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# Study of the Professional Learning Practices of Three Rural Elementary Title I Distinguished Schools in Georgia

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A STUDY OF THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PRACTICES OF THREE RURAL  
ELEMENTARY TITLE I DISTINGUISHED SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA

by

Sandra Kay Adams

(Under the Direction of Linda M. Arthur)

ABSTRACT

The research explored the current professional learning practices in place at three elementary schools within the same district to determine what school wide and individual professional learning practices have been implemented and if they have played a role in their success as Title I Distinguished Schools. The research also explored the extent to which the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a professional learning community: 1) shared and supportive leadership, 2) shared vision and values, 3) collective learning and application, 4) shared personal practice and (5) supportive conditions (collegial relationships and structures).

A mixed methodology collective case study design was used. Quantitative data was collected from a large sampling utilizing the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (PLCA) (Olivier, Hipp & Huffman 2003). Qualitative research methods were utilized using interviews with the Title I Coordinator, principals, and members the School Improvement Team. The research revealed the school-wide professional learning and individual professional learning resulted from the goals of the School Improvement Plan as well as those that are mandated by district and state initiatives. Other conclusions drawn from the study include; 1) Professional learning is fundamental to school improvement efforts; 2) Developing staff collaboration is an important tool for improving

instructional programs in schools through professional learning teams to improve teacher knowledge and teaching skills; 3) Professional learning is an integral component of school and district school improvement initiatives and should support the goals of the district and school's improvement plans; 4) The option to choose professional learning activities is important to teachers; 5) Teachers prefer time for professional learning and collaboration during the regular school day; 6) Professional learning communities provide a context of collegiality to support teachers and administrators as they strive to improve student learning.

**INDEX WORDS:** Professional learning, Professional Learning Communities, School Improvement

A STUDY OF THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PRACTICES OF THREE  
RURAL ELEMENTARY TITLE I DISTINGUISHED SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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ELEMENTARY TITLE I DISTINGUISHED SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA

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## DEDICATION

The journey to the fulfillment of this degree has been a three-year commitment and one that I could have not made alone. I will always remember those who encouraged me along the way.

To my family who have supported me in every way. You are the best! I hope that my children, Keri and Rusty, will value education and always pursue their own goals and dreams.

To my parents who have always believed that I could accomplish anything. You have both been in inspiration and a blessing throughout my entire life. I have been so fortunate to have you both for so many years, and I hope to have you many, many, more.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Study

For decades numerous reforms have been instituted to support improving the quality of teaching and learning. According to Dufour and Eaker (1998) although most of these reforms have been based on research-based information, many of the reforms have failed to achieve significant improvement in schools and improve student learning due to a combination of factors, including the absence of a comprehensible plan of change that includes support to sustain the initiative.

Fullan (1993) believes current literature recognizes that an important key to developing capacity for educational improvements lies in the successful development of the school as a learning organization and that people in organizations will change only if the sought-after reform is meaningful to them and has application to their work. Fullan also notes that in order for schools to become learning organizations, they must overcome fragmentation in their reform efforts, solve problems collectively, focus on improving teaching and learning, and develop shared values and beliefs about learning and change.

Many authors have called for a reform of professional development practices as a precursor to educational reform (Fullan, 2002; Glickman, 2002; Guskey, 1995, 2002; Sparks, 2002, Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). Professional development plays a central role in school reform and should focus on building the capacity of schools and teachers to rethink practice and redesign the organization to improve education by investing in the knowledge and skills of educators (Darling-Hammond, 1995). Lambert (2003) agrees that the ineffectiveness of the reform movements of the 1970's and 1980s resulted from

the failure to recognize the importance of increasing teachers' skills and knowledge. Unfortunately, as schools approach change in a fragmented fashion, staff development has often been an afterthought (Sparks & Hirsh).

The federal requirements of *No Child Left Behind Act* focuses on the provision of high-quality professional development that improves and increases teachers' knowledge and skills through sustained, intensive, and classroom focused models (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2003). This is especially true of schools whose are designated at Title 1 Schools as their school wide program must provide ongoing professional development for teachers, principals, paraprofessionals and, if appropriate, pupil services personnel, parents, and other staff, to enable all students in the school to meet the State's student academic standards, align professional development with the State's academic standards, and devote sufficient resources to conduct effective professional development (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

Although professional development has traditionally been provided through school in-service workshops, according to Little (1993) this type of approach does not provide continuity and coherence, fails to recognize the best approaches to adult learning, and does not appreciate the complexity of the work teachers perform. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2001) in the year 2000, teachers participated in professional development that typically lasted 1 to 8 hours on any one content area, and only 18 percent of teachers felt their training was connected to their school improvement plan. In addition, only 10 to 15 percent (the difference was in the content areas) reported that they were given significant follow-up materials or activities.



Advocates of alternatives to the workshop or in-service models of professional development highlight the need for teachers to work collaboratively in study groups, curriculum-development projects, and network with other teachers, and conduct peer reviews (Little, 1993; Smylie, Allensworth, Greenberg, Harris, and Luppescu, 2001). A 2000 study by the National Staff Development Council examined professional development programs in schools that made proficient gains in student achievement and found their staff development had changed from the occasional workshop and isolated learning to organizational learning that was collaborative in nature, contained diverse and extensive opportunities, and placed an emphasis on accountability and increased student achievement (WestEd, 2000). The National Staff Development Council has called for effective staff development based on the research and practices described in the *Standards for Staff Development* (2001).

One of the goals of the Georgia Department of Education is to design and implement a coherent and sustained statewide system of support and process for improvement, which includes professional learning. During 2003, an 18-month evaluation and research in staff development was conducted with findings reported in the *Evaluation of Statewide Staff Development in Georgia* indicating that there is a need to transform the Staff Development Program in Georgia from a moderately indiscriminate system of staff development into a comprehensive school improvement process that is school-based, results focused, and job-embedded (Georgia Department of Education, 2004). One of the recommendations that resulted from the evaluation project was that school districts develop and implement an evaluation system to assess the effectiveness of staff development. This would include collecting and analyzing data on staff

development as well as its impact on teaching practices and subsequent gains in student learning. Interpretation of this data would be used to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of staff development activities and inform districts of development needs.

Another recommendation was that staff development should become an integral part of the school improvement program with staff development activities conducted within the school day, and the schools faculty within schools would be responsible for developing a continuous improvement plan with staff development aligned to the plan (Georgia Department of Education, 2006).

In 2004 The Georgia Department of Education adopted the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development and named the standards the "Georgia Standards for Professional Learning" (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). The twelve NSDC Standards for Staff Development and the Georgia Standards for Professional Learning have been organized into three major areas: *Context*, *Process*, and *Content* (Georgia Department of Education).

The Context Standards address organizational support. Professional learning that improves student learning: 1) develops a learning community within the school and district that focuses efforts on continuous learning while providing structures and opportunities to support that learning. 2) develops instructional leadership that distributes leadership responsibilities throughout the school and district and focuses on continuous improvement, and 3) uses resources wisely to support new professional learning formats and activities such as time within the workday for professional learning.

The Process Standards focus on how professional learning topics are identified, designed, and delivered. Professional learning that improves student learning: 1) uses

data to determine what educators should be learning, to monitor progress of effort, and to sustain continuous improvement, 2) evaluates professional learning in order to demonstrate the impact on student learning as well as to improve programming, 3) uses research to determine the content of professional learning, 4) designs professional learning using a variety of professional learning formats and activities that will accomplish the intended goals, 5) applies the knowledge of adult learning when designing professional learning activities, and 6) develops collaborative skills so that team members can effectively work together to improve their skills and knowledge.

The Content Standards identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to attain high levels of achievement for all students. Professional learning that improves student learning: 1) focuses on equity, so that all students are understood, supportive learning environments exist, and high expectations are upheld for all students, 2) uses high quality teaching, which includes deep knowledge of content, research-based instructional strategies, and a variety of classroom assessments, and 3) focuses on strategies that involve families in the education of their children.

One of the conclusions reached after analyzing evaluation data submitted by local systems in their *2005 Comprehensive Professional Learning Program Reports* was that more school systems in Georgia have begun to form “learning communities” or “learning/study groups” in which everyone in the building is an active learner. These learning communities examine available data and regularly assess their own knowledge and skills which forms the basis of individual, group, and schools improvement plans. The research in school improvement and professional learning indicated that this

approach should be the focus of all training in local school systems (Georgia Department of Education, 2006).

Hord (1997b) defines professional learning community, the focus of the first Context Standard noted above, as the professional staff studying and acting together to direct efforts toward improved student learning and conceptualized five related dimensions that reflect the core of a professional learning community: 1) shared and supportive leadership, 2) shared vision and values, 3) collective learning and application, 4) shared personal practice, and (5) supportive conditions (collegial relationships and structures). A number of studies have identified the influence of the development of professional learning communities as an effective reform effort (Louis and Kruse, 1995; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; Hord, 1997a; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Langer, 2000).

The foundation for Georgia's comprehensive data-driven system of school improvement and support is *The School Keys: Unlocking Excellence through the Georgia School Standards* (Georgia Department of Education, 2007). The School Keys describe effective, high impact practices for schools and encompass eight broad strands: curriculum, instruction, assessment, planning and organization, student, family, and community support, professional learning, leadership, and school culture. The strands have been further developed into performance standards, linguistic rubrics, and elements/descriptors to assist schools in their process of school improvement. Using the Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards diagnostic process (GAPSS Analysis) a variety of data may be collected from multiple sources to assess the status of schools on each of the standards, and this data can be used as a guide for continuous improvement at the school level (Georgia Department of Education).

### Statement of the Problem

As a result of widespread criticism of public education, researchers are seeking to document successful practice. Today's schools face the unprecedented need evaluate their professional learning practices. The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) significantly raises expectations for states and schools in that all students must meet or exceed state standards in reading and mathematics within twelve years that has propelled professional development of teachers into the center of the debate surrounding school reform. The recent literature and research suggest schools need to develop their collective capacity to address the learning needs of their students in order to increase student achievement and that increased student learning is coupled with teacher learning and collaboration.

Professional learning that focuses on student achievement while meeting district and staff needs is key to improving teaching and learning. Because there is a greater recognition today that quality staff development is a necessary ingredient for all students to achieve at high levels, school districts and individual schools need to develop and implement an evaluation system to assess the effectiveness of professional learning. This would include collecting and analyzing data on professional development activities as well as its impact on teaching practices and subsequent gains in student learning. Interpretation of this data would be used to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of staff development activities and inform districts of development needs.

Therefore, the researcher studied the professional learning practices in three rural elementary schools in northeast Georgia, who have been named Title I Distinguished Schools to determine how those practices contribute to the school's success. The study

also examined the extent to which these schools reflect the dimensions of a professional learning community in the areas of shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, supportive conditions (collegial relationships and structures), and shared personal practice (Hord, 1997b).

### Research Questions

The researcher answered the following overarching question in this study: How do professional learning practices contribute to the school's status as a Title I Distinguished School? The following sub questions were used to guide the study:

1. What school wide professional learning practices have been implemented?
2. What individual/targeted professional learning practices have been implemented?
3. What role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school?
4. To what extent do the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a Professional Learning Community?

### Significance of the Study

The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act significantly raises expectations for states and schools in that all students must meet or exceed state standards in reading and mathematics within twelve years which has propelled professional development of teachers into the center of the debate surrounding school reform. The federal requirements of *No Child Left Behind* focuses on the provision of high-quality professional development that improves and increases teachers' knowledge and skills through sustained, intensive, and classroom focused models. The results of this study provided insight into the professional learning activities of the three Title I Schools as their school wide program must provide ongoing professional development for teachers,

principals, paraprofessionals and, if appropriate, pupil services personnel, parents, and other staff, to enable all students in the school to meet the State's student academic standards, align professional development with the State's academic standards, and devote sufficient resources to conduct effective professional development (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

Numerous studies have found that professional learning communities are an important factor in improving student achievement, particularly in those schools with low-achieving students. Teachers' engagement of the five dimensions of professional learning community practices yielded insight into an understanding of the five dimensions of professional learning communities within three elementary schools within one school district.

This study is significant to other schools that have been identified as successful Title 1, as many schools receiving Title 1 funds will qualify as "in need of improvement" by the federal government as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* specifies that Distinguished Title 1 Schools should serve as models for schools identified for improvement with similar demographics.

This particular study is also significant to the participating schools as data is available that shows similarities and differences in school practices even though the schools are located within the same school district. The study provided an opportunity to reveal barriers that have limited previous or current improvement efforts, as well as the strengths that have nurtured the development of community.

The study was important to the researcher, as it was an investment of both time and commitment. The researcher had vested interest in the findings of the study as the

researcher works in the school district and it was important to assess the professional learning activities at the school level to determine their impact on school reform efforts and the learning outcomes of the students. The researcher also sees the time and energy that teachers have invested in their mandated professional learning community grade level meetings.

## Procedures

### *Research Design*

The research explored the current professional learning practices in place at three elementary schools within the same district to determine what school wide and individual professional learning practices have been implemented and if they have played a role in their success as Title I Distinguished Schools. The research also explored the extent to which the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a professional learning community: 1) shared and supportive leadership, 2) shared vision and values, 3) collective learning and application, 4) shared personal practice and (5) supportive conditions (collegial relationships and structures). The dimensions were identified by Hord (1997a) during her work with the Southwestern Educational Developmental Laboratory.

A mixed methodology collective case study design was used which yielded both qualitative and quantitative data from three schools that were used in the study. Quantitative data was collected from a large sampling, as a questionnaire was used to assess perceptions about the school's principal, staff, and stakeholders based on the five dimensions of the professional learning community. Qualitative research methods were utilized as the Title I Coordinator from the central office, the three principals from the Title I Schools, and one teacher each from grades 1, 3, and 5 who serve on the School



Improvement Team at each school were interviewed to collect information regarding the professional learning practices that have been implemented. The teacher interviews took place as a group interview at each school with all teachers participating equally.

Interviews were conducted using an interview protocol. The interviews, a total of 7, were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for recurrent themes.

### *Participants*

All names of individuals, schools, streets, and cities have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of the participants. The units of analysis for this study were three rural elementary schools in Georgia. These schools are located in a district that administers one high school, one middle school, and the three elementary schools chosen for the study. Each elementary school is identified as a Title I School and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students range from 51% to 63%. . To qualify as a Title I school the percentage of economically disadvantaged students must be over 40% as measured by students receiving free or reduced lunch.

This project included principals, assistant principals, and teachers at three elementary schools from a school district located in northeast Georgia. All three schools are currently Title I Distinguished Schools and have made adequate yearly progress for five or more years according to Georgia Department of Education criteria. The Southern Association of Schools and Colleges accredited all three schools in 2005. All three schools have participated in the Max Thompson Learning Focus Schools training, and one of the schools is currently using the Modern Red Schoolhouse (MRSh) reform model. Julian Drive Elementary is the largest of the three schools with over 600 students, 45 certified teachers, one assistant principal, and one principal. Ellis Elementary has an

enrollment of over 500 students, 39 certified teachers, one assistant principal, and one principal. Brookside Elementary is the smallest of the three schools with over 400 students, 39 certified teachers, one assistant principal, and one principal.

### *Instrumentation*

One of the instruments used in this study was the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (PLCA) (Olivier, Hipp & Huffman 2003). This questionnaire was designed to assess perceptions about the school's principal, staff, parents, and community members and is based on Hord's five dimensions of a professional learning community. The questionnaire was administered to the faculty members at all chosen sites.

The questionnaire contains statements about practices that occur at the school level. The measure serves as a descriptive tool of practices relating to shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, including relationships and structures. The PLCA instrument is available for dissemination and use by educators and permission to use the instrument was secured. The interviews with each of the three principals, the District Title I Coordinator, and the teachers, were conducted and the questions are included in the Appendices.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Approval from the Georgia Southern University IRB was secured before any research was conducted. Permission from the local school superintendent was solicited before any data was collected. Copies of the survey questionnaire and the interview questions, as well as informed consent documents, were given to the superintendent for

his approval. After approval from the superintendent was obtained, the researcher solicited approval from the principals at each school and requested permission to attend a faculty meeting at all schools. The researcher prepared a cover letter which was given to all those in attendance at the faculty meeting. Volunteers were asked to participate in the survey, and their names will remain anonymous. Individuals who volunteered for the study completed the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* questionnaire. The data from the *Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCA)* was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The researcher also conducted group interviews with three teachers at each school from grades 1, 3, and 5 who serve on the School Improvement team for a total of three teacher group interviews. These interviews took place on-site at each school and lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Individual interviews were held with the principal at each school. The principals' interviews took place at each of the elementary school sites and took approximately 1 hour. The interview with the District Title I Coordinator took place at his office and lasted approximately 1 hour. The seven interviews were analyzed for recurring themes and patterns.

#### Limitations of the Study

1. The participants of the study were from three elementary schools in a rural setting. Therefore, the results may not generalize to other schools.
2. The findings and conclusions will be based on the perceptions and actions of the individuals who have a variety of interest, knowledge, and differing years of experience and experiences within the school system and should be viewed as such.

3. The researcher also holds an administrative position of an assistant principal at one of the schools included in the study and did not participate in completing any of the instruments used in the data analysis.

#### Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions of key terms are assumed:

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) - a component of the Accountability Profile based on a series of performance goals that every school, LEA, and state must achieve within specified timeframes in order to meet the 100% proficiency goal established by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB).

Professional learning – the means by which teachers, administrators and other school and system employees acquire, enhance and refine the knowledge, skills, and commitment necessary to create and support high levels of learning for all students (Georgia Department of Education, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the terms professional learning, professional development, and staff development will be used interchangeably.

Professional learning communities - schools in which the professional staff as a whole consistently operates along five dimensions: (1) supportive and shared leadership; (2) shared values and vision; (3) collective learning; (4) supportive conditions; and (5) shared personal practice (Hord, 1997b).

Title I School – A school whose population of economically disadvantaged students, as determined by free or reduced lunch, exceeds 40% (Georgia Department of Education, 2006).

Title I Distinguished School – Schools that meet or exceed adequate yearly progress (AYP) for three or more consecutive years and have not been on the Unsafe Schools Choice Option (USCO) list within the last two years will be identified as Title I Distinguished Schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

### Summary

There has been a paradigm shift regarding the professional development of teachers. With the climate of increasing accountability, professional development plays a central role in school reform and teachers are now involved in both teaching and learning as they continue to increase their skills and knowledge. Professional learning that focuses on student achievement while meeting district and staff needs is key to improving teaching and learning.

The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act significantly raises expectations for states and schools in that all students must meet or exceed state standards in reading and mathematics within twelve years which has propelled professional development of teachers into the center of the debate surrounding school reform. The federal requirements of *No Child Left Behind* focuses on the provision of high-quality professional development that improves and increases teachers' knowledge and skills through sustained, intensive, and classroom focused models.

The results of this study provided insight into the professional learning activities of the three Title I Schools as their school wide program must provide ongoing professional development for teachers, principals, paraprofessionals and, if appropriate, pupil services personnel, parents, and other staff, to enable all students in the school to meet the State's student academic standards, align professional development with the

State's academic standards, and devote sufficient resources to conduct effective professional development. The researcher interviewed principals, and members of the School Improvement Teams at each school and examined artifacts and evidence to ascertain what professional learning practices that had been implemented and their impact on the school's status as a Title I Distinguished school.

