay.

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Middle school leader's perspective. It always starts with a whisper. The words "Colt Teams" first surfaced in the Middle School as inquisitive rumblings from a handful of faculty members. Some knew teachers in the High School and had heard that they were meeting in groups to do *something*. In the spring of 2006, the principal asked for a few teachers to volunteer to be Middle School "COLT Leaders." What that meant exactly, was yet to be explained.

At the next faculty meeting, a few High School teachers presented an overview of the purpose, function, and implementation of their teacher leadership team and professional learning communities. They shared the origin and a short history of COLT, as well as their most significant accomplishments. While their presentation was well-received, the words of the cynics echoed: "When do we have time to do all this?", "They won't listen to our ideas.", and "That's the Administration's job."

The newly formed COLT leadership team knew that an atmosphere of trust needed to be fostered, which seemed like a rather daunting task. Several disillusioned faculty members announced that they were tired of "stepping up" only to have their efforts thwarted or ignored. Fortunately, the COLT leaders learned that administrative micromanaging would not be an issue; full support of the Superintendent was already in place.

At the end of that year, the faculty completed a survey designed by the leadership team focusing on many facets of student achievement. The team analyzed this information and compiled the reflections into ten target areas. These areas became the first COLTs. The teachers identified the teams on which they wanted to serve, and then the leadership team grouped the faculty into their chosen teams, carefully crafting each COLT to have equal representation across discipline and grade levels.

For the first COLT meeting in the following school year, each team brainstormed ideas and set short and long-term goals for the year. In order to promote feelings of accomplishment and success, team leaders encouraged the teams to identify some small, achievable steps with which to start. While this worked beautifully in some teams, others barely got off the ground. Even with these barriers, some noteworthy accomplishments did surface. Although a few of the successes seemed small, all of them helped the staff members in building and believing in a culture that empowered teachers as leaders, leaders who have the ability to make a difference for students.

Intermediate school leader's perspective. COLTs were introduced to the Intermediate School as an "optional process" at the end of the 2005-2006 school year. At one faculty in-service meeting, three High School COLT leaders shared the professional learning community concept by touting their accomplishments and experiences, as well as other possibilities that COLT could offer. For the Intermediate School teachers, this presentation alone was not enough to sell COLT and they needed more time to process the "opportunity" and try to understand what it would look like at the Intermediate School. Soon after the meeting, the entire faculty was informed that COLT teams were designated as a district-wide initiative. The appearance of "top down" management left a negative taste in the mouths of many teachers.

At the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year, a small group exhibited a true interest in COLT. These teacher leaders talked with the principal and volunteered to be the team leaders or "facilitators." They created and distributed a survey to all school personnel in order to gain insights into what the faculty and staff viewed as areas of concern. Based on the results of this survey, seven teams were formed and members assigned according to their identified preferences. Each facilitator was assigned to a specific team as the COLT leader. These leaders worked very hard to get everyone "on board" which ultimately proved to be the toughest challenge. Some colleagues viewed the meetings as a waste of time. They believed that administrators would not accept teachers as decision-makers who could positively impact the school. Luckily, some faculty members saw hope with the idea of finally having a voice. They were excited for the opportunity to brainstorm solutions for the problems they viewed as relevant. Although the Intermediate School COLT had a few successes, when compared to the outcomes of the High School COLTs, feelings of failure spread throughout the COLT members. This followed the professional learning community process into the second year of implementation.

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Some of the 2007-2008 COLT teams believed they had reached a dead end. As a result, COLT meetings moved from being a time for problem-solving and idea generating to "gripe sessions." This began to filter throughout the building. The team leaders met with the High School COLT leaders and principals to discuss the 2008-2009 school year and to brainstorm ideas to address the school's COLTs. As a direct result of this meeting, the facilitators realized that lack of communication and trust seemed to be the major problem. The facilitators were not communicating with the administrators and vice versa. Further, the leadership team failed to establish trust between faculty and administrators. Because of this realization, the leadership team now meets three times monthly; one of those meetings includes the building principal. The meetings focus on keeping open dialogue and building positive relationships. Issues and ideas from COLT meetings and members are shared with the other leaders and then the information with clarification is able to be returned to the teams.

Although COLT had a painfully slow start at the Intermediate School, the learning communities are now making progress and COLT is being viewed in a more positive light. The Intermediate School COLTs have continued to develop goals relative to students' needs and other issues permeating the building.