In addition, the recent literature and research suggest schools need to develop their collective capacity to address the learning needs of their students in order to increase student achievement and that increased student learning is linked to teacher learning and collaboration. Professional learning communities offers the most powerful conceptual model form transforming schools to meet this challenge. The power and effectiveness of professional learning communities lies in that instead of becoming a reform initiative in itself, it becomes a supporting structure for schools to continuously renew and transform themselves whether from an initiative they create or one that is mandated.

Professional learning communities provide a context of collegiality to support teachers and administrators as they improve their practice. As educators we are continually striving to provide appropriate learning environments and opportunities for children, and it is imperative that we provide similar environments and opportunities for our teachers. It is extremely advantageous to study the manner in which schools become involved in joint planning, and collaboration for school improvement while focusing on individual student growth and increased achievement.

Therefore, the researcher also studied the extent of teacher engagement within the five dimensions of professional learning communities within three elementary Title I schools within one school district that had been mandated to implement professional

learning communities through grade level horizontal planning teams. The researcher conducted this research using Hord's framework for professional learning communities. The researcher surveyed teachers in order to determine the level of engagement within the five dimensions of professional learning communities.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

For decades numerous reforms have been instituted to support improving the quality of teaching and learning. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998) although most of these reforms have been based on research-based information, many of the reforms have failed to achieve significant improvement in schools and improve student learning due to a combination of factors, including the absence of a comprehensible plan of change that includes support to sustain the initiative.

Many scholars have called for a reform of professional development practices as a precursor to educational reform (Fullan, 2002; Glickman, 2002; Guskey, 1995, 2002; Sparks, 2002, Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). Professional development plays a central role in school reform and should focus on building the capacity of schools and teachers to rethink practice and redesign the organization to improve education by investing in the knowledge and skills of educators (Darling-Hammond, 1995). Lambert (2003) agrees that the ineffectiveness of the reform movements of the 1970's and 1980s resulted from the failure to recognize the importance of increasing teachers' skills and knowledge. Unfortunately, as schools approach change in a fragmented fashion, staff development has often been an afterthought (Sparks & Hirsh).

#### Principals of Professional Development

The lack of high-quality professional development for teachers explains much of the failure of past school reforms (Sparks and Hirsh, 1997). According to Speck and Knipe (2001) professional learning is a lifelong collaborative process that nourishes the



growth of educators as individuals and as team members in order to improve their skills and abilities. Yet, “for too long professional development practices of too many school systems and schools have led nowhere...and have amounted to little more than a disparate set of adult learning activities with few demonstrable results” (Mizell, 2001, p. 1).

However, an expanded view of professional development has emerged that includes teachers discussing issues with colleagues; problem-solving; developing new lessons and instructional units; and thinking about, experimenting, and perfecting new classroom practices (Lieberman, 1995). Professional development in education has also been described as an organized effort to change teachers with the expected result of improving their teaching practice and student learning (Guskey, 1986).

According to Sparks and Hirsh (2000), effective professional development is:

- Focused on helping teachers become deeply immersed in subject matter and teaching methods;
- Curriculum-centered and standards-based;
- Sustained, rigorous, and cumulative;
- Directly linked to what teachers do in their classrooms;
- Creates regular opportunities for serious collaborative planning;
- Expands teachers’ repertoires of research-based instructional methods; and
- Links teachers to other professionals within and outside their schools.

In addition, according to Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) the components of professional development that affect educator learning include:

- Sustained, long-term collaboration of teachers;

- A clear goal of improving student achievement;
- A focus on content knowledge, instructional strategies, and student thinking;
- The use of active learning such as reciprocal observations with colleagues, planning for classroom implementation, and examining student work;
- A whole school or grade level focus
- The use of less traditional forms of professional development such as networks and study groups.

### Professional Development Practices

There have been several studies to determine what makes teacher professional development effective (Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, and Yoon, 2002; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon, 2001; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). Using the *Teacher Activity Survey*, Garet et al., surveyed a nationally representative sample of teachers who participated in the Eisenhower Professional Development Program to examine the relationship between features of teacher professional development and change in teachers' knowledge, skills, teaching practice, and outcomes.

Garet et al. (2001) analyzed responses from 1,027 teachers from 358 school districts across the nation and characterized teacher professional development in terms of structural and core features. The structural feature they identified included the type of activity, duration, and collective participation. The core features identified included content focus, active learning, and coherence. Their study indicated that sustained professional learning is more likely to have an impact than is shorter professional development. Their results also indicated that in order to enhance knowledge and skills professional development needs to focus on academic subject matter, provide hands-on

opportunities for teachers, and be integrated or job-embedded into the daily life of the school. This study provided support for the contention by Little (1999) that collective participation of teachers from the same school leads to active learning opportunities to improve teacher knowledge, skills, and classroom practice, and that teacher professional development is more effective when it is focused on specific subject-matter and not general pedagogy (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Lowe, and Stiles, 1998).

In a two-year case study of nine urban public elementary schools, Newman et al. (2000) described how some schools use teacher professional learning to improve school capacity. Their study indicated that in order to increase school wide student achievement, five aspects of school capacity should be addressed: teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions; professional community; program coherence; technical resources; and principal leadership. Their study implied that schools could coordinate teacher professional development to address school capacity through various approaches to align with school contexts.

Desimone et al. (2002) research on policy mechanisms and processes indicated that most districts do not provide high-quality professional development for their teachers as they fail to: align professional development with state standards and assessments; coordinate multiple professional development programs; use needs assessments and evaluation; and fail to seek input from teachers when planning professional development activities. Their research also revealed that duration, collective participation, and type of activity are features of professional development that are important for school districts to consider when designing professional development for teachers. In summary, research on teacher professional development has indicated that in order to be effective,

professional development activities should involve collective participation, content and context focus, duration, and active participation from teachers.

### Professional Development Models

Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) conducted an analysis of existing research and outlined five basic structures of staff development: 1) individually-guided staff development; 2) observation/assessment; 3) involvement in a school process such as curriculum development; 4) training characterized by workshops and conference that are outcome-based and include knowledge and skill development; and 5) inquiry that is based on action research.

Individually guided staff development allows the learner to design the learning activities. One of the assumptions of this model is that being able to select their own learning goals and the means for accomplishing those goals motivates individuals. One belief that supports this model is that self-directed development empowers teachers to address their own problems and by doing so, creates a sense of professionalism (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley 1990). Individual improvement models are self-directed by teachers and allow them to best judge their own learning needs which is the key characteristic of this model rather than spending their time in activities that are less relevant than those they would design (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley). They do note, however, that when individual teachers design their own learning there is much “reinventing of the wheel,” which may seem inefficient. Even so, according to Lawrence’s (1974) review of 97 studies of inservice programs, those with individualized activities were more likely to achieve their objectives than those that provided identical experiences for all participants.

Loucks-Horsley, Harding, Arbuckle, Dubea, Murray, & Williams (1987) list three assumptions about a teacher inquiry approach to staff development:

- Teachers are intelligent, inquiring individuals with legitimate expertise and important experience.
- Teachers are inclined to search for data to answer pressing questions and to reflect on the data to formulate solutions.
- Teachers will develop new understandings as they formulate their own questions and collect their own data to answer them.

The differences in people and their needs are well represented in the literature on adult learning theory, adult development, learning styles, and the change process (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989). Adult learning theorists believe that adults become increasingly self-directed and that their readiness to learn is stimulated by real life tasks and problems (Knowles, 1980). Stage theorists (Levine, 1989) believe that individuals in different stages of development have different personal and professional needs. Consequently, professional learning that provides practical classroom management assistance to a 22-year-old beginning teacher may not be appropriate for a veteran teacher nearing retirement.

Observation/assessment is another form of professional development. Instructional practices are improved through classroom observations and feedback. Having someone else in the classroom to view instruction and give feedback or provide reflection is a powerful way to impact classroom behavior (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990). According to Loucks-Horsley et al. (1987) observation and assessment of

instruction provide teachers with data that can be reflected upon and analyzed for the purpose of improving student learning.

Peer coaching is also a form of the observation/assessment model and there are two basic peer-coaching configurations; coaching done by an outside specialist or expert and reciprocal coaching by colleagues within the same department, teaching team, or campus (Showers, 1985). According to Showers, the design of a peer-coaching program includes:

- Investigating the climate for accepting change;
- Identifying specific issues to be addressed and observed;
- Training the faculty;
- Writing lesson plans that reflect new practices;
- Reviewing lesson plans in the pre-observation stage;
- Observing teacher performance; and,
- Extending dialogue during the post-observation conference.

In addition, according to Zepeda (1999) as peer coaches, teachers need training and follow-up support to refine coaching skills. Coaches need training to gain skills in the areas of: human relations and communications; clinical supervisory processes: pre-observation, observation, and post-observation (feedback) techniques; and, the uses of data collection instruments. Joyce and Showers (1988) have found in their studies that when the training of teachers in effective instructional practices is followed by observation and coaching in their classrooms student learning increases.

Involvement in a development/improvement process is another model of staff development. Systematic school improvement processes usually involve assessing

current practices and deciding upon a problem whose solution will improve student achievement. The solution may include developing curriculum, designing programs, or changes classroom practice. New skills or knowledge may be needed to accomplish these tasks. Therefore, involvement in the improvement process can result in new skills, attitudes, and behaviors and can help nurture teachers' growth (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990).

Joyce and Showers (1988) agree and note that curriculum development or implementation requires strong staff development programs appropriately designed or a low level of implementation will occur. Glickman (1986) feels that curriculum development demands that teachers know their content and must also acquire curriculum-planning skills. He recommends that curriculum development be conducted in groups composed of teachers with low, medium, and high abstract reasoning abilities and the complexity of the curriculum development task matched to the abstract reasoning ability of the majority of teachers in the group.

Inquiry is another model of professional development as teachers formulate questions about their own practice and pursue objective answers to those questions. Inquiry involved the identification of a problem, data collection, data analysis, and changes in practice with additional data collection. This can be done individually or in small groups. This model is built on the premise that the mark of a professional is their ability to reflect on their practice (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990).

Action research is a methodology through which teachers can formulate a research question that concerns their own professional practice, devise methods to collect data, gather data, analyze the data, and articulate findings and conclusions that inform

their teaching practice (Marshak, 1997). When conducting action research the designs and methodologies are less rigorous so that individuals and groups are not encumbered with tight controls, however, it is systematic in its approaches (Glanz, 1998). The benefits of action research reported by Watson and Stevenson (1989) include:

- The opportunity to collaborate with one another;
- The development of a forum where interested members of the community can learn together;
- Learning opportunities that do not attempt to influence teachers toward a predetermined point of view;
- Data-driven decision making; and,
- More readily accepted change

According to Zepeda (1999) action research shows promise as a staff development as teachers and other members of the learning community become the researchers. They can then study their practices with data guiding informed discussions and the future decisions they make regarding instructional practices. Action research also promotes dialogue and reflection (Zepeda).

Burbank and Kauchak (2003) conducted a mixed methods study to investigate the practice of collaborative action research. Their study of ten pre-service teachers and ten in-service teachers indicated that action research conducted collaboratively has the capacity to validate educators as producers of knowledge while involving them in professional reflection. However, they found that there were differences between the participants research interest as the pre-service teachers found participating in action research while student teaching to be overwhelming.



Although teachers' development can be designed using any of these models, the most prevalent is the training model. A training design includes the selection of objectives, learning activities, and outcomes. Usually the outcomes involve awareness, knowledge, or skill development, but changes in attitude and transfer of training need to be included. The improvement of teachers' thinking should be a critical outcome of any training program. The most effective programs include exploration of theory, demonstration of practice, supervised trial of new skills, feedback on performance, and coaching within the workplace (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (1999) found that 99% of all teachers participated in professional development activities that would be categorized as training and those experiences typically lasted one day or less. The limited scope of such training opportunities according to Little (1993) has been shown to have little effect on teacher practices or student outcomes. They lack the duration, intensity, and follow-up that are essential for success.

Zemke (2002) distinguished between know-how and expertise by acknowledging the key role that training plays in creating expertise. He states that training should offer teachers the knowledge and skills they need to positively impact their performance. He proposed that experiences that offer knowledge without skills or skills without knowledge would not create understandings that would support lasting change. Joyce and Showers (2002) identified training that distinguishes between training that fine-tuned the craft of the teacher and training that requires teachers to learn new strategies. If training is to redefine the techniques of the teachers that teachers were already using, it

must be designed in such a way that teachers become knowledgeable about the change and competent in transferring the concepts, principles, and skills into their classrooms.

Joyce and Showers (1988) indicated in order to encourage transferability of skills into the classroom, they envisioned a system of professional development that would include 15 to 20 days of study each year and allow teachers to collaborate with each other to perfect and expand their skills. Joyce and Showers also contend that effective models of training should be evaluated in terms of their impact on teacher practices and student performance.

The Joyce and Showers (1980) model of staff development is a well-researched model. The first component of this model is the presentation of theory or the description of the skill or behavior. This presentation usually takes approximately thirty minutes to one or two hours, and it provided in a one-way delivery mode to a passive audience. The second component of the model is demonstration or modeling of the new strategy or skill. Again, the delivery requires no action from the audience. The third component is initial practice usually in the workshop session. This component has the audience trying out the new skills. The fourth component is providing structured and open-ended feedback based on the performance relating to the practice. The fifth and final component of this model is coaching. Follow-up to help with the implementation is given to the participant of the staff development, as the skill is being applied and tried in the classroom

Bush (1984) tested the effectiveness of the five components of the Joyce and Showers (1980) model as he examined the effect that the components of the model had on transfer of skills into the classroom. Bush found that when participants were given the first component only, a description of the new skill, only 10% could transfer the skill to

the classroom. When the second component, modeling or demonstration of the skills, 2-3% more participants could perform the skill. When the third component, practice, was added, 2-3% more transfer occurred. When the fourth component, feedback, was added, another 2-3% transfer occurred as well. Consequently, a 16-19% gain or 16-19 participants out of one hundred could perform the new skill or behavior in their classroom. On the other hand, when coaching was part of the process, up to 95% of the participants were able to transfer the skill into classroom practice. Therefore, coaching was the one component that when added, effected a change in the skills of a large number of the participants in the staff development.

#### Evaluation of Professional Learning

In order to determine the effectiveness of professional development models and activities evaluation must occur. However evaluation has been underestimated as a tool for increasing the impact of professional development (NCREL, 2003). Joyce and Showers (1988) agree that evaluation provides critical information that can be used to improve professional development activities, and to neglect evaluation is to undermine any professional development activity. According to the National Staff Development Council (2001) evaluation can gather both quantitative and qualitative information from various sources that provide specific recommendations for future professional learning. Hamilton, Kruger, and Smiley (2005) contend that a well-designed and implemented evaluation can help legislators and educational leaders see if collaborative efforts are achieving their goals. In this area of accountability, evaluation professional learning can help school and district leaders look deeply into their programs and professional practices to see what is and is not working.

Guskey (2002) suggest five levels of evaluation of professional development whereby each looks at different data sets.

- Participants' reactions
- Participants' learning
- Organizational support and change
- Participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and
- Student learning outcomes

His contention is that the five levels are hierarchical in nature and as with other researchers, believes that student learning and achievement outcomes are the most important evaluation tool for all professional learning (National Staff Development Council, 2001; Joyce and Showers, 1988).

Participant reaction - Historically, evaluation of professional development has primarily consisted of examining teachers' attitudes as outcomes and level one analyzes staff development by looking at the reactions of participants to the professional development experience. This is the most common form of professional development as the information it easy to gather and it the method most educators have the most experience (Guskey, 2000). While Sparks and Hirsh (1997) contend that the days of evaluating the success of professional learning by a "happiness quotient" that measures participants' satisfaction with the experience are gone, but research has revealed it is a valid aspect of the bigger evaluation picture (Guskey, 2000; Speck & Knipe, 2001).

Participant learning - Level two evaluations measure the knowledge and skills gained by the participants. According to Smylie (1998) professional development activities are designed to advance the knowledge, skills, and understanding of teachers

that led to changes in their thinking and classroom behavior. Therefore, Speck and Knipe (2001) suggest that participants be given a summative assessment of their learning at the end of a professional development activity to ascertain whether or not the participants acquired the intended learning goals of the professional development. Guskey (2000) suggest using structured evaluation forms such as, pre and posttest, interviews, personal learning logs and reflective journals to evaluate participant learning.

Organizational support and change - Guskey (2000) has contended that gathering information at this level is more complicated than at the previous levels, however, determining whether or not teachers are supported throughout their professional development is a vital. These evaluations frequently accompany initiatives surrounding school reform or programs designed to affect school improvement. Joyce and Showers (1988) feel the information gathered could be used to inform future professional development that can help foster sustainable change.

Participant use of new knowledge and skills - Garet et al. (2001) have acknowledged that assessing teachers' use of new knowledge and skills is challenging. The most accurate evaluation is direct observation of teachers, however teachers are often asked to complete self-evaluations, written reflections, or learning portfolios as evaluation tools (Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2000; Joyce & Showers, 1998). Speck and Knipe (2001) note that short-term and long-term objectives for teacher implementation of new knowledge and skills should be established at the development stage of professional development.

Student learning outcomes - Professional development researchers have stated that the primary goal of all professional development activities should be improved

student achievement, and evidence of improved student learning and academic performance is necessary when evaluating professional development activities and that measurable student achievement goals must be identified at the planning stages (Guskey 2000, 2002; Speck & Knipe, 2001). At this level, multiple measures should be used including: standardized achievement assessments, teacher-developed classroom assessments, portfolios and other collections of student work, student grades or standards mastery, student questionnaires and interviews, and school records (Guskey, 2000: Guskey & Sparks, 1996). The data gathered can be used to improve professional development efforts and keep improved student achievement at the center of all professional development activities.

According to Dufour (2004b) leaders can increase the probability that site-based staff development will enhance the school's capacity to improve student learning if they address four questions:

1. Does the professional development increase the staff's collective capacity to achieve the school's vision and goals? In the past the premise has been that schools will improve if individual teachers are encouraged to pursue professional growth opportunities that reflect their personal interests. Developing individual teachers' knowledge and skills is important but not sufficient. Schools should expand the ability of a team of teachers to achieve goals for all their students while developing the ability of the entire staff to move the school toward a shared vision.
2. Does the school's approach to staff development challenge staff members to act in new ways? Effective professional development will do more than help staff

acquire new skills and knowledge. While building shared knowledge is critical it is only when teachers begin to apply new learning that they will come to the deeper level of understanding that will enable them to adapt new practices in their own classroom

3. Does the schools' approach to staff development focus on results rather than activities? The real test of staff development is whether it changed instructional behavior and practices in ways that benefit students (Sparks, 2002). Leaders should help schools shift emphasis from programs and projects and create a collaborative culture where teachers work together to improve student learning.
4. Does the schools' approach to staff development demonstrate a sustained commitment to achieving important goals? Sparks (2002) advises that the key to school improvement is sustained effort over three to five years in which the entire staff seeks incremental annual improvements related to school goals. Leaders should bring coherence to the organization by establishing clear goals, coordinate efforts to achieve the goals, and sustain the effort over a period of time.

#### District-Wide and Site-Based Initiatives

District-wide models of professional development have offered a broad vision for teacher improvement, collaboration across grade levels, and opportunities to share resources, and expertise (Guskey, 2000). This professional development often begins with a needs assessment survey from the district office that is given to teachers.

Workshops or presentations are then geared based on the needs identified in the survey.

However, Guskey contends that this consists of one-shot presentations that have little relevance to the day-to-day problems of school administrators and teachers. Sparks and

Hirsh (1997) also that report district-wide professional learning programs are often established based on perceptions of teacher needs by administrators at the district office with and are negatively received by teachers.

District-wide initiatives have also resulted from the analysis of student test data. An examination of the data reveals weaknesses in classroom practices and district administrators then choose the focus of all the professional learning activities. Sparks and Hirsh (1997) feel this type of top-down model with lack of teacher in-put is not likely to improve teacher practice or student learning outcomes. Birman, Desimone, Porter, and Garet (2000) suggest district-wide professional learning that is mandated fails to have the form, duration, collective participation, meaningful content, active learning, and coherence necessary to result in improved student achievement.

Site-based professional development, on the other hand, has enabled collaborative planning and evaluation (Sparks, 2002; Little, 1993). According to Little (1999) site-based models include: collaborative action research, analyzing student work, peer coaching, professional inquiry, and any other activities that bring teachers together at the school level to improve teaching and student achievement. Site-based professional learning can help schools meet their goals for student achievement while contributing to a shared professional culture where teachers discuss instructional goals, methods, problems and solutions (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; Garet et al., 2001). Speck and Knipe (2001) emphasize that professional learning must focus on the overall vision and plan for school improvement that the teachers and administrators have developed.

After her work with the Corpus Christi, Texas school district, Hirsh (2004) reported effective staff development plans should not be written separately from a district



or a school improvement plan. Instead, professional learning should be embedded into the district or school plan and seen as a primary strategy for achieving the district and/or school goals. The professional development planning should focus attention on how the system and individuals within the system must change to achieve the district's goals and the professional learning should be results-driven, standards-based, and focused on educators' daily work. Hirsh contends that schools will achieve high levels of performance when professional learning is embedded in every school day and that job-embedded learning means:

- Adults work in learning communities whose goals are aligned with school and district goals.
- The learning community uses disaggregated student data to set priorities for adult learning, to monitor students' progress, and to help sustain continuous improvement.
- The learning community uses research to make decisions and adopts strategies that lead to the desired changes in educator practice in order to achieve the goals for student learning. Professional development focuses on deepening educators' content knowledge, applying research-based strategies to help students meet rigorous standards, and using a variety of classroom assessments.

Such was the case of the schools in the Warren Township in Indiana. Utilizing the eight-step process that was formulated in the Brazosport, Texas school district, one of the schools experienced a dramatic gain in reading, one elementary school earned a four-star rating from the state for performing in the top 25% of all Indiana schools, and 7 of 11 elementary schools experienced double-digit increases in achievement ranging from 10 to

34 percentage points (Richardson, 2005). The eight steps included: 1) disaggregate and analyze student data, including test results; 2) develop an instructional calendar in the core subjects; 3) deliver an instructional focus, based on the calendar; 4) assess student mastery of the standard taught by using common formative and summative assessments written by teachers; 5) provide additional instruction for students who did not master the standard; 6) provide enrichment for students who have mastered the standard; 7) provide ongoing maintenance of standards taught; 8) monitor the progress by using classroom walk-throughs, learning logs, and grade-level meetings (Richardson).

#### Professional Learning Initiatives in Georgia

One of the goals of the Georgia Department of Education is to design and implement a coherent and sustained statewide system of support and process for improvement, which includes professional learning. During 2003, an 18-month evaluation and research in staff development was conducted with findings reported in the *Evaluation of Statewide Staff Development in Georgia* indicating that there is a need to transform the Staff Development Program in Georgia from a moderately indiscriminate system of staff development into a comprehensive school improvement process that is school-based, results focused, and job-embedded (Georgia Department of Education, 2004). One of the recommendations that resulted from the evaluation project was that school districts develop and implement an evaluation system to assess the effectiveness of staff development. This would include collecting and analyzing data on staff development as well as its impact on teaching practices and subsequent gains in student learning. Interpretation of this data would be used to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of staff development activities and inform districts of development needs.

Another recommendation was that staff development should become an integral part of the school improvement program with staff development activities conducted within the school day, and the schools faculty within schools would be responsible for developing a continuous improvement plan with staff development aligned to the plan (Georgia Department of Education, 2006).

In 2004 The Georgia Department of Education adopted the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development and named the standards the "Georgia Standards for Professional Learning" (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). The twelve NSDC Standards for Staff Development and the Georgia Standards for Professional Learning have been organized into three major areas: *Context*, *Process*, and *Content* (Georgia Department of Education).

The Context Standards address organizational support. Professional learning that improves student learning: 1) develops a learning community within the school and district that focuses efforts on continuous learning while providing structures and opportunities to support that learning. 2) develops instructional leadership that distributes leadership responsibilities throughout the school and district and focuses on continuous improvement, and 3) uses resources wisely to support new professional learning formats and activities such as time within the workday for professional learning.

The Process Standards focus on how professional learning topics are identified, designed, and delivered. Professional learning that improves student learning: 1) uses data to determine what educators should be learning, to monitor progress of effort, and to sustain continuous improvement, 2) evaluates professional learning in order to demonstrate the impact on student learning as well as to improve programming, 3) uses

research to determine the content of professional learning, 4) designs professional learning using a variety of professional learning formats and activities that will accomplish the intended goals, 5) applies the knowledge of adult learning when designing professional learning activities, and 6) develops collaborative skills so that team members can effectively work together to improve their skills and knowledge.

The Content Standards identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to attain high levels of achievement for all students. Professional learning that improves student learning: 1) focuses on equity, so that all students are understood, supportive learning environments exist, and high expectations are upheld for all students, 2) uses high quality teaching, which includes deep knowledge of content, research-based instructional strategies, and a variety of classroom assessments, and 3) focuses on strategies that involve families in the education of their children.

In addition, the Georgia Department of Education contracted with the National Staff Development council in 2005 to make the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI), which was developed by the NSDC to measure the implementation of the Standards for Staff Development, available to every school in Georgia. Georgia is only one of two states in the country that have made the survey available free of charge to all schools in the state (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). The SAI is a diagnostic and planning tool and the results of the survey with other data and school research, provide baseline information for planning for high quality school improvement and focuses on the use of professional learning communities as a vehicle for implementing more effective professional learning activities (Georgia Department of Education, 2006)

One of the conclusions reached after analyzing evaluation data submitted by local systems in their *2005 Comprehensive Professional Learning Program Reports* was that more school systems in Georgia have begun to form “learning communities” or “learning/study groups” in which everyone in the building is an active learner. These learning communities examine available data and regularly assess their own knowledge and skills that forms the basis of individual, group, and schools improvement plans. The research in school improvement and professional learning indicated that this approach should be the focus of all training in local school systems (Georgia Department of Education, 2006).

In summary, some of the changes impacting professional learning include:

- From isolated, individual learning to organizational development which includes learning both individually and in the context of groups;
- From fragmented, one-shot training geared toward receiving knowledge from experts in training to multiple forms of job-embedded learning which includes collaboration with peers to study the teaching/learning process;
- From skills that can be used by everyone and therefore available in depth to no one to involvement of all teachers and instructional leaders in developing new approaches to teaching based on their needs;
- Adult learning as an add-on that is not essential to schooling, to adult learning as a fundamental way of teaching and transformation of schooling; and,
- From measuring effectiveness by attendance at workshops to measuring effectiveness by improvements in teaching and learning (Sparks, 1995, Little, 1993).

A number of studies have identified the influence of the development of professional learning communities as an effective reform effort that enhances professional learning practices (Louis and Kruse, 1995; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; Hord, 1997a; Dufour and Eaker, 1998; Langer, 2000).

### Defining Professional Learning Community

Senge (1990) introduced the term learning organizations in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*. Senge states that there are five disciplines of a learning organization: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning. The first discipline, systems thinking is a body of knowledge and tools that help us see underlying patterns and how they can be changed, and understanding these patterns can allow a school to be proactive rather than reactive when they are making changes in programs and practices. The second discipline, personal mastery, reflects Senge's belief that organizations learn when individuals learn and an organizations' commitment to learning can be no greater than those of individual members. Mental models, Senge's third discipline, are deeply engrained assumptions and generalizations that influence how to understand the world and take action and can be a barrier to people being able to adapt to change. Shared vision, the fourth discipline refers to individuals being able to hold a shared picture of the future they seek to create. Team learning, the fifth discipline, focuses on group interaction through dialogue and skillful discussion.

As schools became engaged in building collaborative work cultures, the term learning organizations came to be referred to as professional learning communities in schools (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). They chose the term purposefully and refer to professionals as those with expertise in a specialized field, having advanced training to

enter the field and someone who is expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. Learning suggests ongoing study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement while community suggest an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot achieve by themselves.

Dufour and Eaker (1998) believed that schools were organized around the factory model and that this model is inadequate to educate the students of today. They argue that educators need to embrace an alternate model of the school and suggested that professional learning communities was a model that was consistent with the findings of a number of educational researchers. Eaker, Dufour and Dufour (2002) summarized their conceptual framework of professional learning communities as having seven components: (1) collaboration; (2) developing shared mission, vision, values, and goals; (3) focus on learning; (4) leadership; (5) focused school improvement plans; (6) celebration; and (7) persistence.

According to Brown and Isaacs (1994) the term professional learning community, as applied to schools, is a term used to refer to a school organization in which all stakeholders are involved in joint planning, action, and assessment for student growth and school improvement. Lieberman in his interview with Sparks (1999) describes professional learning communities as places where teachers engage in collaborative activities, pursue clear shared purposes and take collective responsibility for student learning. Zepeda (1999) contends that learning communities share a similar vision of educational values and beliefs and work together toward common goals that enhance professional and personal development.

In the publication *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*, Hord (1997a) noted that there was no universal definition of a professional learning community. However, based on an extensive literature review of the subject and her research with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Hord conceptualized professional learning communities as schools in which the professional staff as a whole consistently operate along five dimensions: (1) supportive and shared leadership; (2) shared values and vision; (3) collective learning; (4) shared personal practice, and (5) supportive conditions. The conceptual framework of Hord's model of professional development will be used in this research study.

#### Supportive and Shared leadership

Principals are central to productive school change. Transforming the school organization into a learning community can only be done with the leader's sanction and active nurturing of the entire staff's development as a community according to Hord (1997a). Hord defined shared and supportive leadership as the capacity of the school leader to abdicate the traditional command and control roles typically associated with school leadership and to develop strategies with which to encourage members of the organization to participate actively in the leadership activities of the school. The researcher also noted that leaders who are effective change agents guide the school collaboratively to develop a shared vision and to learn collectively. They also share personally and professionally and engage in long-range planning that provides supports for teachers as well as students.

According to Prestine (1993) there are three factors necessary to create professional learning communities in schools: the ability to share authority, facilitate the



work of staff, and the ability to participate without dominating. Other studies support these factors and note that leaders who exhibit characteristics of a collaborative leadership style have a greater opportunity for success in developing and supporting learning communities (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003, Louse & Kruse 1995).

Newman and Associates (1996) also found that leaders play a key role in fostering the success of professional learning communities. They found that if a school has a strong professional learning community, leaders paid attention to school culture and structure by supportive and shared leadership with a strong focus on improvement and ensured that cultural conditions supported the learning community. According to Zepeda (1999) leaders set the tone for improvement by modeling active learning, investing time in the process, showing respect for others ideas, and empowering teachers as leaders.

Hipp and Huffman (2000) reported that the schools in their study were committed to whole school reform and represented various levels of learning communities. The study's findings indicate that the key factor in whole-school reform is the leadership of the principal. In their research, principals in the schools deemed as high-readiness schools were not coercive or controlling; they shared leadership, and were selective in their focus on a shared vision. Evidence from their study indicated that the focus on capacity building was purposeful and reinforced, as staff members increasingly became open to changing roles and responsibilities. The principal's belief in the capabilities of the teachers corresponded positively to the trust level reported by the staffs and was evident in their broad participation in both formal and informal structures. Hipp and Huffman also found that unlike traditional implementation of site-based decision-making,

empowered decision-making was evident as responsibilities were dispersed among the staff and they had significant input into decisions related to teaching and learning.

While Dufour and Berkley (1995) recognize the important role of the principal in facilitating meaningful change they contend that the best way for principals to accomplish this is to create conditions that promote the development and growth of the professionals within their schools. This is in agreement with Fullan (1993) as he promotes that organizations do not change, only the individuals within those organizations change and that focusing on individuals is the most effective way to implement change or reform.

Dufour and Berkley (1995) offer the following suggestions to principals to promote the professional growth of staff members: (1) create consensus on the school you are trying to become; (2) monitor the critical elements of the school improvement efforts; (3) ensure systematic collaboration throughout the school; (4) encourage experimentation; (5) model commitment to professional growth; (6) provide one-on-one professional learning; (7) provide professional learning that are purposeful and research based; (8) promote individual and organization self efficacy; (9) identify, promote, and protect shared values and (10) stay the course. The professional learning community is one means by which shared values and a common vision can be created.

Morrissey and Cowen (2000) describe ways that principals create and sustain professional learning communities. Principals' actions were crucial to the creation and sustenance of a professional learning community in the following five dimensions: 1) developing collective values and vision in the school by focusing on "doing what is best for students" and using the vision to develop and recruit quality staff; 2) supporting shared decision making by establishing structures and processes that contribute to,

promote, and increase decision making capacity of teachers over time; 3) promoting continuous learning by communicating the value of learning, monitoring growth and progress, and connecting professional developing to the school improvement goals; 4) encouraging collaboration by providing time and support for collaboration and identifying outcomes of that collaboration; 5) providing support by establishing clear expectations, creating opportunities to develop relationships among staff, devising structures for communication, and acknowledging the human capacity for change.

### Shared Values and Vision

Hord (1997b) defined shared values and visions as the shared mental image of that which is important to the individual and the organization and suggested that in professional learning communities, the shared vision must be focused sharply on student learning. Bolman and Deal (1997) noted that vision is a “persuasive and hopeful image of the future” (p. 315) and suggest that condensing and disseminating a vision is the most important function of a leader. However, they added the importance of the link between personal vision and organizational vision stating that “no amount of charisma can sell a vision that reflects only the leader’s values and needs” (p. 315).

Barnett and McCormick (2003) conducted a study in Australia and sought to examine the role of vision in the development of commitment by teachers and the relationship between a school’s vision and the behavior of teachers. The development of the vision in the schools in the study occurred through staff meetings, surveys, and other professional development activities that were collaborative in nature. The principal in the study described the vision as the “glue that held the school together” (p. 65), and some teachers described the vision as having a positive effect on the school. The authors

suggested that the significant amount of time invested in developing a collaborative vision was of utmost importance as there is little chance of realizing the vision unless there is overlap between the organization's vision and that of the members of the organization. This reflects the same conclusion of Bolman and Deal (1997).

Nonetheless, Barnett and McCormick (2003) also found that other teachers in the study reported little effect on their classroom practice as a result of their work in developing and adopting a vision. One teacher said, "I know it's there but it doesn't influence me when I am teaching" (p. 65). The authors noted that the principals in the study attempted to motivate teachers to apply their knowledge, capability, and effort toward the attainment of the shared vision, but not at the expense of individual beliefs and values. In another study, Leonard and Leonard (2001) found that "there was substantially low inclination that the wishes of the majority should be imposed upon the individual (p. 392) even though the teacher supported the belief that schools function better when teachers share common values and beliefs. It was suggested that the differing opinions resulted from teachers' belief in a democratic process for resolving contradictory beliefs.

In a study conducted in Australia, Andrews and Lewis (2001) studied the development of an Innovative Design for Enhancing Achievement in Schools (IDEAS) team. The school invited all their staff to become involved in clarifying the values and vision of the school but only a few teachers actually agreed to participate. Those who participated shared ownership of the vision but the outcome was like that in the Barnett and McCormick (2003) study in that ensuring that the shared vision and values were embraced by all proved difficult.

In a study by Chrispeels, Castillo, and Brown (2001) they addressed the ability of a school improvement team to create a vision and goals. The teams in the study that had access to adequate data and focused their efforts on student work were better able to create a clear vision and goals for improvement. They also noted that for maximum effectiveness, team goals, school goals, and district goals need to be aligned. This is consistent with Bolman and Deal's (1997) contention that organizational vision needs be aligned with the vision of the members of the organization. Dufour and Berkey (1995) also note that the vision of the school's future will be influential only to the extent that it is widely shared by the staff and community.

Eaker et al. (2002) described the need to resolve differing opinions when developing shared values and vision and suggested that the development of vision in traditional schools amounted to an averaging of opinions. Eaker et al. noted that the development of shared values and vision in professional learning communities is grounded in research and best practices. According to Eaker et al. and Hord, (1997b), in the professional learning community, shared values and vision becomes the driving force that leads to true school reform.

### Collective Learning

According to Hord, (2004b) a professional learning community is characterized by a climate where teachers and administrators evaluate their performance against their shared values and visions and as a result, determine the learning necessary to enable their students to become more successful. Goddard , Hoy and Hoy (2000) contend that professional learning communities affect school culture, as teachers believe that they can work collaboratively to bring about change. As they begin to share successes and target

areas for instructional improvement, the culture of the school grows more positive and encouraging, and these coordinated efforts lead to enhanced student achievement.

Langer's (2000) study suggests that a critical aspect of school culture is the extent to which teachers create a professional learning community.

Louis and Kruse (1995) agree and state that professional communities affect organizational culture as they create an environment where teachers are grounded by their shared values, beliefs, and dispositions, as they are continuously learning and critically reflective. They also uphold that a core characteristic of a professional community is an unwavering focus on student learning. They also contend that a review of teacher's behavior by colleagues is the norm in the professional learning community, not as evaluation, and that teachers visit each other's classrooms to observe, take notes, and then discuss teaching practices from the observations with each other.

According to Fullan (1999) one characteristic of successful schools is that teachers work collaboratively to develop stronger instructional strategies, and these strategies enhance student achievement. At the same time, teachers develop a stronger professional community that allows them to provide even more support for learning that enhances student accomplishment. Louis and Marks (1996) agree, and their research reveals, there are significant positive effects on student learning where the norms of collaboration and teacher learning are in place

According to Rosenholtz (1989), teachers who felt supported in their classroom practice and their own continuing professional development were more committed than those who did not. Rosenholtz observed that in effective school improvement teaching is a combined rather than an individual effort, and those teachers improve instruction when

analysis, evaluation, and experimentation are conducted in a collaborative environment. She also finds that teachers with a strong sense of efficacy tend to stay in the profession longer than those who did not. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) confirmed Rosenholtz's findings and suggest that when teachers have opportunities for collaborative inquiry and its related learning, they are able to share new insights related to teaching.

In another study, Spillane (1999) provides a longitudinal study of math and science reform initiatives in which teachers who were most successful in improving instruction engaged in ongoing collaboration and deliberations with colleagues that help them translate new ideas into practice. Likewise, Coburn (2001) finds that elementary teachers engaged in reading reforms constructed understanding and innovations in formal and informal collaborative conversations that lead to successful instructional practices. Schrage (1990) finds that collaboration leads to shared understandings through the group process that could not have been discovered by an individual. In their research, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) established that successful schools found a way to channel staff and student efforts toward a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning. These same schools created opportunities for teachers to collaborate and help one another as the teachers in the schools took collective not just individual responsibility for student learning. The schools with strong professional learning communities were effective in promoting student achievement, as they were better able to offer authentic pedagogy. The results showed that comprehensive redesign of schools, shared decision-making, and teachers teaming as professional communities of staff, can improve student learning.

Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995) shared findings from a study conducted by the Center on Organizational and Restructuring of Schools from 11,000 students enrolled in

820 secondary schools in the United States. In the schools that had developed into professional learning communities, the staff worked together to change their pedagogy. As a result, the students were engaged in high intellectual learning tasks, and students achieved academic gains in math, science, history, and reading that those students in schools who were not organized into professional learning communities. The study also revealed that the achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds were smaller in the schools characterized by professional learning communities.

In commenting on the case studies in *The Work of Restructuring Schools*, Darling-Hammond (1995) observed that the schools that looked into teaching and learning and how their practices were effective for students showed increased student achievement more quickly than schools that did not. In those schools, teachers had opportunities to collaborate with peers and observe each other teaching.

In another study, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) worked with 15 low-performing schools across their region. The primary goal was to help the schools transform themselves into high-performing learning communities. The evaluation of the work revealed that collaboration appears crucial in improving student outcomes. All three schools reported progress toward increased student achievement through enhanced staff collaborative activities, including professional learning teams who were provided opportunities to jointly develop and revise curriculum, improve instructional practice, and address student academic and personal needs. The findings also suggest that a key element in the process is making decisions based on data, which in turn increases the likelihood that educators link improvement activities to student achievement and address factors hindering progress (Hamilton et al. 2005).



Supovitz and Christman (2003) report the findings from large-scale evaluations of district reform initiatives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Cincinnati, Ohio. Both reform initiatives were designed to foster the development of instructional communities. However, the study indicates that only under certain conditions will teacher communities flourish into communities engaged in instructional improvement. Organizational restructuring that fosters social groupings of teachers without providing them with the strategies and supports to engage in instructional will product communities, but they will not likely emerge as communities of instructional practice.

#### Shared Personal Practice

Professional learning communities according to Hord (2004) are characterized by a culture of shared professional practice and behaviors that serve to cultivate continuous improvement for both the individual and the community. However, this dimension of the professional learning community is often the most difficult and because of the significant change in culture needed to encourage teachers to share their professional practice.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Browns University works with urban school districts across the United States that are pursuing efforts to improve educational opportunities especially for students from low-income backgrounds and English Learners. Their experiences have shown that professional learning communities can enhance professional culture in the following four key areas: (1) build the productive relationships that are required for teacher collaboration, and reflection; (2) connect educators at all levels in collective, consistent, and content-specific learning; (3) address inequities in the opportunities for teaching and learning by supporting teachers who work with students who require more assistance; and (4) promote efforts to improve results in

terms of school culture, student learning, and teacher practice (Annenberg Institute, 2004).

According to Barth (1990), shared personal practice involves a commitment of members of a professional learning community to observe each other's practice to allow professionals to act as change facilitators for each other. This would facilitate schools where teachers and principals talk about their practices, share their knowledge, and observe each other engaged in their work to facilitate collective growth. Sawyer (2001) defined collegial schools as those where teachers are encouraged to observe each other teaching and discuss their personal practice. Little (1982) agrees and states that characteristics that distinguish collegial schools include: teachers' frequent and concrete talk about teaching practice; frequent and honest observations of teaching; the collaborative design, research, and evaluation of teaching materials; and peer teaching and coaching of teaching practice. However, Sarason (1999) suggests that the need for personal safety of teachers is vital in schools since most school culture characteristically view asking for help as incompetence.

A culture of collaboration and shared personal practice is the norm at Boones Mill Elementary School, a rural school serving 400 students according to Dufour (2004b). Teachers meet in grade-level teams to study state standards, develop common assessments, and analyze the data from those assessments to identify weaknesses in student learning, and develop strategies for improving results. It is through this shared personal practice that team members make public what has traditionally been private in an effort to raise student achievement. Shared practice and collective inquiry help sustain

improvement by strengthening connections among teachers, stimulating discussion about professional practice, and helping teachers to build on one another's expertise.

#### Supportive Conditions (Collegial Relationships and Structures)

Structures that support the vision of a school and learning community are vital to the effectiveness and innovation of teaching at the classroom level. Hord (1997b) cited two types of supportive structures found within professional learning communities: structural conditions and collegial relationships. The structural conditions include use of time, communication procedures, size of the school, proximity of teachers, and staff development processes. Collegial relationships include positive educator attitudes, widely shared vision or sense of purpose, norms of continuous critical inquiry and improvement, respect, trust, and positive caring relationships.

Creating supportive structures, including a collaborative environment, has been described as "the single most important factor" for successful school improvement for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their school (Eastwood & Louis, 1992, p. 215). According to Morrissey (2000), within professional learning communities, supportive conditions are provided for staff to go about their daily work and engage in learning together. Time is provided for staff to meet regularly in large and small groups, and staff value the time provided by engaging in substantive work and learning together. Communication and organizational processes run smoothly within the office and among the school staff. Weekly or daily bulletins are issued, informing staff of events, decisions, and questions. Communication structures with the central office are clearly established and parents are regularly informed of school events via newsletters and phone calls.

Louis and Kruse (1995) identified the following physical factors that support learning communities: time to meet and talk, small size of the school and physical proximity of the staff to one another, teaching roles that are interdependent, communication structures, school autonomy, and teacher empowerment. Boyd's (1992) list of physical factors include: the availability of resources; scheduled and structures that reduce isolation; policies that provide greater autonomy, foster collaboration, provide effective communication, and provide for staff development.

According to Louis and Kruse (1995) one of the first characteristics of individuals in a productive learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement. They also noted the need for the following characteristics: respect and trust among colleagues at the school and district level, possession of an appropriate cognitive and skill base that enables effective teaching and learning, supportive leadership from administrators and others in key roles, and relatively intensive socialization processes. These factors parallel those identified by Boyd (1992): positive teacher attitudes toward schooling, students, and change; students' heightened interest and engagement with learning; norms of continuous critical inquiry and continuous improvement; widely shared vision or sense of purpose; norm of involvement in decision making; collegial relationships among teachers; positive, caring student-teacher-administrator relationships; a sense of community in the school; supportive community attitudes; and parents and community members as partners and allies. Boyd noted that the supportive conditions, both physical and collegial relationships are highly interactive with many influencing the others.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) used years of longitudinal survey data and interviews with principals, teachers, parents, and local community leaders in Chicago and described how effective social relationships can be a leading resource for school improvement. In schools characterized by high relational trust, educators were more likely to experiment with new practices and work together to advance improvements. These schools were also more likely to demonstrate marked gains in student learning. In contrast, schools with weak trust saw practically no improvement in their reading or mathematics scores. The research showed that the quality of social relationships strongly predicts positive student outcomes.

According to Sather (2005) building relations is important as the quality of these relations makes a huge difference in the way a school and the teams within the school function. Although relationships happen simply through proximity Sather thinks, “It is important to be intentional about building and sustaining health relationships” (p.24).

Sather calls upon school leaders to:

- Build and maintain trust and create a safe environment for teachers to share openly;
- Explore ways to work with conflict as it comes up; and,
- Develop and use avenues for communicating with the entire school community, including parents and the district office.

Relational trust serves as a resource for school improvement in four ways:

1. It helps moderate the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty in times of change. Relational trust can also serve as a catalyst for innovation.

2. Structural change efforts require collective decision-making. In reform efforts in a context of high-trust, participants are more willing to share publicly in problem solving efforts.
3. Relational trust increases the change of high-quality implementation of reform efforts and helps coordinate meaningful collaborative action.
4. This trust constitutes a moral resource for school improvement. The norms created by trust provide good reasons for engaging in collective efforts that might seem irrational in an individual point of view (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

#### Professional Development and Professional Learning Communities

Fullan (1993) believes current literature recognizes that an important key to developing capacity for educational improvements lies in the successful development of the school as a learning organization and that people in organizations will change only if the sought-after reform is meaningful to them and has application to their work. Fullan also notes that in order for schools to become learning organizations, they must overcome fragmentation in their reform efforts, solve problems collectively, focus on improving teaching and learning, and develop shared values and beliefs about learning and change.

Swanson (2000) proposes that some of the most powerful professional development opportunities are created when teachers participate in some form of learning community. However, professional development has traditionally been provided through school in-service workshops, and according to Little (1993) this type of approach does not provide continuity and coherence, fails to recognize the best approaches to adult learning, and does not appreciate the complexity of the work teachers perform. Zepeda

(1999) agrees as understanding what motivates adults to grow and learn enhances professional development.

Corcoran (1995) maintains that the typical formats for staff development are most often a waste of time as they lack a clear focus and effective follow-up and are not a part of a more long-range scheme of learning for teachers. Advocates of alternatives to the workshop or in-service models of professional development highlight the need for teachers to work collaboratively in study groups, curriculum-development projects, network with other teachers, and conduct peer reviews (Little, 1993; Smylie et al., 2001).

Folden, Goertz, and O'Day (1995) also report that it takes more than a workshop to truly develop new abilities. They point out that an essential component in the implementation of new strategies is time for discussion, observation, and reflection that are all activities of learning communities. They found that teachers attitudes and abilities are shaped in the contexts in which they work and learning in communities formed with other professionals, and not in the traditional staff development model. In the structure of communities, individuals or groups bring in new ideas for discussion and this provides the forum and support needed for collective learning of all members. The support according to the authors is ongoing and focused on improving student achievement.

Another study of teachers' perceptions of their professional learning needs in secondary schools in Ontario, Canada, (Moore and Shaw, 2000) revealed that the most meaningful teacher professional development takes place not in a workshop or in isolated, restricted conversations, but in the context of professional learning communities. Findings indicate that teachers value professional learning that is directly relevant to their practice, however, many teachers tend to look to experts outside their workplace to fill

this need, often with disappointing results. Their findings also suggest that the program model of professional development is often at odds with adult learning principles and adverse to building the conditions of shared purpose, infrastructure, and domains for action that enable schools to become effective learning organizations.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2001) in the year 2000, teachers participated in professional development that typically lasted 1 to 8 hours on any one content area, and only 18 percent of teachers felt their training was connected to their school improvement plan. In addition, only 10 to 15 percent (the difference was in the content areas) reported that they were given significant follow-up materials or activities.

A 2000 study by the National Staff Development Council examined professional development programs in schools that made proficient gains in student achievement and found their staff development had changed from the occasional workshop and isolated learning to organizational learning that was collaborative in nature, contained diverse and extensive opportunities, and placed an emphasis on accountability and increased student achievement (WestEd, 2000). Other findings from this study indicated that professional learning should: 1) use agreed-upon student achievement goals to focus and shape teacher learning; 2) provide an expanded array of professional development opportunities; 3) embed ongoing, informal learning into the school culture; 4) build a highly collaborative school environment where working together to solve problems and to learn from each other become cultural norms; 5) find and use time to allow teacher learning to happen; and 6) keep checking a broad range of student performance data.

In the local context related to staff development and their relationship to professional learning communities, the findings in the *Evaluation of Statewide Staff*



*Development in Georgia* report indicated that there was a need to transform the staff development program in Georgia from a relatively random system of personnel training into a comprehensive school improvement process that is school-based, results focused, job-embedded and driven by action research conducted by teachers and administrators (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). The Georgia state board of education also adopted the National Staff Development Council's for Staff Development, and created the *Georgia Standards for Professional Learning*. The State Board of Education also changed the term "staff development" to "professional learning".

*The Georgia Standards for Professional Learning* addresses organizational support for professional learning (Georgia Department of Education (2006). Professional learning that improves student learning: (1) develops a learning community within the school and district that focuses efforts on continuous learning while providing structures and opportunities to support that learning; (2) develops instructional leadership that distributes leadership responsibilities throughout the school and district and focuses on continuous improvement; and (3) uses resources wisely to support new professional learning format and activities such as time within the workday for professional learning (Georgia Department of Education).

### Summary

In the literature review regarding staff development and the professional learning community, Swanson (2000) proposes that some of the most powerful professional development opportunities are created when teachers participate in some form of learning community. However, professional development has traditionally been provided through school in-service workshops, and according to Little (1993) this type of approach does

not provide continuity and coherence, fails to recognize the best approaches to adult learning, and does not appreciate the complexity of the work teachers perform.

The outcomes for students and teachers in professional learning communities according to Louis and Marks (1996) include significant positive effects on student learning where the norms of collaboration and teacher learning are in place. Research also indicates that low-performing schools can overcome the implementation problems that accompany reform efforts, and increase student achievement, when the staff and school are organized as professional learning communities (Lee et al., 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). According to Rosenholtz (1989), teachers who felt supported in their classroom practice and their own continuing professional development were more committed than those who did not. In her research she observed that in effective school improvement teaching is a combined rather than an individual effort, and those teachers improve instruction when analysis, evaluation, and experimentation are conducted in a collaborative environment. Rosenholtz also finds that teachers with a strong sense of efficacy tend to stay in the profession longer than those who did not.

As the reform initiative of schools to develop their capacity to become professional communities continues, there are those such as Fullan (2006) who now caution that there are reasons to be worried about the spread of professional learning communities because; (1) the danger of superficial PLCs; (2) people believing that professional learning communities as the latest reform effort or just another program; and (3) the focus on individual schools rather than creating new multi-school district cultures. Dufour (2004) agrees and contends that the term professional learning community is in

danger of losing its meaning and momentum if it is viewed as just another reform effort because there is confusion about the fundamental concepts.

There has been a paradigm shift regarding the professional development of teachers. With the climate of increasing accountability, professional development plays a central role in school reform and teachers are now involved in both teaching and learning as they continue to increase their skills and knowledge. Professional learning that focuses on student achievement while meeting district and staff needs is key to improving teaching and learning.

The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act significantly raises expectations for states and schools in that all students must meet or exceed state standards in reading and mathematics within twelve years which has propelled professional development of teachers into the center of the debate surrounding school reform. The federal requirements of *No Child Left Behind* focuses on the provision of high-quality professional development that improves and increases teachers' knowledge and skills through sustained, intensive, and classroom focused models.

The results of this study provided insight into the professional learning activities of the three Title I Schools as their school wide program must provide ongoing professional development for teachers, principals, paraprofessionals and, if appropriate, pupil services personnel, parents, and other staff, to enable all students in the school to meet the State's student academic standards, align professional development with the State's academic standards, and devote sufficient resources to conduct effective professional development. The researcher interviewed principals, and members of the School Improvement Teams at each school and examined artifacts and evidence to

ascertain what professional learning practices that had been implemented and their impact on the school's status as a Title I Distinguished school.

In addition, the recent literature and research suggest schools need to develop their collective capacity to address the learning needs of their students in order to increase student achievement and that increased student learning is linked to teacher learning and collaboration. Professional learning communities offers the most powerful conceptual model form transforming schools to meet this challenge. The power and effectiveness of professional learning communities lies in that instead of becoming a reform initiative in itself, it becomes a supporting structure for schools to continuously renew and transform themselves whether from an initiative they create or one that is mandated.

Professional learning communities provide a context of collegiality to support teachers and administrators as they improve their practice. As educators we are continually striving to provide appropriate learning environments and opportunities for children, and it is imperative that we provide similar environments and opportunities for our teachers. It is extremely advantageous to study the manner in which schools become involved in joint planning, and collaboration for school improvement while focusing on individual student growth and increased achievement. Therefore, the researcher also studied the extent of teacher engagement within the five dimensions of professional learning communities within three elementary Title I schools within one school district that had been mandated to implement professional learning communities through grade level horizontal planning teams. The researcher conducted this research using Hord's framework for professional learning communities. The researcher surveyed teachers in

order to determine the level of engagement within the five dimensions of professional learning communities.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional learning practices in three rural elementary schools in Georgia, who have been named Title I Distinguished Schools. The study also examined the extent to which these schools reflect the dimensions of a professional learning community in the areas of shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions (collegial relationships and structures), (Hord, 1997b). A description of the research design, participants, sample, instrumentation, data collection methods, data analysis and reporting of the data is included in this chapter.

#### Research Questions

The overarching question for this research study was: How do professional learning practices contribute to the school's status as a Title I Distinguished School? The following sub questions were used to guide the study:

5. What school wide professional learning practices have been implemented?
6. What individual/targeted professional learning practices have been implemented?
7. What role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school?
8. To what extent do the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a Professional Learning Community?

## Research Design

A mixed methodology collective case study design was used, which yielded both qualitative and quantitative data from the three schools that were used in the study. Case study research provides a detailed account and analysis of one or more cases. Case study researchers study how systems operate and view each case as having an internal and external context (Johnson and Christensen, 2000). Yin (2003) suggests that case studies are appropriate when the researcher believes that the context in which the study is situated is pertinent to the phenomenon under consideration. The phenomenon under investigation in this research was the professional learning practices at three Title I elementary schools and the extent to which the dimensions of professional learning community are present in the three schools. The learning community is embedded in the school context making the case study an appropriate design. Case studies are also the preferred design when the researcher examines contemporary events without the ability to manipulate the behaviors of the participants, (Yin, 2003). The study investigated the perceptions of principals and teachers and the extent to which they feel their schools function as professional learning communities. The study also examined the professional learning practices at each school making the case study an appropriate design.

In a collective case study, the researcher believes that greater insight can be gained through studying multiple cases in one overall research study. Johnson and Christensen (2000) note that although case studies typically focus on a single case, they can assume a comparative form when similarities and differences between two or more cases are analyzed. Since the intent was to study the perceptions of professional

learning practices at three different Title 1 elementary schools, a comparative case study was appropriate.

Qualitative research and quantitative research are two major research traditions in educational research (Johnson and Christensen, 2000). They suggest that it is beneficial to collect multiple sets of data using both qualitative and quantitative research as both research methods have different strengths and weaknesses. Using different types of research helps to corroborate research findings if the same result is found, and if the data results in conflicting information, additional research will be needed. According to Johnson and Christensen, qualitative research tends to use the inductive form of research to develop theory about phenomena in the world and is typically conducted in naturalistic settings, while quantitative tightly controlled conditions. Both forms of research were used for this study to investigate the perceptions of principals and teachers with regard to their professional learning practices and the extent they feel their schools function as professional learning communities. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data and individual interviews and group interviews were used to collect qualitative data. Individual school and district documents were also reviewed including but not limited to Title I reports, School Improvement Plans, Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) surveys, and staff development reports and expenditures.

#### Population

All names of individuals, schools, streets, and cities have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of the participants. The units of analysis for this study were three rural elementary schools in Georgia. These schools are located in a district that administers one high school, one middle school, and the three elementary



schools chosen for the study. Each elementary school is identified as a Title I School and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students range from 51% to 63%. To qualify as a Title I school the percentage of economically disadvantaged students must be over 40% as measured by students receiving free or reduced lunch. Title I Distinguished Schools program recognizes and honors schools that meet or exceed adequate yearly progress (AYP) for three or more consecutive years and have not been on the Unsafe Schools Choice Option list within the last two years.

### Sample

Two types of sampling are available in research; random sampling, which enables the researcher to generalize or make statements about the population based on their study of the sample, and nonrandom sampling (Johnson and Christensen, 2000). The researcher in this study used two types of nonrandom sampling techniques: convenience sampling, and purposeful sampling. Johnson and Christensen note that both types of sampling can be used in qualitative and quantitative research. Purposeful sampling results in the selection of a sample based on its ability to provide the most information about the phenomenon of interest, while convenience sampling includes people that are available, volunteer, or can be easily recruited, and are willing to participate in the study. In this study, the researcher assessed perceptions from the principals and staffs at three rural elementary schools in northeast Georgia, who have been named Title I Distinguished Schools, to determine if their schools reflect the five dimensions of a professional learning community. In addition, interviews were conducted to determine the professional learning practices at each school. The entire staffs at each school were invited to participate in the study to complete a questionnaire and/or be part of the interview process.