Primary school leader's perspective. During a faculty meeting late in the year 2006, the teachers at the Primary School were presented with an idea that would encourage all school personnel to consider their practices, collaborate with peers, and really reflect on the needs of students. Some thought it sounded like another duty. Others viewed it as an opportunity to take Chartiers Valley School District from a "good" to a "great" place. Many of the teachers immediately saw the value in establishing a new culture within the Primary School. After all, the High School had been doing this for years and had made great progress. The Primary School could do it, too. The foundation was already in place with a strong leadership team from the High School to guide, model, and support the process, but those seemed like giant shoes that the Primary COLTs had the responsibility to fill.

The teachers at the Primary School took that challenge and ran. Five teachers accepted the role of COLT leaders. This leadership team asked the staff to complete surveys that involved serious thought and honesty. They compiled the information and were able to define six teams focusing primarily on student achievement. The teacher leadership team members were given time (e.g., class coverage, half day substitutes) to organize the first few meetings and to build the professional learning communities based on where teachers indicated they could offer the most contribution. From there, the COLTs determined their own goals and created plans to reach those goals.

The Primary School is in its third year of implementing the COLTs. It has not always been smooth sailing and the professional learning communities have had their share of ups and downs. Fortunately, the principals "bought in" to the COLT process early and continue to support it. They allowed COLT members to make mistakes without criticism. Some teachers who were less than thrilled in the beginning have made great contributions to their teams. COLT members are even surprised with how well individuals continually work together. The entire staff has learned to compromise, voice opinions, and adjust to personality clashes. Today, when problems, concerns, or just great ideas are discussed, the response is typically, "Sounds like a COLT project!"

Results

Today, COLT is thriving in all four buildings because of the groundwork laid by a group of teacher leaders at Chartiers Valley High School. Across the entire district, new teachers are expected to become active members within the professional learning communities, with these expectations disclosed during the induction process. Students see teachers striving for consistency, modeling true collaboration, and valuing working together. Communications have improved between teachers, across disciplines, with administrators, and throughout the district.

This leadership team process is now embedded in the fabric of the Chartiers Valley School District resulting in a substantial increase in staff morale, school pride, and opportunities for students. This is a place where teachers want to be leaders and they continuously collaborate and hold collegial conversations regarding how to positively change and improve the school as a whole. Through the distribution of leadership, these professional learning communities address many factors of the school. These aspects fall into three broad categories: student outcomes, basic operations, and professional development. However, many of the COLTs serve multiple functions and therefore span more than one category. For a complete listing of COLTs at each school, refer to Table 1: COLTs across the District.

Table 1
COLTs across the District

High School COLTs	Middle School COLTs	Intermediate School COLTs	Primary School COLTs
• Classrooms of the Future	• Transition[†]	• Transition[†]	• 2nd and 3rd Connection[†]
• COLT Culture	• Communication*	• Behavior/Discipline	• Academic Support*
• Differentiated Instruction*	• Discipline*	• Building Enhancement	• Assessment
• Discipline*	• Going Green[†]	• Curriculum Enrichment	• Behavior
• FLEX[†]	• Instructional Technology	• Morale	• Parent Involvement
• Go Green[†]	• Instructional Time	• Parent Involvement*	• Staff Well-Being
• Motivation*	• MS/HS Collaboration*[†]	• Professional Development	• Student Well-Being
• Professional Development	• Procedures	• Scheduling*	• Technology Integration
• PSSA (state assessment)*	• Professional Development	• Student Achievement	
• Public Relations	• PSSA	• Technology	
• Rigor/Leadership	• Public Relations		
• Safety[†]	• Safety[†]		
• Scheduling	• Student Morale		
• School Spirit*	• Teacher Morale		
• Senior Topics	• Wellness		
• Staff Morale*			
• Transition*[†]			
• Wellness			

*Due to the evolving nature of COLT, these teams no longer exist. New teams were created to address other issues or needs within the schools.
[†]Indicates teams that work across buildings (e.g., teachers from both the Middle and Intermediate Schools are members of their respective Transition Teams).

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Student Outcomes

As with all school reform efforts, the focus of COLTs was specifically an attempt to address student outcomes, development, and improvement. Through COLT, these teachers accomplished this overarching goal and were able to "embrace a shared obligation to promote student success and well-being, and they develop[ed] expertise by employing problem solving, critique, reflection, and debate" (Little, 2007, p. 55).

When establishing COLTs, each school adamantly maintained that their primary focus was on meeting student needs and increasing conditions for improved student outcomes. Further, many teams create a capacity for improved student learning and fall into a category labeled by one team leader as "enablers of student learning." These teams do not specifically address academics, but recognize that other aspects like behavior and motivation also impact student learning. Of the 48 COLTs that currently exist across the district, nearly half are directed toward improving the conditions of student success. The following examples from all four schools represent COLTs that have contributed directly to student outcomes.

High School. When all Pennsylvania school districts were charged with meeting new state regulations on Career Education, it was the High School FLEX COLT that realized the existing FLEX program already covered most of the standards. With some brainstorming from this team, the remaining standards were achieved through the addition of a Career Relocation Project. This project (a simulation where students relocate to another city to find a job, find living arrangements, and develop a budget) which had been optional in some 12th grade classes, was moved to 11th grade and served as a continuation of a job shadowing requirement.

The High School Student Responsibility COLT addressed student outcomes related to missed tests and work. Prior to the work of this COLT, students would take make-up tests at various times and places. In order to take missed tests, students were placed in another room, worked in the hall, or had to report during their lunch period to complete the task. Each of these options cost class time or disrupted instruction and the environment for taking the test was not conducive to student learning. This COLT worked to create a test-taking room by turning a rarely used area into a functional make-up center. The principal staffed the room with math teachers who served as tutors during their duty period for students who wanted extra help. These teachers also served as proctors for the test. The make-up test conundrum was conquered. Now students are responsible for taking make-up tests during study halls, thus eliminating lost instructional time, and a new math tutorial service was a fortunate, but unintended consequence.

Middle School. At the Middle School, the Discipline COLT recognized the dire need for organization and consistency in the in-school suspension room, which was staffed by a different faculty member each period. With a revolving door of adult monitors and no official procedures ever firmly established, consistency in expectations and conduct was hard to manage. This COLT first devised a schedule for all students to follow that corresponded with the subject area expertise of the teachers monitoring the room. They developed checklists for the monitors to complete each period regarding student behavior, completion of work, and even students' trips to the restroom. Most impressively, the Discipline COLT members cleaned and rearranged the desks and bookshelves in order to transform an environment prone to distractions to one more conducive to independent work. The entire faculty reported a considerable increase in productivity and assignments completed by the students during in-school suspension due to the work of this team.

Intermediate Schools. The Curriculum Enrichment COLT at the Intermediate School wanted to motivate their students and spark their interests in reading. To do this, the team decided to do something that had never been done at any Chartiers Valley school. They wanted to invite a nationally recognized author to speak to and interact with the students at the school. Although this COLT was immediately told

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that their idea could not be funded, they did not give up. The team held fundraisers and were able to support their own initiative. Johanna Hurwitz, author of such books as *The Unsigned Valentine, Fourth Grade Fuss,* and *Elisa Michaels, Bigger & Better* came to the Intermediate School. Separate presentations were given to each grade level which promoted open dialogue and allowed students to ask questions.

      Primary School. The Assessment COLT at the Primary School determined that a building-wide writing rubric would assist in teaching and assessing student writing skills in a consistent manner across all grade levels. This team not only created rubrics, they also built student reading packets and teacher resource guides with specific teaching strategies. Thirty-five teachers now follow the same basic teaching methods using the same assessment tools to teach writing.

Basic Operations

      In order for distributed leadership models to be effective, the basic functions of schools must be entrusted to the leadership teams and the members of professional learning communities. This requires a "decentralization of authority [where] teachers participate in decision making…. [and] the roles of administrative staff are goal developers and leaders, human resources drivers and coordinators, and resources developers" (Cheng & Mok, 2007, p. 520). Further, the management of school is placed in the hands of the personnel. Sixteen of the COLT teams across the district focused on improving and managing their day-to-day operations in order to create those conditions necessary to enhance student learning. The following accomplishments from the High School and the Middle School describe how the basic operations of schools, typically addressed by administrators, are now being resolved by COLT.

      High School. The Scheduling COLT at the High School revised the school schedule so that testing days (i.e., mid-term exams, final examinations, state standardized assessments) would be better organized allowing for better use of time and more conducive testing environments. Teachers reported an increase in on-task student behavior and more effective use of instructional time on these days as a direct result of the Scheduling COLT's work.

      Middle School. Setting the course for the rest of the district, The Middle School Safety COLT identified major loopholes within the Middle School emergency procedures (e.g., fire, weather, evacuation drills). They elicited feedback from the faculty regarding inconsistencies in the systems in place. After reviewing this information and meeting with the district's Director of Security, the Safety COLT developed a detailed list of directions for each emergency procedure and created a "Go Folder" for each faculty member. The Safety COLT is now part of a district-wide council working with Central Administration and the School Board to develop a district Crisis Intervention Plan.