## Participants

The research project incorporated principals, assistant principals, and teachers at three elementary schools from a school district located in northeast Georgia. Two of the schools have been named Title I Distinguished schools for five years and one school for six years, having made adequate yearly progress according to Georgia Department of Education criteria. All three schools have participated in the Max Thompson Learning-Focused® Schools training, and one of the schools is currently using the Modern Red Schoolhouse (MRSh) comprehensive reform model. The Max Thompson Learning-Focused® Schools Model is based on schools focusing on learning and achievement for all students and implementing five categories of exemplary practice which include: 1) curriculum frameworks, benchmarks, and maps; 2) instructional strategies for learning; 3) assessment to promote and measure learning; 4) schools and teacher organizations; and 5) short and long-term planning. The Modern Red Schoolhouse is a reform model whose main focus include: 1) differentiated instruction; 2) data-based school wide planning process; 3) alignment with state standards and assessments; 4) participatory governance structure (leadership team and tasks forces); 5) integration of instructional technology; and 5) parent and community partnerships.

The schools were chosen to examine the professional learning practices that occur at their schools and to assess the perceptions of the principals, and staffs at each school to determine the extent to which the schools reflect the five dimensions of a professional learning community. The three schools have made adequate yearly progress as measured by their student's scores on Georgia's Criterion Referenced Competency Tests and have been named Title I Distinguished Schools.

### Site Selection

The three schools chosen for participation in the proposed study are currently Title 1 Distinguished Schools. The sites were chosen as studying the professional learning practices of schools that have been identified as successful Title 1 schools will benefit other schools with similar characteristics, since many schools receiving Title 1 funds will qualify as “in need of improvement” by the federal government and will be subject to sanctions. Additionally, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* specifies that Title Distinguished Schools should serve as models for schools identified for improvement with similar demographics. During the 2007 school year there were 218 Title I schools in Georgia who did not make adequate yearly progress.

Title I Schools must also provide ongoing professional development for teachers, principals, paraprofessionals and, if appropriate, pupil services personnel, parents, and other staff, to enable all students in the school to meet the State's student academic standards, align professional development with the State's academic standards, and devote sufficient resources to conduct effective professional development. Therefore, it was beneficial to the participating schools to study their professional development activities since any data generated can be used to plan future professional learning activities at the school and district level.

This particular study is significant to the participating schools in that data has been generated that show similarities and differences in school practices even though the schools are located within the same school district. The research also identified strengths and weaknesses within each school in relation to the five dimensions of professional learning communities.

## Case Descriptions

Ace County School District is located along an interstate corridor in of the state of Georgia. According to the United States Census Bureau the population of Ace County is 22,997 of which 22.8% are under the age of 18, and 16.4% are 65 and over. The education levels of those 25 years of age and over were that 13.5% has at least a Bachelors degree and 71.1% have a high school diploma. The median household income is \$33,801 and the percentage of persons living below the poverty level is reported to be 14.3%. The three primary occupation groups reported in the county were manufacturing (30.5%), educational, health and social services, (16.5%), and retail trade (10.5%). Ace County's white population is 78.6%, African-American 19.4%, and a small Hispanic population of 1.4% is reported (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The Ace County school system has three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school with a total of over 3,600 students. There are a total of 19 full-time administrators and 2 part-time administrators within the district; 38% are male and 62% female; 16% are African-American and 84% are white. All administrators have an Educational Specialist Degree and four have their Doctorate Degree. There are 248 teachers in the system: 22% are male and 78% female; 8% are African-American, 1% Hispanic, and 91% white; 69% have at least a Masters degree. The average years experience for administrators and teachers is 26 and 15 respectively. The proportion of economically disadvantaged students system-wide is 52%.

After a sizeable building project during the 2002 school year, the district consolidated four elementary schools into two; Julian Drive Elementary and Ellis Elementary. The other elementary school, Brookside Elementary, is located within the

city limits of the district. The leadership at the county level had remained steady since the consolidation; however, during the 2007-2008 school year the leadership at the district level changed with the appointment of a new superintendent, new assistant superintendent of curriculum, and a new director of operations.

#### Julian Drive Elementary School

Enrollment at Julian Drive Elementary School at the time of the study is approximately 650 students. Julian Drive opened in 2002 and was the result of the consolidation of two smaller county schools located in the eastern part of the county. Julian Drive is the largest of the three schools chosen for the study. The majority of the students (82%) are white, 10% are African American, 3% Hispanic, 5% multiracial, and 1% Asian. When compared to the other schools in the district and the state, Julian Drive's percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch is similar (51% compared to 52%, and 50% respectively). The percentage of students with disabilities is also similar (12% compared to 11% and 12%), as is the English language learners (3% compared to 2% and 5%; Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

In 2006-2007 the staff included 2 administrators, 43 full-time teachers and 2 part-time teachers, all of which were classified as highly qualified under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. The staff is predominantly white (89%), and 11.1% are identified as African American. The average number of years of teaching experience at Julian Drive is 16.4%, and 73.3% of the staff have a Masters degree or higher. Julian Drive has been recognized by the State of Georgia as a Title 1 Distinguished school for the last five years. The percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards on the Criterion

Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) at Julian Drive Elementary is indicated in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: *Percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standard* n (%) - Julian

Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT)	2006-2007	2005-2006	2004-2005
Mathematics	84.7	90.6	85.8
Reading	92.0	89.5	90.3
English Language Arts	89.7	89.7	89.3
Science	75.2	93.6	92.2
Social Studies	89.9	94.8	93.2

Since the opening of the school in 2002 the leadership has been relatively stable as there have been only two principals, with the current principal in the position since 2004.

#### Ellis Elementary School

Ellis Elementary is the second largest school in the study with a student enrollment of approximately 600. The school opened in 2002 and was also the result of the consolidation of two smaller elementary schools located in the western portion of the county. The majority of the students (64%) are white, 30% are African American, 3% Hispanic, 2% multiracial, and 1% Asian. When compared to the other schools in the district and the state, Ellis' percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch is greater (63% compared to 52%, and 50% respectively). The percentage of students with disabilities is also similar to that of the district and state, (12% compared to 11% and 12%), as is the English language learners (1% compared to 2% and 5%; Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

In 2006-2007 the staff included 2 administrators, and 46 full-time teachers who were classified as highly qualified under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. The staff was predominantly white (93.4%), and 6.5% were identified as African American. The average number of years of teaching experience at Ellis was 15.6%, and 71.7% of the staff have a Masters degree or higher. Ellis Elementary has been recognized by the State of Georgia as a Title 1 Distinguished school for the last five years. The percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards on the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) is indicated in Table 3.2.

The leadership at Ellis Elementary has remained stable since the opening of the school until the 2007 school year when a new principal was appointed after the retirement of the previous principal. The assistant principal has been in her position since the school opened in 2002.

Table 3.2: *Percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standard n (%) - Ellis*

Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT)	2006-2007	2005-2006	2004-2005
Mathematics	76.3	83.5	81.6
Reading	85.0	84.0	89.9
English Language Arts	81.7	78.2	84.7
Science	71.4	84.3	87.4
Social Studies	85.1	88.0	88.1

#### Brookside Elementary School

Brookside Elementary School is the smallest of the three schools with a student enrollment in 2007 of approximately 500 students. The school has been operation for many years and is the only elementary school located in the city limits of the county seat.

The leadership at Brookside Elementary School has remained stable as the current principal was appointed in 2002. The majority of the students (52%) are white, 37% are African American, 5% Hispanic, 5% multiracial, and 2% Asian. When compared to the other schools in the district and the state, Brookside Elementary Schools' percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch is greater (60% compared to 52%, and 50% respectively). The percentage of students with disabilities is also similar to that of the district and state, (12% compared to 11% and 12%), as is the English language learners (4% compared to 2% and 5%; (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

In 2006-2007 the staff included 2 administrators, and 40 full-time teachers, all of which were classified as highly qualified under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The staff is predominantly white (87.5%), 10% were identified as African American and 2.5% are Hispanic. The average number of years of teaching experience at Brookside Elementary School is 13.8%, and 60.0% of the staff have a Masters degree or higher. Brookside Elementary School has been recognized by the State of Georgia as a Title 1 school for the past six years. The percentage of students meeting and exceeding standards on the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) is indicated in Table 3.3.



Table 3.3: *Percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standard* n (%) - Brookside

Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT)	2006-2007	2005-2006	2004-2005
Mathematics	79.4	85.4	82.9
Reading	81.0	78.1	91.2
English Language Arts	76.4	72.9	85.4
Science	63.6	86.0	87.3
Social Studies	86.6	90.4	91.4

The participants for the research study included the district Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum who also serves as the Title I Coordinator, the three principals at the three elementary schools, and three teachers from grades 1, 3, and 5, at each school who serve on the School Improvement Team at each school. The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and the three principals were interviewed individually. Group interviews were used with the teachers in grades 1, 3, and 5 who serve on the School Improvement Team. The interviews took approximately 45 minutes to an hour and there were a total of 7 interviews. In addition, the teachers, principals, and assistant principals at each school were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding the dimensions of a professional community, including shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, including relationships and structures in place at their respective schools.

#### Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study was the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (PLCA) (Hipp & Huffman 2003). This questionnaire was designed to assess

perceptions about the school's principal, staff, parents, and community members and is based on Hord's five dimensions of a professional learning community and its critical attributes. The questionnaire was administered to the faculty members at all chosen sites. The questionnaire contains statements about practices that occur at the school level. The measure serves as a descriptive tool of practices relating to shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, including relationships and structures Hord, 1997b). Table 3.4 displays the items on the instrument as they relate to the dimensions of a professional learning community.

Table 3.4: *Professional Learning Communities Assessment: Relationship to the Conceptual Framework*

Dimension	Assessment Items
Shared and Supportive leadership	1-10: School administrators participate democratically with teachers by sharing power, authority, and decision-making, and by promoting and nurturing leadership among staff.
Shared Values and Vision	11-18: Staff shared values and visions for school improvement based on student needs and high expectations. Shared vision reflects norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.
Collective Learning and Application	19-26: Staff at all levels of the school share information and work collaboratively to plan, solve problems, and improve learning opportunities. Together they seek knowledge, skills, and strategies, and apply what they learn to their work.
Shared Personal Practice	27-32: Peers visit with and observe one another to offer encouragement and to provide feedback on instructional practices to assist in student achievement and increase individual and organizational capacity.
Supportive Conditions - Relationships	33-36: Collegial relationships include respect, trust, norms of critical inquiry and improvement, and positive, caring relationships among students, teachers, and administrators.
Supportive Conditions - Structures	37-45: Structures include a variety of conditions such as size of the school, proximity of staff to one another, communication systems, and the time and space for staff to meet and examine current practices.

According to Huffman and Hipp (2003) in order to provide evidence of construct validity in the initial phase, a panel of 76 expert educators was chosen to provide data as to the importance of 44 statements about practices occurring at the school level. The panel represented various levels of professional practice including classroom teachers, principals, assistant principals, district and regional administrators, university faculty members, and educational researchers. Each expert was asked to rank (high, medium, low) the importance of each practice as an item to be included in the assessment. Ninety-eight percent of the items were rated as high in importance with only one item receiving a rating of medium. All 44 items were retained for the initial field test with one item being divided into two statements for a total of 45 items.

The next phase of the study included a field test of the PLCA instrument in schools. The PLCA utilizes a four-point, forced choice Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree. The field test yielded 247 questionnaires, and the descriptive statistics included minimum and maximum values (1 and 4), item means, and standard deviations. Factor Analysis was the method selected to provide evidence of construct validity. Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients were computed for the factored subscales of the measure. For the five factored subscales, the Alpha coefficients ranged from a low of .83 (Collective Learning and Application and Supportive Conditions-Relationships and Structures,) to a high of .93 (Shared Values and Vision). Thus, the instrument yielded satisfactory internal consistency (Alpha coefficient) reliability for the factored subscales. The PLCA instrument is available for dissemination and use by educators and permission to use the instrument has been

secured. The interviews with each of the three principals, the District Title I Coordinator, and the teachers, were conducted and the questions are included in the Appendices.

### Data Collection

Approval from the Georgia Southern University IRB was secured before any research was conducted. Permission from the Ace County School Superintendent was solicited before any data was collected. Copies of the survey questionnaire and the interview questions, as well as informed consent documents, were given to the superintendent for his approval. Once approval from the superintendent had been obtained, the researcher solicited approval from the principals at each school and requested permission to attend a faculty meeting at all schools. The researcher prepared a cover letter prepared which was given to all those in attendance at the faculty meeting. Individuals who volunteered for the study completed the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* questionnaire. The surveys were distributed and collected by the researcher. The researcher also asked each assistant principal and principal to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire contains 45 items and took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. There were 117 teachers and administrators who completed the questionnaire for a 91% response rate. The questionnaires were color coded for each site to allow for tracking of response rates and to allow for comparison of the results from the three sites, however, no names or demographic data were solicited with the questionnaire. At no time did the administrative staff see or view the surveys.

The interviews with each of the three principals, the district Title I Coordinator, and the teachers, were conducted and the questions are included in the Appendices. The interviews with the principals took place at their respective schools as did the teacher

group interviews. The interview with the district Title I Coordinator took place at his office. All of the interviews took approximately forty-five minutes to one hour.

### Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (PLCA) was analyzed and the data summarized in tables, figures, including a detailed discussion of the results. The quantitative data will answer research question four. Results are displayed in a table indicating the average response values for each dimension of the conceptual framework. Both single-item scores, for each item on the instrument and a mean score for each dimension of the conceptual framework will be calculated.

The interviews provided the qualitative data and also supported the quantitative data. The information received from the interviews was analyzed. This use of multiple techniques allowed for triangulation of the data. Transcripts of the interviews were created using a standard word processing program with the ability to number the lines of the text. A copy of the interview questions is included in the Appendices.

### Reporting the Data

The quantitative data that will be obtained from the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (PLCA) was analyzed and the data was summarized in tables, figures, with a detailed discussion of the results. Both single-item scores, for each item on the instrument and summed means for each dimension of the conceptual framework were calculated for each school. The responses to the interview questions, which will provide the qualitative data, were analyzed and the data reported in text form to answer research questions one, two, and three.

## Summary

The *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act* significantly raises expectations for states and schools in that all students must meet or exceed state standards in reading and mathematics within twelve years which has propelled professional development of teachers into the center of the debate surrounding school reform. The federal requirements of *No Child Left Behind* focuses on the provision of high-quality professional development that improves and increases teachers' knowledge and skills through sustained, intensive, and classroom focused models. This is especially true of schools whose are designated at Title 1 Schools as their school wide program must provide ongoing professional development for teachers, principals, paraprofessionals and, if appropriate, pupil services personnel, parents, and other staff, to enable all students in the school to meet the State's student academic standards, align professional development with the State's academic standards, and devote sufficient resources to conduct effective professional development.

Professional learning that focuses on student achievement while meeting district and staff needs is key to improving teaching and learning. School districts and individual schools need to develop and implement an evaluation system to assess the effectiveness of professional learning. This would include collecting and analyzing data on professional development activities as well as its impact on teaching practices and subsequent gains in student learning. Interpretation of this data would be used to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of staff development activities and inform districts of development needs.

The recent literature and research suggest schools need to develop their collective capacity to address the learning needs of their students in order to increase student achievement and that increased student learning is linked to teacher learning and collaboration. Professional learning communities offers the most powerful conceptual model form transforming schools to meet this challenge. The power and effectiveness of professional learning communities lies in that instead of becoming a reform initiative in itself, it becomes a supporting structure for schools to continuously renew and transform themselves whether from an initiative they create or one that is mandated.

This study examined the professional learning practices in three rural elementary schools in northeast Georgia, who have been named Title I Distinguished Schools. The study also examined the extent to which these schools reflect the dimensions of a professional learning community in the areas of shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, shared personal practice and supportive conditions (collegial relationships and structures). A mixed methodology collective case study design was used, which yielded both qualitative and quantitative data from three schools that were used in the study. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data and individual interviews and group interviews were used to collect qualitative data.

## CHAPTER IV

### REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional learning practices in three rural elementary schools to determine how the professional learning practices contribute to the school's status as a Title I Distinguished School. The study also examines the extent to which these schools reflect the dimensions of a professional learning community. The population for the study was all certified teachers at three Title I elementary schools in Ace County, the three principals at each school, two assistant principals, and the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction who also serves as the Title I Director. Participants were asked to complete the Professional Learning Communities Assessment (PLCA) and the data from each school were analyzed by dimension: shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions (collegial relationships and structures). In addition, the principals and Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and three teachers from each of the schools who serve on the school leadership team were interviewed regarding professional learning practices at the individual, school and county level. This chapter presents data on the questions the study sought to answer.

#### Research Questions

The overarching question for this research study was: How do professional learning practices contribute to the school's status as a Title I Distinguished School?

1. What school wide professional learning practices have been implemented?



2. What individual/targeted professional learning practices have been implemented?
3. What role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school?
4. To what extent do the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a Professional Learning Community?

### Methodology

A mixed methodology collective case study design was used, which yielded both qualitative and quantitative data from the three schools that were used in the study. The phenomenon under investigation in this research was the professional learning practices at three Title I elementary schools and the extent to which the dimensions of professional learning community are present in the three schools. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data and individual interviews and group interviews were used to collect qualitative data. Individual school and district documents were also reviewed including but not limited to Title I reports, School Improvement Plans, Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) surveys, and staff development reports and expenditures.

### Respondents

The units of analysis for this study were three rural elementary schools in Georgia, Julian Drive Elementary, Ellis Elementary, and Brookside Elementary. Each elementary school is identified as a Title I School Distinguished School. The participants in this study were certified teachers at the three Title I elementary schools in Ace County, the three principals at each school, and two assistant principals, and the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction.

Ace County School District is located along an interstate corridor in the portion of the state of Georgia. According to the United States Census Bureau the population of

Ace County is 22,997 of which 22.8% are under the age of 18, and 16.4% are 65 and over. The education levels of those 25 years of age and over were that 13.5% has at least a Bachelors degree and 71.1% have a high school diploma. The median household income is \$33,801 and the percentage of persons living below the poverty level is reported to be 14.3%. The three primary occupation groups reported in the county were manufacturing (30.5%), educational, health and social services, (16.5%), and retail trade (10.5%). Ace County's white population is 78.6%, African-American 19.4%, and a small Hispanic population of 1.4% is reported (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The Ace County school system has three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school with a student population in excess of 3,600. There are a total of 19 full-time administrators and 2 part-time administrators within the district; 38% are male and 62% female; 16% are African-American and 84% are white. All administrators have an Educational Specialist Degree and four have their Doctorate Degree. There are in excess of 240 teachers in the system: 22% are male and 78% female; 8% are African-American, 1% Hispanic, and 91% white, 69% have at least a Masters degree. The average years experience for administrators and teachers is 26 and 15 respectively. The proportion of economically disadvantaged students system-wide is in excess of 50%.

## Findings

### Ace School District

Several documents were examined at the district level as well as at each school in the study. At the district level the Comprehensive Professional Learning Program Report indicated that in excess of \$440,000 had been expended for professional learning during the fiscal years 2005, 2006, and 2007. The number of teachers who participated in the

comprehensive professional learning program was 200, 183, and 202 respectively for the same three years; 20, 21, and 16 respectively in the leadership category; 50, 54, and 64 respectively in the paraprofessional category; as well as other system personnel. The number of courses that offered professional learning credits was 70, 68, and 70 respectively for the same three years. Participants completed a professional learning activity form that was submitted to the district office as an evaluation of the activity. There was no evidence at the district level of follow-up activities to see if the professional learning was actually being implemented in the classroom. The district had utilized the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) to review staff perceptions of their professional learning.