Professional Development

      Lieberman and Miller (2007) advocate the need for professional learning communities to transform professional development in schools. Further, they argue that "it is necessary to focus on creating professional learning strategies that are long-term and collaborative and are supported by enabling policies shaped by the constituencies who are involved in the routines of schools and have investment in their renewal" (p. 100). As a result of more than 11 COLTs across the district that focus primarily on professional development, Chartiers Valley School District have employed strategies that have "lead to authentic changes in teaching practice and improved student learning" (p. 100). Each of the four schools had various COLTs which centered on teacher professional development. The impact of COLTs on professional development is illustrated by examples from the High School, Primary School, and Intermediate Schools.

High School. At the High School, the Best Practices COLT organized roundtable discussions during faculty meetings to promote the sharing of instructional strategies among faculty and staff. This sharing provided teachers with additional strategies from which to choose when considering the needs of their students. The Professional Development COLT determined that more relevant training on in-service days was necessary to meet the needs of teachers within the school. The team organized a full-day workshop with presentations by teachers. After the workshop, teachers debriefed the sessions and provided feedback and recommendations for future teacher-led topics.

Intermediate School. The Professional Development COLT at the Intermediate school geared their efforts toward developing both professional and personal interests of their staff. This COLT was charged with planning and implementing an In-service Professional Development Day. In addition to focusing on the professional needs of the Intermediate School personnel, they decided to include a few interest sessions. Throughout the course of the in-service day, faculty had the option to attend sessions on stress management or CPR and First Aid in addition to the sessions on assessment or instructional practices. Similar to the Primary School, this effort increased collegiality among the faculty and increased the overall morale of the school.

Primary School. At the Primary School, the Staff Well-Being COLT focused on improving their school climate to not only to be productive, but also enjoyable. The COLT started a raffle for premier parking spaces to raise money to support families in the community and make donations to other charities, such as *Relay for Life*. These types of activities brought teachers closer on a personal level, which spilled over into professional collegiality and camaraderie.

Summary

Although these are just a few of the COLT successes across the district, what they show is significant. By continuing to work in learning communities, teachers have taken on issues ranging from the use of instructional time to school safety to school spirit and morale. Historically, these issues would have remained mired in administrative meetings for months or years at a time. The COLTs have provided each school in the district with a sense of shared ownership, a means for collaborative problem-solving, and have increased personnel involvement in the schools, the district, and more significantly, the community.

In the past, teachers were charged with implementing new requirements or addressing challenges by quickly piecing something together to make it work. That disruption plagued them with compromise. The quick fix without proper vetting and thought turned into disaster. By having a ready avenue for discussion and a collection of minds working in the same direction, these irritations have decreased. Educators can go about the business of educating with the whole school in mind. What would take a sole administrator much too long to accomplish, if ever, are tackled head-on by those impacted the most. The buildings simply run better because teacher leaders share an active voice in the decision-making process.

Discussion

Leadership team initiatives, specifically the concept of distributed leadership, are popular reform issues in literature related to school leadership and management. However, few if any provide first-person accounts and perceptions of those immersed in the process. The main objective of this article was to chronicle the effects of distributed leadership on the greater organization. The focus was the impact of the leadership teams on students, the faculty, the school, and the school district. As a result of these professional learning communities, teacher leadership increased throughout the entire organization.

Teachers were encouraged to come together as professionals to engage in dialogue around a shared knowledge base about students, teaching, and learning. COLT was a grassroots initiative that began at the High School as a means to promote all teachers as leaders by empowering their participation

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and encouraging their collaboration through creating communities of leaders. As the process spread throughout the larger organization, it became apparent the process was elective for some of its members and mandated for others. Disregarding how COLT transpired at each school, evidence here shows that as teachers across the district began to collaborate, analyze their operations, and adjust their practices, they became participants in school reform.

According to Murphy (2005), "Teacher leadership generally refers to actions by teachers outside their classrooms which involve an explicit or implicit responsibility to provide professional development to their colleagues, to influence…policy or…to support changes in classroom practices" (p. 14). Through leadership teams, teachers become aware of and concerned about school-wide issues and are able to brainstorm possible solutions and act to make change happen (Vernon-Dotson, in press). The COLT process at Chartiers Valley describes teacher leadership at its best.