Documents also revealed that the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges accredited all three of the elementary schools in this study in May of 2005. Brookside Elementary School received a grant for the Modern Red Schoolhouse comprehensive school reform model in 2002, and the staff at all three schools received professional learning in the Learning-Focused Schools Model strategies from 2003-2007.

The staff development report revealed that while there was an occasional workshop that teachers attended, the majority of the professional learning had taken place within the district and had been provided by outside consultants provided by purchased programs, or the local RESA. The addendum to the Comprehensive Professional Learning Program Report indicated:

The focus on professional learning had been directed toward Learning Focused Schools training, Georgia Performance Standards training, and improving teacher and paraprofessional quality. All staff had access to participation in activities that

took place over time instead of “one-shot” opportunities. Consultants were brought in to teach data analysis and understanding of test scores. Professional learning was provided in the areas of differentiated instruction, acceleration, and unit planning. Numerous activities for improving student achievement in the areas of reading and math were also provided. Teachers also received training on several benchmark assessments including, IRM, DIBELS, Testgate, and Georgia’s Online Assessment System (OAS). Co-teaching was also provided to numerous teams at all schools and the local Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) conducted professional development for the new Georgia Pyramid of Interventions.

The administrators within the district also participated in training provided by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) designed to help in district wide improvement in student achievement, school culture, and organizational effectiveness. Principals and assistant principals at each school had also participated in Learning Focused Schools Walk-Through training to assess the degree of implementation of the strategies of the Learning Focused Schools Model that had been implemented district-wide.

An interview with the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Mr. Cost, who also serves as the Title I Coordinator indicated that the professional learning needs of the staffs in the district are determined through the System Improvement Team which is comprised of the principals, Special Education Director, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Elementary Coordinator, and the Superintendent. This team develops the goals for the county and the professional learning is determined based on those goals as

well as from the needs assessment survey that teachers complete yearly. He indicated that the Survey Assessment Inventory (SAI) data is used to determine the perceptions of teachers on professional learning and that data is also taken into consideration when setting the goals of professional learning. In addition, he indicated that collaboration is important at all levels of the district:

We are trying to decrease the amount of isolation that occurs at the many levels of the system. We are trying to decrease isolation at the school level through the System Improvement Team that creates more collaboration between the schools and the district office. We are trying to decrease the isolation at the teacher level by trying to get teachers to work with their peers. We have asked each grade level at each school to meet as collaborative teams to talk about student work, assessment data, common assessments, and common curriculum maps. We are having to mandate the collaboration, but in other places they were doing it before. When asked about individual or targeted professional learning activities, there was ample discussion on the Georgia Performance Standard revolution and the professional learning that has been required for the implementation of the standards. However, Mr. Cost believes that the “most rich and valuable professional learning experience that you can have is the grade level peer horizontal collaboration.”

When discussing the professional learning activities of the district, Mr. Cost has this to say:

From informal feedback we have received on professional learning, we have had no shortage of help. We have had people come in and we have had district meetings of teachers getting together and we have had planning sessions, and we have had

consultants come in, but that really doesn't affect a whole lot of change in our system. So we have made a conscious choice to take another approach and start with school level teacher level collaboration and then bring in the consultants to supplement those things rather than do the opposite.

As for the impact he senses the horizontal grade level planning will have on the teachers:

We are hoping that we are going to start seeing evidence of teachers that are empowered by this process, that they feel the instructional decisions; the planning that they are doing actually has a great impact because they are based on data from their assessments, from informal observation, from collaboration and then sharing. Then they can come to us and tell us the areas where they feel they need some help. That is when we will bring in the consultant or the district trainer.

When asked how the impact of the professional learning on teacher practices and student learning are evaluated Mr. Cost stated:

The essence of professional learning is did it catch...is it still being used at the classroom level, and are you getting the results that you wanted. That is really all that counts. We are trying to work on awareness walks, curriculum data reviews and see the evidence of the training that we are doing. The schools that are out-performing us are those that are doing a better job of collaboration and looking at data, implementing a plan, and evaluating the plan; the process of plan, do, check, act. If we don't see the evidence or we do see the evidence, but are not getting the results we want, then we go back and see how we can improve things. If we don't

see increases then we have to go back to the table and figure out what is going on.

In summary, the professional learning practices in the Ace School District have become more job-embedded and collaborative. A review of the staff development report document for the years 2004-2007 reveal a yearly decrease in the amount of the “one-shot” workshops or conferences that teachers are attending outside the school district. The focus of the district is on collaboration at the district and school levels. The internal mandate from the district office for the horizontal grade level meetings referred to as professional learning communities, as well as the outside influences of the implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards, the SACS accreditation process, and the comprehensive school reform models of Learning Focused Schools and Modern Red Schoolhouse has had a tremendous impact on the professional learning practices within the individual schools and the district as a whole.

#### Julian Drive Elementary School

##### *Research Question 1*

*What school wide professional learning practices have been implemented?*

Several artifacts were examination to substantiate the implementation of school wide professional learning practices. These sources of evidence included the Title I report, School Improvement Plan, Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) surveys, notes from horizontal grade level meetings and staff development reports.

The Title I report stated that highly qualified professional development activities at Julian Drive are designed to promote professional and personal growth, and improve instruction and student learning in the areas of reading, language, and math. The report

also targets structured professional development regarding the use of academic assessments and data to improve the achievement of individual students and the overall instructional program. The goals outlined in the School Improvement Plan focuses on goals to improve student performance in the areas of reading, and math at all grade levels and stated that staff development activities should focus on those areas.

Forty-four certified staff members from Julian Drive completed the Standards Assessment Inventory survey on December 14, 2007. According to the survey the five standards needing the most improvement at Julian Drive Elementary were: learning communities, leadership, evaluation, learning, and family involvement. Highlights from the data include:

While the majority of teachers, 65%, report that observations of each other's classroom is almost nonexistent (Item 29), many report receiving feedback from each other about classroom practices, (Item 34), and examining student work together (Item 56.). Many responders (70%) report their principal fosters a school culture that is focused on instructional improvement (Item 45), while only 40% would use the word empowering to describe their principal (Item 48).

Resources are provided as 98% of the teachers reported that fellow teachers, trainers, facilitators, and/or consultants are available to help implement new instructional practices (Item 2). Teachers use student data when discussing instruction and curriculum (Item 46), and analyze classroom data with each other to improve student learning (Item 50).

Only 38% of the teachers believe that several sources are used to evaluate the effectiveness of their professional development on student learning (Item 13), and just 39%



think that they set aside time to discuss what is learned from our professional development experiences. A majority of the teachers judge their learning to be supported through a combination of strategies such as workshops, peer coaching, study groups, joint planning sessions, and the examination of student work as evidenced by 61% of the teachers choosing frequently or always on the continuum (Item 15), however, the teachers feel that their prior knowledge and experience are not always taken into consideration when designing staff development activities (Item 52).

The respondents believe that professional development is an integral part of the School Improvement Plan as shown by 89% choosing frequently or always (Item 38), but when asked if the school stays with the adoption of school improvement initiatives long enough to see if changes in instructional practice and student performance occur, 79% of the respondents chose never, seldom, or sometimes (Item 57). When asked if they have opportunities to practice new skills gained during staff development 73% chose frequently or always on the continuum (Item 5), however only 29% stated they receive support implementing new skills until they become a natural part of instruction (Item 16). Only 32% of the teachers believe they can choose the types of professional development they receive (Item 53).

In the area of collaboration 68% of the respondents believe that the school's teaching and learning goals depend on staff's ability to work well together (Item 28). A majority of the teachers, 61%, believe that professional learning activities have taught them effective ways to work together (Item 6), and 64% also concur that the school has structured time for them to work together to enhance student learning (Item 23). Of those surveyed 96% report that teachers expect high academic achievement for all of the students

(Item 37), and 88% report a focus on creating positive relationships between teachers and students. However, only 43% of the teachers reported receiving training on curriculum and instructions for students at different levels of learning (Item 59). In direct conflict, 70% of the respondents report that the professional development they participate in models instructional strategies that they will use in the classroom (Item 17), and 90% report that they use research-based instructional strategies (Item 25).

In addition to the review of the evidence and artifacts of school documents, three teachers from the School Improvement Team were also interviewed. When asked to describe the process of identifying the school's professional learning needs, all three agreed that they had several means to have some input into the process. Ms. Wash spoke of the individual surveys that the teachers complete to identify weaknesses at the school level. Based on the information provided in the survey, the staff at the district office decides what staff development opportunities to offer during the summer months.

Ms. Rob recognized the School Improvement Team as another means of having input into the decisions concerning school wide professional learning:

The School Improvement Team looks at the needs of the school based on the School Improvement Plan. In the Leadership Team meetings we talk about the school goals and also discuss them at our grade level meetings. We then decide the areas we think we need additional support and then the needs are reported to the district office so they can decide the best way to support our professional learning needs.

Ms. Ackers discussed the role of outside forces such as state and district mandates on the school's professional learning:

As far as the school's professional learning needs, I feel like that is pretty much decided at the district level. They know the direction we are headed as a district and I feel like the curriculum director and the principals, with some input from their individual School Improvement teams, are the ones that decide what the professional learning needs are going to be. Our professional learning is also being dictated by the state. I don't see a lot of real choices that are being made by the faculty here. The state has come up with standards and they were very specific as to what is to be done and the School Improvement Team has a book that is about 3 inches thick of all these things we are supposed to be moving toward.

When asked what school wide professional learning practices had been implemented, all three teachers agreed that there had been a great deal of time spent on professional learning the last several years relating to the implemented of the new Georgia Performance Standards. They described their in-service days as devoted to listening to their peers redeliver the training for the new GPS. They also discussed the district-wide training relating to the Max Thompson Learning Focused Schools initiative the year before the Georgia Performance Standards were introduced and the staff development was provided on instructional strategies and exemplary practices that have the greatest impact on student achievement.

The teachers also discussed the school-wide horizontal grade level planning that occurs weekly. The school schedule has been structured so the teachers at each grade level have a fifty-minute planning period each day. Each Wednesday is reserved for their horizontal grade-level meeting. All three teachers agreed that the horizontal grade level

meetings are one of the strengths of the system's professional learning program. In addition, they reported three planning days during the year during the regular school day for collaborative planning for each grade level. According to Ms. Wash:

We have changed and are now able to have more site based staff development.

Whereas in the past we would have to go to other places and do other things, we are all working together as a grade level and working on something that we are actually going to use such as our curriculum mapping and common assessments.

According to Ms. Rob:

I just have to agree with Ms. Wash. Having that time built into the day for all of us to sit down and know that time is protected for us to work on the things that we know we need to work on is wonderful.

Ms. Ackers echoed Ms. Wash's sentiments about the collaboration during the grade level meetings and the extended planning days:

I like it that when we do the collaborative thing and when our professional learning is actually on things we will be using in the classroom it saves us a lot of time plus we are working together so two heads are better than one and we have one finished product that is better than if each one of us had done in on our own.

The principal of Julian Drive, Ms. Ingalls, was also interviewed and stated that the professional learning practices that have been implemented school wide include the Max Thompson Learning Focused School Training and the training for the new Georgia Performance Standards. She noted that since the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges accredited the school there has been a shift from teachers going outside the system for training. In fact, she mentioned that the process of becoming accredited was a

professional learning experience itself. Since that time, the focus for staff development has become more in tune with the goals of the School Improvement Plan developed during the SACS process and updated yearly. She said:

In the past, our teachers would apply for many staff development activities based on brochures they received in the mail, or training offered by the local Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA). Since we went through the SACS process, we are more focused on the School Improvement Plan and our goals for student learning. Those same goals now determine the direction of our professional development activities. The SACS process highlighted our strengths; it also narrowed the focus on what we needed to be doing as a school and what we needed to do to get there.

The principal also discussed the horizontal grade level planning teams that meet at least once weekly for the purpose of improving student achievement. She discussed the power of those collaborative sessions:

The teachers meet weekly to collaborate on how best to achieve the goals of the School Improvement Plan. Those goals include improving student achievement in several subject areas. They have spent the better part of this year focusing on creating a curriculum map and common assessments. They have reviewed test data and the progress monitoring on many of our students. It is through this collaboration that they share ideas on best practices in order to meet the needs of all the students.

The principal discussed how in the past the weekly meetings had been sporadic with different grade levels collaborating more than others. However, since the change in the

leadership at the district office, the mandate to develop professional learning communities for the purpose of addressing student achievement, the meetings were now a regularly scheduled part of the week and that planning time protected.

She also noted that there is a School Improvement Team as well as a Leadership Team at the school level. While there are overlapping topics on both teams, she stated the School Improvement Team is charged with school improvement and monitoring the success of reaching the goals outlined in the School Improvement Plan regarding increasing student achievement. She also noted that she and the assistant principal conduct frequent walk-throughs of the teachers classrooms to monitor the implementation of the strategies that the teachers had been trained in through the Learning Focused Schools training and the training relating to the Georgia Performance Standards.

In sum, the school-wide professional learning that has been implemented according to the representatives from the School Improvement Team result from the goals of the School Improvement Plan as well as those that are mandated by district and state initiatives. The interviewees reported that they were being given input into some of the decisions on professional learning initiatives, but also recognized that there are outside forces that affect the decisions relating to professional learning practices. They reported being provided time during their workday for job-embedded professional learning as they collaborate with their grade level colleagues on curriculum issues for the purpose of improving student achievement.

The principal reiterated the findings of the school-wide horizontal grade level planning meetings that occur weekly. Although there had been sporadic collaboration between teachers during their common planning time there was now a directive that

weekly meetings occur for the purposes of aligning curriculum, looking a data, and creating common assessments. She stated that she reviews the minutes of the meetings weekly and makes comments and/or suggestions. The principal also indicated that periodic walk-throughs of the teacher's classrooms served as informal observations and follow-up to verify the implementation of professional learning practices. Artifacts of periodic walk-through reports were reviewed.

The artifacts and evidence from school documents indicate that those meetings were occurring on a regular basis, and the minutes were sent to the principal for review. The minutes indicated collaboration for the purpose of creating curriculum maps, common assessments, and reviewing data for the purposes of refining instruction. There were also minutes and sign-in sheets from extended planning days. The minutes indicated collaboration on variety of initiatives to improve instruction.

### *Research Question 2*

*What individual/targeted professional learning practices have been implemented?*

When asked to identify how individual or targeted professional learning practices are identified there were some differences of opinion among the three teachers. Ms. Wash mentioned the survey that is completed every year and the staff development needs that are identified during the horizontal grade level meetings. Ms. Rob again discussed the targeted individual professional learning needs that are identified through the goals of the School Improvement Plan. However, Ms. Ackers disagreed and stated:

I think in the past the survey drove staff development. I don't think the survey is driving staff development any more. It has only been two years since I have renewed my certificate and I already have 12 professional learning credits and I

have not chosen any of them. They have all been chosen for me. So I see that more and more it is being dictated and driven by the state goals.

According to the teachers, the individual professional learning practices that have been implemented are those that were targeted by the school-wide or district-wide initiatives. There has been a definite shift from the teachers attending workshops and training sessions outside the district. According to the teachers, the Max Thompson Learning Focused Schools training strategies focus on many aspects of improving student achievement and they use many of the strategies in their classroom. The strategies include acquisition lessons, activating strategies, graphic organizers, summarizing strategies, extended thinking activities, and how to use rubrics effectively. The teachers also had training on differentiating instruction to meet the needs of learners at all levels through the Learning Focused School Training and also the Georgia Performance Standards Training.

### *Research Question 3*

*What role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school?*

When reviewing the evidence and artifacts of the school with regard to professional learning practices it was evident that the change to a standards based classroom with the implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards had a direct impact on the professional learning practices at the district and school level. When reviewing the records of staff development there is a definite shift from attending workshops outside the school or district. Much of the staff development is now taking place on-site. SACS accredited the school in 2005, and according to the principal there was a new and sustained focus on student achievement after going through the SACS



process. The School Improvement Plan provided a focus for school goals, and those goals dictated the professional learning needs of the staff.

When asked about the impact of their professional learning practices on student achievement all three teachers agreed that the horizontal grade level meetings have the greatest potential to impact student achievement. They discussed their use of data and how they are using the data to inform instruction. Ms. Wash talked about the development of the cumulative assessments as part of professional learning and stated:

We developed cumulative assessments during our grade level meetings and it has been such a great tool as we are seeing the areas where the students are weak and we are using the data to revisit and re-teach those areas of our curriculum.

Ms. Rob also discussed the use of data and said:

Data is also helping us to see if there is a particular group that didn't do so well on this and this group did better so now we can discuss each other's strategies and getting some ideas from each other that are improving our student's learning. We want to know where the students are with regard to curriculum before they take the state test in April.

When the teachers were asked to recall a professional learning experience that they will always remember and one that impacted their teaching, all three of the teachers indicated that it was at a workshop or conference conducted outside the school system. They emphasized that the knowledge gained from the conference was content specific to what they were doing in their classrooms and that was important to them.

The interview with the principal revealed that in the past there was minimal follow-up when teachers attended individual conferences to see if the professional

learning had impacted or changed their instruction. Now with the focus on collaborative grade-level teams and the focus on creating curriculum maps, assessing data, and designing common assessments, it is easier to conduct informal observations in the classroom. Since everyone had the same Max Thompson Learning Focused Schools Training, and training in the implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards, it is easier to assess whether the teachers are implementing those strategies in their classrooms. She did state, however, that there are still professional learning opportunities available for individuals or grade levels if the need has been identified through the assessment data:

Even though we are focusing of school-wide professional learning practices, if teachers identify an area of weakness or something they need help with, we will discuss how to best meet that need. It could be having someone come from the local RESA, the Georgia Department of Education, or a consultant, if need be. We had a group of teachers visit another school to see how they had implemented their guided reading groups. Those types of professional learning practices are important to meet teachers' individual needs. Not all teachers are at the same place in their careers, and some need more help than others.

In sum, the professional learning practices of this school have played a major role in their success. The combination of district-wide, school-wide and individual professional learning practices continue to impact the student learning at this school. They participated in formal school reform model with the Max Thompson Learning Focused School Training in 2003-2004 where they studied research-based best practices to employ with their students. The collaborative nature of the school is such that they

have time built in during the day for job-embedded professional development as they meet in horizontal grade level meetings. Data is used extensively to inform instruction. Learning Focused walk-throughs are conducted as a follow-up to ensure professional learning practices are implemented. Informal observations can also indicate if teachers are following the curriculum maps that were developed at grade-level meetings. Although the school has areas to improve as indicated by the SAI survey, their professional learning practices seem to have impacted their student achievement and contributed to their success as a Title I Distinguished School.

#### Ellis Elementary School

##### *Research Question 1*

*What school wide professional learning practices have been implemented?*

The same artifacts that were examined at Julian Drive elementary were also examined at Ellis Elementary which included the School Improvement Plan, Title I report, notes from horizontal grade level meetings, staff development reports, and administrative walk-through reports. Their School improvement plan revealed targeted student achievement goals for increasing student achievement score in reading, math, and writing and school discipline. The Title I report indicated that highly qualified professional development are designed to improve instruction and student learning in those same areas, and using data and academic assessments to improve student achievement and the overall instructional program. in conjunction with the Title I report

Thirty-eight certified staff members from Ellis completed the Standards Assessment Inventory survey on December 14, 2007. All of the standards had an overall mean over 3.0. According to the survey the three standards needing the most improvement

at Ellis Elementary were: learning communities, evaluation, researched-based, and learning. Highlights from the data include:

The opportunity to observe each other's classroom is almost nonexistent (Item 29), so there is little feedback from colleagues regarding classroom practices (Item 34). However, there appears to be a strong mentoring program for beginning teachers (Item 32). The principal believe that teacher learning is essential to reaching school goals (Item 1), and focuses in improving instruction (Item 18). However, there is some concern that the principal's decisions on school-wide issues and practices are not influenced by faculty input (Item 10). Teachers use student data when discussing curriculum and instruction (Item 46), however they do not use the student data to plan for professional development programs (Item 39).

Teachers do not feel they take time to reflect on what they learn from their professional development experiences (Item 29), and the student's classroom performance is not used to assess the success of teachers' professional development (Item 51). Teachers feel decisions about professional development are often not related to evidence of improved student performance or evidence of effectiveness of programs in other schools (Items 14, 21). The respondents believe that when school initiatives are adopted, the staff does not stay with them long enough to see if changes in instructional practice and student performance occur (Item 57), and there is some concern of whether teachers can choose the types of professional development they receive (Item 53).

When interviewing the three teachers on the School Improvement Team many of the same themes and patterns emerged that had been disclosed at Julian Drive Elementary. Interviews with the three teachers who serve on the School Improvement Team revealed

that the school-wide professional learning needs are identified through teacher surveys and the needs identified at the horizontal collaborative meetings held weekly. When asked what school-wide professional learning practices had been implemented the Max Thompson Learning Focused Schools Training was discussed along with the training to implement the new Georgia Performance standards, and Writing to Win.

However, the majority of the discussion centered on the weekly collaborative grade level meetings. Their school schedule has also been structured so the teachers at each grade level have a fifty-minute planning period each day. According to Ms. Brooks, “The focus of the meeting is on curriculum and assessments.” Ms. John agreed and said, “We have an agenda and the meetings are always geared toward the school improvement goals.” This year they stated that the focus of many of the grade level meetings was to create curriculum maps and common assessments. In addition to weekly grade level meetings there have also been some vertical grade level meetings to discuss each grade level’s standards.

Ms. Wall mentioned the extended planning days and said that the last day was spent working on common assessment for reading and math. She stated that in addition to curriculum and assessments, “We had someone who came into the school and discussed a school wide discipline plan.” She noted that the School Improvement Plan contains goals related to student discipline and the principal and teachers felt that they needed professional development in that area.

When asked what professional learning practices had been implemented the teachers mentioned the strategies learned from the Max Thompson Learning Focused School Training, Writing to Win Strategies, and the Georgia Performance Standards

Training. Some of the strategies included: differentiating for all students, unit planning, developing rubrics, and utilizing graphic organizers.

When asked about their most favorable professional learning experience, two teachers mentioned a conference or workshop away from the school. When asked how it has impacted their students' achievement they stated they used some of the activities presented at the training and used pretest and posttest activities to gauge student-learning outcomes. The other teacher, Ms. Brooks, indicated that her most memorable experience was when a consultant came into the system to train teachers on how to use literacy centers. When asked how the training had impacted her students' achievement, she stated that she could use data from the benchmark testing and progress monitoring that she utilizes to see what specific strategies she needs to use to enrich or remediate her students' learning.

When asked how the professional learning program could be improved, all three teachers indicated that they wanted professional learning that is relevant to what they do. Ms. Brooks stated, "If it is relevant to my instruction that is fine, but sometimes I am required to attend sessions that really don't apply to my grade level." Ms. Wall also stated that she doesn't think the district should "always go with the trend." Ms. John agreed and said that she has often heard teachers state that, "this won't be around very long so we won't have to get really serious about it if you know what I mean." Ms. Wall agreed and stated that "often a new program will come in and it will not last a long time and a lot of time and money have been put into the new program and the next year it is not renewed or something else comes along and we try it."

This is the first year for the principal at Ellis Elementary and he is still becoming familiar with all the initiatives that have been implemented before his arrival. One of the issues he expressed concern about was what he considers to be a “lack of consistency between the three elementary schools.” He expressed the need of having a school-wide discipline plan in place as quickly as possible and had a consultant to come into the school and work with his staff. He noted that weekly grade level meetings were happening at his school and they submit the minutes to him for review. However, he expressed these concerns:

Sometimes I go to their meetings if there is something I want to discuss; however, sometimes we tend to get off the instructional part and talk about custodial services, and other things instead of focusing on instruction. It is only for a short period of time and we don't maximize the use of it.

The principal also discussed how his teachers were using data in the weekly grade level meetings and said:

I think they are doing as well as they can, but I don't think they have had the training on how to do different things with the data. I am not sure they understand item analysis and that sort of thing.

In sum, the school-wide professional learning practices that have been implemented at Ellis include the Max Thompson Learning Focused Schools Training, the training for the implementation of the new Georgia Performance Standards, Writing to Win, a school-wide discipline initiative, and horizontal as well as vertical grade level planning.

*Research Question 2*

*What individual/targeted professional learning practices have been implemented?*

The teachers interviewed noted that most of the individual/targeted professional learning related to the training that had been implemented on a school-wide basis. They discussed the strategies that have been implemented from the Max Thompson Learning Focused Schools training, the Writing to Win strategies, and all of the strategies included in the training for implementing the new Georgia Performance Standards. Several teachers had also been targeted to receive additional training in content areas such as reading and math. This training was conducted at the school and at the local RESA. The teachers made reference to the fact that since being accredited by SACS the professional development activities have been undertaken are more focused and must relate somehow to the School Improvement Plan.

*Research Question 3*

*What role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school?*

In sum, the professional learning practices of this school have played a role in their success. The combination of district-wide, school-wide and individual professional learning practices continue to impact the student learning at this school. They participated in formal school reform model with the Max Thompson Learning Focused School Training in 2003-2007 where they studied research-based best practices to employ with their students. The collaborative nature of the school is such that they have time built in during the day for job-embedded professional development as they meet in horizontal grade level meetings. Data is used extensively to inform instruction. Although the school has areas to improve as indicated by the SAI survey, their



professional learning practices have impacted their student achievement and contributed to their success as a Title I Distinguished School.

### Brookside Elementary School

#### *Research Question 1*

*What school wide professional learning practices have been implemented?*

Again, several artifacts were examined to substantiate the implementation of school wide professional learning practices. These sources of evidence included the Title I report, School Improvement Plan, Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) surveys, notes from horizontal grade level meetings and staff development reports, and committee reports relating to the Modern Red Schoolhouse reform. Their Title I report indicated student-learning goals in the areas of reading, math, and writing and professional activities to support the achievement of those goals.

Brookside has completed the Standards Assessment Inventory survey on several occasions. Forty-two certified staff members completed the most recent SAI survey for Brookside on December 13, 2007. According to the survey the five standards needing the most improvement were: learning communities, evaluation, research-based, design, and learning. Highlights from the data include:

Only 31% of teachers consider that there are opportunities to observe each other's classroom instruction as a way to improve teaching (Item 29), yet 73% feel that beginning teachers have opportunities to work with more experienced teachers. The entire staff (100%) thinks that the principal believes teacher learning is essential for achieving the school goals (Item ), and 90% believe the principal is committed to providing teachers with opportunities to improve instruction (Item 18). However, 65%

do not feel that they have input into the decisions on school-wide issues and practices (Item 10), and only 67% would use the word empowering to describe their principal (Item 48).

In the area of resources, the respondents believe there is help available to implement new instructional practices (Item 2), teachers have opportunities to learn how to use technology to enhance instruction (Item 11), however only a small percentage believe that school goals determine how resources are allocated (Item 49). The respondents agree that they learn how to use data to assess student learning needs (Item 12), and that they use student data when discussing instruction and curriculum (Item 46), as well as analyze classroom data with each other to improve student learning (Item 50).

According to the survey, very little time is set aside to discuss what is learned from the professional development experiences, (Item 20). Only 58% of the respondents believe that teacher's prior knowledge and experience are taken into consideration when designing staff development (Item 52) and only 45% believe that when a school improvement initiative is adopted they stay with them long enough to see if changes in instructional practice and student performance occur (Item 57).

Of those responding to the survey only 59% report receiving support implementing new skills until they become a natural part of instruction, or that the professional development promotes deep understanding of a topic (Item 27). Only 18% believe that teachers can choose the types of professional development they receive. In the area of collaboration 90% of those responding note that time is structured for teachers to collaborate to enhance student learning (Item 23) however, only 65% believe that the principal models effective collaboration.

The respondent percentages in the area of equity are high as they believe the school meets the needs of diverse learners (Item 24), respect all student sub-populations in the school (Item 33), hold high expectations for all students, (Item 37), and strive to create positive relations between teachers and students (Item 44). Respondents to the survey also report they use research-based strategies (Item 25), and most note that the administrators engage teachers in conversations about instruction and student learning.

In addition to documents and artifacts from the school, three teachers were also interviewed who serve on the School Improvement Team. When asked how the school-wide professional learning practices were identified one area they discussed was their School Improvement Plan. This was an example according to Ms. Oglesby:

One of our biggest weaknesses when we look at our school improvement plan was writing. So we went and researched for a writing program and adopted the *Writing to Win* program. We had a lot of professional development on how to teach our kids a better way to write. That was a specific goal we knew we had to reach so we went and got the program and all agreed to adopt it and now that is what we all do in our classroom everyday.

The teachers also discussed the implementation of the new Georgia Performance Standards and the amount of professional learning that has been required in each content area. Almost all of their in-service days for the past two years have focused on training for the new Georgia Performance Standards

A great deal of the discussion also centered on the horizontal grade-level meetings that are held weekly and the extended planning days they have three times each year. According to Ms. Oglesby, “it is during our horizontal planning and extended planning

that we get to look at student work, test scores, pinpoint weaknesses, and plan how to better address those areas.”

This school had been the recipient of a comprehensive school reform grant and had chosen the Modern Red Schoolhouse Model. As a result of this grant they had received extensive training pertaining to the committees that are an integral part of the model in the areas of curriculum, assessment, technology, parent community relations, professional development and organizational finance. Teachers received training on how to align curriculum, develop units utilizing the backward design, how to align state standards and benchmarking tests, and how to differentiate instruction to meet the student’s needs. Teachers were also trained on how to conduct and facilitate meetings, and gather and disaggregate data. This training began before and also ran parallel to the phase in of the new Georgia Performance Standards.

The school principal, Ms. Dismuke, also verified that the school-wide professional learning activities are identified by the goals set forth in the School Improvement Plan and “as results of test or assessments come in we use those to guide our professional learning.” She also indicated that the staff participates in horizontal grade-level team meetings on a weekly basis. In sum, the district-wide professional learning that had been implemented was the same as the other schools with the exception of the training received from the Modern Red Schoolhouse initiative.

### *Research Question 2*

*What individual/targeted professional learning practices have been implemented?*

As with the other schools, most of the targeted professional learning practices are those that have been implemented school-wide and usually relate to the School

Improvement Plan. The teachers at this school also take the individual survey at the end of the school year to identify areas they think they need professional learning, but according to Ms. Oglesby, “but for the most part for the past 2 years the majority of our professional learning has been GPS redelivery.”

The teachers also discussed how analyzing test scores help them to pinpoint weaknesses in their teaching so they can ask for content specific professional learning. However, there was some discussion on whether or not the opportunities to attend professional learning activities outside the district were becoming limited. According to Ms. Oglesby:

It used to be that you could seek out those things and we would get stuff in our boxes all the time about different conferences. There is no sense in looking at those now because we can't go anywhere. It is all going to be brought to us. As far as finding something on a specific thing that you want to work on and going to a conference somewhere, that doesn't happen any more. I don't know if it is money or trying to stay within the RESA realm but we really don't get a lot of chance for outside information.

However, Ms. Harper disagreed and said:

I have not been actively seeking anything right now, but I didn't know that I was limited. If I see something that is beneficial, I will go ask. A lot of things are brought to us, which I like, however, I also like to go meet other people and talk with people from other counties. In other words I want a balance. I really just want to concentrate on what I am teaching and there are a lot of times when you

are in staff development in areas that you are not teaching. I want to be a master teacher at what I am teaching.

When asked about their most favorable professional learning two teachers indicated that it had been training they had received outside the district, while one indicated training that had been implemented within the district. When asked about follow-up or evaluation of what they had learned all three admitted that usually after training they are excited and ready to come back to implement the new strategies. However, all indicated that when there is no follow-up or monitoring, they usually revert back to teaching the way they did before the training.

All three teachers indicated they would like more variety in professional learning, more teacher input and content specific to what they are teaching. According to Ms. Oglesby:

When you say professional learning to me I automatically think of the students...something that is coming back to them, but it is not always content specific to what you are doing. It may be a good delivery but make it applicable to what we are doing and bring variety to it. Most of the time we get redelivery in-house and we see these people every day and we might love them, but bring us some variety. We are more apt to listen to somebody if it's content specific.

Again, the information from Brookside paralleled the other two schools.

Individual/targeted professional learning is an extension of the School Improvement goals. Teachers do not attend as many workshops and conferences as they did in the past unless the training is content specific or a need for professional development identified through student data.

*Research Question 3*

*What role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school?*

In summary, the professional learning practices as with the other schools have played a major role in their success. The combination of district-wide, school-wide and individual professional learning practices continue to impact the student learning at this school. The collaborative nature of the school is such that they have time built in during the day for job-embedded professional development as they meet in horizontal and vertical grade level meetings. Data is used extensively to inform instruction.

This school has also participated in comprehensive school reform with the implementation of the Modern Red Schoolhouse. According to the principal, it is through this model of school reform that the teachers have participated on committees that are constantly setting goals in the critical areas of curriculum, assessment, technology, and professional development. Although the school has areas to improve as indicated by the SAI survey, their professional learning practices have impacted their student achievement and contributed to their success as a Title I Distinguished School.

*Research Question 4*

*To what extent do the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a Professional Learning Community?*

To address this research question, The *Professional Learning Communities Assessment* (PLCA) questionnaire was given to assess perceptions about the school's principal, staff, parents, and community members at the school level. The measure serves as a descriptive tool of practices relating to Hord's five dimensions of a professional learning community: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision,

collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, including relationships and structures.

#### PLC - Julian Drive Elementary

The questionnaire was distributed to the staff members at Julian Drive and there were a total of 39 respondents for a 91% participation rate. The PLCA questionnaire included ten items in the shared and supported leadership dimension (See Table 4.1). The overall mean for this dimension was 2.59, which indicated that the respondents do not feel that there is shared and supportive leadership at this school. The respondents did not feel that the principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority (Item 7), and also does not incorporate advice from the staff when making decisions (Item 2). However, at least 70% of the respondents feel that they have access to key information, (Item 3); that some decisions are made through committees and communications across grade and subject areas (Item 9); and the principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed (Item 4).



Table 4.1: *Shared and Supportive Leadership --Julian Drive Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
1. The staff is consistently involved in making decisions about most school issues.	2 (5.1%)	9 (23.0%)	25 (64.1%)	3 (7.7%)	2.74	0.669
2. The principal incorporates advice from staff to make decisions.	1 (2.5%)	20 (51.3%)	17 (43.6%)	1 (2.5%)	2.46	0.593
3. The staff has accessibility to key information.	0	11 (28.2%)	24 (61.5%)	4 (10.3%)	2.82	0.594
4. The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.	2 (5.1%)	8 (20.5%)	28 (71.8%)	1 (2.5%)	2.72	0.597
5. Opportunities are provided for staff to initiate change.	1 (2.5%)	13 (33.3%)	24 (61.5%)	1 (2.5%)	2.64	0.577
6. The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.	2 (5.3%)	16 (42.1%)	19 (50.0%)	1 (2.6%)	2.50	0.639

7. The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.	6 (15.8%)	22 (57.9%)	10 (26.3%)	0	2.11	0.640
8. Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff.	3 (7.7%)	10 (25.6%)	26 (66.7%)	0	2.59	0.629
9. Decision-making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.	3 (7.7%)	8 (20.5%)	25 (64.1%)	3 (7.7%)	2.71	0.714
10. Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.	1 (2.6%)	17 (44.7%)	17 (44.7%)	3 (7.9%)	2.58	0.674
Shared and supportive leadership (overall mean)					2.59	

In the dimension of shared values and vision, the questionnaire addressed 8 items (See Table 4.2). The respondents feel that they share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning (Item 13), and that decisions are made in alignment with the school's values and vision (Item 14). Those responding to the questionnaire do not feel that the stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement (Item 18). The overall mean for the dimension of shared values and vision is 2.95, which indicates that the teachers feel that shared values and vision exist at this school.

Table 4.2: *Shared Values and Vision -- Julian Drive Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
11. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.	1 (2.5%)	6 (15.4%)	29 (74.4%)	3 (7.7%)	2.87	0.563
12. Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.	0	5 (12.8%)	30 (77.0%)	4 (10.2%)	2.97	0.480
13. The staff share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.	0	1 (2.5%)	29 (74.4%)	9 (23.1%)	3.21	0.463
14. Decisions are made in alignment with school's values and vision.	1 (2.5%)	3 (7.7%)	29 (74.4%)	6 (15.4%)	3.03	0.577
15. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.	0	7 (17.9%)	28 (71.8%)	4 (10.2%)	2.92	0.525
16. School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.	1 (2.5%)	10 (25.6%)	19 (48.7%)	9 (23.1%)	2.92	0.764
17. Policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision.	0	1 (2.6%)	31 (81.6%)	6 (15.8%)	3.10	0.441
18. Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to	2	12	20	5	2.72	0.749

increase student achievement.	(5.1%)	(30.8%)	(51.3%)	(12.8%)		
Shared values and vision (overall mean)					2.97	

The dimension of collective learning and application contains 8 items and received the overall highest mean, 3.05, for this school (See Table 4.3). The respondents believe the school staff is committed to programs that enhance learning (Item 26) while they work together to seek knowledge, skills, and strategies and apply this new learning to their work (Item19). A majority of respondents, 95%, feel that their professional development focuses on teaching and learning (Item 24), and that collegial relationships exist among staff that reflects commitment to school improvement efforts (Item 20).

Table 4.3: *Collective Learning and Application -- Julian Drive Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
19. The staff work together to seek knowledge, skills and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.	0	2 (5.1%)	27 (69.2%)	10 (25.6%)	3.21	0.515
20. Collegial relationships exist among staff that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.	0	2 (5.1%)	29 (74.4%)	8 (20.5%)	3.15	0.482
21. The staff plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.	0	5 (12.8%)	24 (61.5%)	10 (25.6%)	3.13	0.607
22. A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.	1 (2.5%)	7 (17.9%)	25 (64.1%)	6 (15.4%)	2.92	0.656
23. The staff engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.	0	8 (20.5%)	26 (66.7%)	5 (12.8%)	2.92	0.572
24. Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.	2 (5.1%)	0	27 (69.2%)	10 (25.6%)	3.15	0.662
25. School staff and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.	0	8 (21.0%)	28 (73.7%)	2 (5.3%)	2.84	0.488

26. School staff is committed to programs that enhance learning.	0	1 (2.5%)	27 (69.2%)	11 (28.2%)	3.26	0.492
Collective learning and application (overall mean)					3.07	

The questionnaire contains 6 items that address the areas of shared personal practice and obtained an overall mean of 2.65 (See Table 4.4). Of those who responded to the survey 97% indicated that very little opportunities exist for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement (Item 27) therefore, the staff does not provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices (Item 28). However, 98% believe the staff informally shares ideas and suggestions for improving student learning (Item 29), and 82% think individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practice (Item 32).