As research suggests, leadership can be a strong, internal driving force behind school improvement when schools allow for redistribution of power and realignment of authority (Muijs & Harris, 2006; Reeves, 2004; Vernon-Dotson, in press; Wan, 2005).The teams that were successful had two distinct characteristics. First, they saw purpose in their efforts. They truly believed that what they were doing was improving the way the schools performed to increase student achievement. And, second, they were validated. This was not the mere "I support you." Rather, it meant defining what support would look like. Active administrator support spoke much more loudly than words. Their validation permeated through COLT ideas and work being approved for implementation. Further, if a COLT activity was not endorsed by administrators, they would provide clarification by providing COLT members a clear-cut explanation of why it was not able to be implemented. The teachers felt that they held high status in the process and, therefore, were willing to contribute beyond what is expected of them (Bogler & Somech, 2004).

According to Fullan and Hargreaves (1996), "The moment of greatest learning for any of us is when we find ourselves responsible for a problem that we care desperately to resolve" (p. 136). These teacher leaders and their colleagues, as members of COLTs, remain dedicated to improving their schools and devoted to having their commitment infiltrate the cultural fabric of their school district. The overall leadership capacity increased. In a recent study conducted with beginning teachers, Cherubini (2008) reported that new teachers "struggle with…liking their work as a teacher" (p. 25). Further, despite that struggle, many of them "capitalized on opportunities to be *leaders* by exerting their positive influence upon their colleagues" (p. 27). As a result of COLT, new faculty are immersed in the teacher leadership process and exposed to veteran colleagues who are positive influences, thereby increasing the likelihood of new teachers not only liking the idea of being a teacher, but also enjoying teaching as a career (Cherubini, 2008).

Leadership teams are typically associated with a group of people in formal leadership roles (e.g., principals, department chairpersons, program leaders) in the school. At Chartiers Valley School District, leadership teams have been redefined. Decision-making and problem solving is managed by the interactions of all members (Gronn, 2002; Spillane & Diamond, 2007) and leadership is performed by the entire school personnel instead of a solo school leader (Copland, 2003; Elmore, 2004; Spillane, 2006). The teachers are valued, empowered, and have a stake in the operations of the schools. Through these professional learning communities, the teachers take action on school-wide issues and model teacher leadership for their colleagues. Teachers at Chartiers Valley School District are expected go above and beyond typical teaching duties, extending their knowledge and skills outside their classroom doors.

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Recommendations and Conclusion

Through writing this article and truly reflecting on their work, the authors offer suggestions and recommendations for future practice and research. First, implementation takes time and must start at the teacher level – from the ground up. For this type of initiative, one team or one school who is able to effectively model the process and then help others initiate the effort is essential. Three of the four schools in this district took COLT by the reigns and immersed themselves in the professional learning community process; the other school was not ready as the majority of the faculty not convinced that it could be implemented at their school. Although COLT is starting to take off at this school, it has not been a smooth process. Instead of COLT being mandated, this school may have benefited from a more calculated start, possibly one team with voluntary membership during the first year.

The second recommendation is for research. The work of COLT has been substantial and worthwhile. It is a reform effort that should be documented and disseminated. The authors suggest developing a school-university partnership therein aligning schools or districts with local college or university faculty members who are interested in researching the endeavor. This will allow the schools to take part in generating research questions and promoting data collection at the onset of the initiative. This type of research will assist in tying leadership team successes to actual student outcomes that are empirically supported. Further, because of their work with the professional learning communities, teachers are poised to be an integral part of the professional dissemination (e.g., writing teams).

The COLT process has not been effortless, nor without incident. The teachers fought through what seemed like insurmountable challenges (e.g., breakdowns in communication with colleagues and administrators, complacent staff members) later discovering that the challenges were merely bumps in the road. Once the COLT were established, began achieving results, and became part of the culture, these challenges ceased to appear so difficult and actually became opportunities, opportunities that never would have surfaced without support and trust from all stakeholders. In addition to the Central Office and school administrators, other important stakeholders who should be specifically recognized are the members of the Chartiers Valley School Board. Because they valued what the High School teacher leaders were able to accomplish over the years, they have genuinely given their support to the district-wide COLT process.

By encouraging all teachers to continue as leaders and allowing them to identify and make changes in schools, the teachers became empowered. Teacher empowerment increases "the ability of teachers to influence those decisions that are important to the operation of schools" (Wan, 2005, p.19) and it is one of the most crucial elements impacting the effectiveness of school improvement and reform efforts (Bogler & Somech, 2004; Elmore, 2004). Teachers who are empowered believe that they can make a difference; they have vision and purpose, are vested in the effort, and make change happen. Without the High School leaders' guidance and perseverance, Chartiers Valley teachers' commitment, the school administrators' support, the Superintendent and Central Office Administrations' confidence, and the School Board's vision to trust and have faith in their educators, COLT would not have become a reality.

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