Table 4.4: *Shared Personal Practice -- Julian Drive Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
27. Opportunities exist for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement.	7 (17.9%)	27 (68.2%)	4 (10.3%)	1 (2.5%)	1.97	0.620
28. The staff provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	4 (10.3%)	16 (41.0%)	17 (43.6%)	2 (5.1%)	2.44	0.744
29. The staff informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.	0	1 (2.5%)	32 (82.1%)	6 (15.4%)	3.13	0.404
30. The staff collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.	1 (2.5%)	7 (17.9%)	27 (69.2%)	4 (10.3%)	2.87	0.607
31. Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring	2 (5.3%)	9 (23.7%)	26 (68.4%)	1 (2.5%)	2.68	0.612
32. Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.	0	7 (17.9%)	27 (69.2%)	5 (12.8%)	2.95	0.552
Shared personal practice (overall mean)					2.67	

The dimension of supportive conditions with regard to relationships contains 4 items. This dimension rated the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest with this school with an overall mean of 3.02 (See Table 4.5). Those completing reported that caring relations exist among staff and students and are built on trust and respect (Item 33). A majority of respondents, 82%, also note that a culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks (Item 34).

Table 4.5: *Supportive Conditions – Relationships -- Julian Drive Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
33. Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.	0	0	22 (56.4%)	17 (43.6%)	3.44	0.496
34. A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.	1 (2.5%)	6 (15.4%)	24 (61.5%)	8 (20.5%)	3.00	0.679
35. Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.	0	10 (25.6%)	21 (53.8%)	8 (20.5%)	2.95	0.677
36. School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.	1 (2.5%)	10 (25.6%)	27 (69.2%)	1 (2.5%)	2.72	0.552
Supportive conditions – relationships (overall mean)					3.03	

The other dimension of supportive conditions, structures, contained 9 items and obtained an overall mean of 2.87 (See Table 4.6). All of the respondents, 100%, believe that their school facility is clean, attractive, and inviting. A vast majority, 95%, also thinks the proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaboration with colleagues, (Item 44). And while 85% believe that a communication system allows for the flow of information among staff members, only 74% think the communication systems promote the information across the entire school community setting (Item 45). Many of the respondents, 47%, report that they feel that fiscal resources are not available for professional development, and 36% think that appropriate technology and instructional materials are not available to the staff.

Julian Drive Elementary is engaged to some degree in each dimension of a professional learning community. Their strengths are in the following dimensions, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, and supportive conditions (relationships). Within the dimensions of Professional Learning Communities the following areas are reported to be the weakest at this school: shared and supportive leadership, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions (structures).

Table 4.6: *Supportive Conditions – Structures -- Julian Drive Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
37. Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	1 (2.5%)	8 (20.5%)	26 (66.7%)	4 (10.3%)	2.85	0.622
38. The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	1 (2.5%)	5 (12.8%)	31 (79.5%)	2 (5.1%)	2.87	0.515
39. Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	4 (10.5%)	14 (36.8%)	20 (52.6)	0	2.42	0.674
40. Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	2 (5.1%)	12 (30.8%)	24 (61.5%)	1 (2.5%)	2.62	0.625
41. Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.	1 (2.5%)	7 (17.9%)	28 (71.8%)	3 (7.7%)	2.85	0.579
42. The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.	0	0	18 (47.4%)	20 (52.6%)	3.53	0.499
43. The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	1 (2.5%)	5 (12.8%)	27 (69.2%)	10 (25.6%)	3.21	0.515
44. Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff.	1 (2.5%)	5 (12.8%)	27 (69.2%)	6 (15.4%)	2.97	0.620

45. Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.	3 (7.7%)	7 (17.9%)	25 (64.1%)	4 (10.3%)	2.77	0.732
Supportive conditions – structures (overall mean)					2.90	

#### PLC - Ellis Elementary

The questionnaire was distributed to the staff members at Ellis Elementary and there were a total of 42 respondents for a 91% participation rate. Of all the dimensions within the assessment, the dimension of shared and supportive leadership at this school was rated the highest with a mean of 3.04 (See Table 4.7). The staff at this school believes they have a voice in the making decisions about school issues (79%), and that decisions are made through committees and communication across grade levels. Of those completing the survey, 71% report having access to key information and 78% believe opportunities are provided for the staff to initiate change. The majority, 95%, thinks their principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed and many believe that leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff members.

Table 4.7: *Shared and Supportive Leadership -- Ellis Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
1. The staff is consistently involved in making decisions about most school issues.	1 (2.4%)	8 (19.0%)	28 (66.7%)	5 (11.9%)	2.88	0.625
2. The principal incorporates advice from staff to make decisions.	1 (2.4%)	6 (14.3%)	25 (59.5%)	10 (23.8%)	3.05	0.688
3. The staff has accessibility to key information.	1 (2.4%)	11 (26.2%)	24 (57.1%)	6 (14.3%)	2.83	0.687
4. The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.	0	2 (4.7%)	18 (42.8%)	22 (52.4%)	3.48	0.587
5. Opportunities are provided for staff to initiate change.	0	9 (21.4%)	25 (59.5%)	8 (19.0%)	2.98	0.636
6. The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.	0	4 (9.5%)	7 (64.3%)	11 (26.2%)	3.17	0.574
7. The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.	1 (2.4%)	8 (19.0%)	24 (57.1%)	9 (21.4%)	2.98	0.707
8. Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff.	1 (2.4%)	9 (21.4%)	22 (52.4%)	10 (23.8%)	2.98	0.740

9. Decision-making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.	0	3 (7.1%)	26 (61.9%)	13 (31.0%)	3.24	0.569
10. Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.	2 (4.8%)	10 (23.8%)	22 (52.4%)	8 (19.0%)	2.86	0.774
Shared and supportive leadership (overall mean)					3.04	

In the dimension of shared values and vision there are eight items and the dimension received a mean of 2.98 (See Table 4.8). At Ellis Elementary the teachers feel that there is more of a focus on test scores and grades than on student learning (64%), and that the stakeholders are not actively involved in creating high expectations for increasing student achievement. However, a large majority 86% feel there is a collaborative process in place for creating a shared sense of values and those values guide decisions about teaching and learning.



Table 4.8: *Shared Values and Vision -- Ellis Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
11. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.	1 (2.4%)	5 (11.9%)	30 (71.4%)	6 (14.3%)	2.98	0.597
12. Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.	0	4 (9.5%)	30 (71.4%)	8 (19.0%)	3.09	0.526
13. The staff share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.	0	1 (2.4%)	33 (78.6%)	8 (19.0%)	3.17	0.432
14. Decisions are made in alignment with school's values and vision.	0	2 (4.8%)	35 (83.3%)	5 (11.9%)	3.07	0.402
15. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.	0	5 (11.9%)	32 (76.2%)	5 (11.9%)	3.00	0.488
16. School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.	2 (4.8%)	13 (30.9%)	20 (47.6%)	7 (16.7%)	2.76	0.781
17. Policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision.	0	0	40 (95.2%)	2 (4.8%)	3.05	0.213
18. Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to						

increase student achievement.	2 (4.8%)	11 (26.2%)	25 (59.5%)	4 (9.5%)	2.74	0.692
Shared values and vision (overall mean)					2.98	

The dimension of collective learning and application received a mean of 3.00 (See Table 4.9). Over 90% of the respondents believe that collegial relationships exist among staff and they have a commitment to school improvement efforts. Of those surveyed, 95% think the staff is committed to programs that enhance learning and 86% feel their professional development focuses on teaching and learning. These is a small number, 21% who feel that the staff does not engage in dialogue that reflects diverse ideas for continued inquiry or that there is a variety of opportunities for collective learning through open dialogue.

Table 4.9: *Collective Learning and Application -- Ellis Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
19. The staff work together to seek knowledge, skills and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.	1 (2.4%)	4 (9.5%)	33 (78.6%)	4 (9.5%)	2.95	0.532
20. Collegial relationships exist among staff that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.	0	4 (9.5%)	31 (73.8%)	7 (16.7%)	3.07	0.507
21. The staff plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.	0	7 (16.7%)	27 (64.3%)	8 (19.0%)	3.02	0.597
22. A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.	0	9 (21.4%)	29 (69.0%)	4 (9.5%)	2.88	0.543
23. The staff engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.	0	9 (21.4%)	29 (69.0%)	4 (9.5%)	2.88	0.543
24. Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.	0	6 (14.3%)	27 (64.3%)	9 (21.4%)	3.07	0.593
25. School staff and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.	1 (2.4%)	8 (19.0%)	27 (64.3%)	6 (14.3%)	2.91	0.648

26. School staff is committed to programs that enhance learning.	0	2 (4.8%)	28 (66.7%)	12 (28.5%)	3.24	0.526
Collective learning and application (overall mean)					3.00	

The dimension of shared personal practice contains 6 items and this dimension was the second lowest for this school with a mean of 2.74 (See Table 4.10). The opportunities for staff to observe peers and offer feedback related to instruction practices or offer encouragement is almost nonexistent at this school, and only 58% believe there are opportunities for coaching and mentoring. However, they find ways to informally share ideas and suggestions to each other for improving student learning. Of those responding, 70% report collaboratively reviewing student work for the purpose of improving instructional practices, and 86% think individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results with their peers.

Table 4.10: *Shared Personal Practice -- Ellis Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
27. Opportunities exist for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement.	3 (7.1%)	26 (61.9%)	10 (23.8%)	3 (7.1%)	2.31	0.707
28. The staff provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	1 (2.4%)	20 (47.6%)	18 (42.9%)	3 (7.1%)	2.55	0.662
29. The staff informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.	0	3 (7.1%)	30 (71.4%)	9 (21.4%)	3.14	0.515
30. The staff collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.	0	12 (28.5%)	28 (66.7%)	2 (4.8%)	2.76	0.526
31. Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring	1 (2.4%)	16 (38.1%)	20 (47.6%)	5 (11.9%)	2.69	0.707
32. Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.	1 (2.4%)	5 (11.9%)	31 (73.8%)	5 (11.9%)	2.95	0.575
Shared personal practice (overall mean)					2.73	

The dimension of Supportive conditions regarding relationships received the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest rating with a mean of 3.02 (see Table 4.11). The staff reports caring relationships among students build on trust and respect and that same culture allows risk taking. They also feel outstanding achievement is celebrated and recognized.

Table 4.11: *Supportive Conditions – Relationships - Ellis Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
33. Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.	0	4 (9.5%)	30 (71.4%)	8 (19.0%)	3.10	0.526
34. A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.	0	8 (19.0%)	27 (64.3%)	7 (16.7%)	2.98	0.597
35. Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.	1 (2.4%)	5 (11.9%)	28 (66.7%)	8 (19.0%)	3.02	0.636
36. School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.	0	10 (23.8%)	23 (54.8%)	9 (21.4%)	2.98	0.672
Supportive conditions – relationships (overall mean)					3.02	

The dimension of supportive conditions with regard to structures received the lowest overall rating for this school (See Table 4.12). According to the respondents, appropriate technology and instructional materials are not readily available and many think that fiscal resources for professional development are also not available. Many of the respondents do not feel that enough time is provided for collaborative work and the school schedule does not support collective learning or shared practice. However, the majority of the staff does feel that the proximity of the grade levels allows for collaboration with colleagues and that their facility is clean, attractive, and inviting.

In summary, Ellis Elementary is engaged to some degree with all the dimensions of a professional learning community. Their strengths are shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, and supportive conditions – relationships. The three areas that are in greatest need of improvement by dimension for Ellis Elementary are shared values and vision, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions with relation to structure.

Table 4.12: *Supportive Conditions – Structures -- Ellis Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
37. Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	4 (9.5%)	10 (23.8%)	7 (64.3%)	1 (2.4%)	2.60	0.692
38. The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	3 (7.1%)	13 (30.9%)	24 (57.1%)	2 (4.8%)	2.60	0.692
39. Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	9 (21.4%)	22 (52.3%)	9 (21.4)	2 (4.8%)	2.10	0.781
40. Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	9 (21.4%)	27 (64.3%)	5 (11.9%)	1 (2.4%)	1.95	0.653
41. Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.	0	12 (28.5%)	25 (59.5%)	5 (11.9%)	2.83	0.614
42. The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.	1 (2.4%)	5 (11.9%)	25 (59.5%)	11 (26.2%)	3.10	0.683



43. The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	0	7 (16.7%)	25 (59.5%)	10 (23.8%)	3.07	0.63 2
44. Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff.	1 (2.4%)	12 (28.5%)	26 (61.9%)	3 (7.1%)	2.73	0.65 4
45. Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.	3 (7.1%)	14 (33.3%)	21 (50.0%)	4 (9.5%)	2.62	0.75 4
Supportive conditions – structures (overall mean)					2.62	

#### PLC - Brookside Elementary

The questionnaire was distributed to the staff members at Brookside Elementary School and there were a total of 36 respondents for a 90% participation rate. The shared and supportive leadership dimension was the dimension the staff rated the lowest at this

school with a mean of 2.88 (See Table 4.13). The respondents do not feel the principal participates democratically with them in sharing power and authority (Item 7) nor do they have opportunities to initiate change (Item 5). They do feel strongly that the principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed (Item 4). The staff feels they are involved in discussion and making decisions, and that decision-making takes place through committees across grade and subject areas. They do not feel that parents and communities assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning.

Table 4.13: Shared and Supportive Leadership -- Brookside Elementary School

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
1. The staff is consistently involved in making decisions about most school issues.	1 (2.84%)	8 (22.2%)	23 (63.9%)	4 (11.1%)	2.83	0.645
2. The principal incorporates advice from staff to make decisions.	1 (2.8%)	6 (16.7%)	25 (69.4%)	4 (11.1%)	2.89	0.614
3. The staff has accessibility to key information.	1 (2.8%)	3 (8.3%)	28 (77.8%)	4 (11.1%)	2.97	0.552
4. The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.	0	4 (11.1%)	22 (61.1%)	10 (27.8%)	3.17	0.601
5. Opportunities are provided for staff to initiate change.	0	14 (38.9%)	18 (50.0%)	4 (11.1%)	2.72	0.650
6. The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.	1 (2.8%)	5 (13.9%)	24 (66.7%)	6 (16.7%)	2.97	0.645
7. The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.	1 (2.8%)	11 (30.6%)	20 (55.5%)	4 (11.1%)	2.75	0.682
8. Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff.	2 (5.5%)	5 (13.9%)	24 (66.7%)	5 (13.9%)	2.89	0.698
9. Decision-making takes place through committees and						

communication across grade and subject areas.	0	4 (11.1%)	26 (72.2%)	6 (16.7%)	3.06	0.524
10. Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.	5 (13.9%)	9 (25.0%)	18 (50.0%)	4 (11.1%)	2.58	0.862
Shared and supportive leadership (overall mean)					2.88	

The dimension of shared values and vision scored the second lowest with a mean of 2.96 (See Table 4.14). Again, there is some question as to whether parents and community members are involved in creating high expectations to increase student achievement (Item 18). Of those responding, 83% feel that a collaborative process exists for developing shared values, 89% think the staff share visions for school improvement that focus on student learning, and 86% feel the policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision. However, only 61% of the staff feels the school goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.

Table 4.14: *Shared Values and Vision -- Brookside Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
11. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.	0	6 (16.7%)	24 (66.7%)	6 (16.7%)	3.00	0.577
12. Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.	0	4 (11.1%)	26 (72.2%)	6 (16.7%)	3.06	0.524
13. The staff share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.	1 (2.8%)	3 (8.3%)	25 (69.4%)	7 (19.4%)	3.06	0.621
14. Decisions are made in alignment with school's values and vision.	0	3 (8.3%)	24 (66.1%)	9 (25.0%)	3.17	0.553

15. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.	0	6 (16.7%)	24 (66.7%)	6 (16.7%)	3.00	0.577
16. School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.	4 (11.1%)	10 (27.8%)	17 (47.2%)	5 (13.9%)	2.64	0.855
17. Policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision.	0	5 (13.9%)	22 (61.1%)	9 (25.0%)	3.11	0.614
18. Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.	1 (2.8%)	13 (36.1%)	18 (50.0%)	4 (11.1%)	2.69	0.700
Shared values and vision (overall mean)					2.96	

The dimension of collective learning and application dimension was rated high by those responding with a mean of 3.09 (See Table 4.15). The staff at this school feels they seek knowledge, skills, and strategies and apply this new learning to their work (90%); relationships exist among the staff that reflect commitment to school improvement initiatives (86%); they plan and work together to address diverse student needs (81%);

and 90% feel they have many opportunities and structures that allow collaborative learning through open dialogue. All of the respondents (100%) feel their professional learning focuses on teaching and learning.

Table 4.15: *Collective Learning and Application -- Brookside Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
19. The staff work together to seek knowledge, skills and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.	1 (2.8%)	3 (8.3%)	19 (52.8%)	13 (36.1%)	3.22	0.711
20. Collegial relationships exist among staff that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.	2 (5.5%)	3 (8.3%)	17 (47.2%)	14 (38.9%)	3.19	0.810
21. The staff plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.	2 (5.5%)	5 (13.9%)	13 (36.1%)	16 (44.4%)	3.19	0.876
22. A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.	0	4 (11.1%)	23 (63.9%)	9 (25.0%)	3.14	0.585
23. The staff engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.	1 (2.8%)	7 (19.4%)	23 (63.9%)	5 (13.9%)	2.89	0.657

24. Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.	0	0	26 (72.2%)	10 (27.8%)	3.27	0.448
25. School staff and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.	3 (8.3%)	12 (33.3%)	16 (44.4%)	5 (13.9%)	2.64	0.822
26. School staff is committed to programs that enhance learning.	1 (2.8%)	4 (11.1%)	18 (50.0%)	13 (36.1%)	3.19	0.739
Collective learning and application (overall mean)					3.09	

Shared personal practice was another dimension that was rated high by the staff at this school with a mean of 3.00 (See Table 4.16). According to those responding, opportunities exist to observe each other and offer encouragement and feedback related to instructional practices (Items 27, 28). A large majority (89%) report collaborating with peers to review student work to share and improve instructional practice. However, only 68% feel that opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.



Table 4.16: *Shared Personal Practice -- Brookside Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
27. Opportunities exist for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement.	1 (2.8%)	7 (19.4%)	24 (66.7%)	4 (11.1%)	2.86	0.630
28. The staff provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	0	7 (19.4%)	20 (55.5%)	9 (25.0%)	3.06	0.664
29. The staff informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.	0	4 (11.1%)	24 (66.7%)	8 (22.2%)	3.11	0.567
30. The staff collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.	0	4 (11.1%)	25 (69.4%)	7 (19.4%)	3.08	0.546
31. Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring	0	11 (30.6%)	22 (61.1%)	3 (8.3%)	2.78	0.583
32. Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.	0	1 (2.8%)	30 (83.3%)	5 (13.9%)	3.11	0.393
Shared personal practice (overall mean)					3.00	

The dimension of supportive conditions with regard to relationships received a mean of 2.99 (see Table 4.17). The staff feels strongly that caring relationships exist between them and the students that have been built on trust and respect. They also feel that outstanding achievement is celebrated regularly. However, they do not feel that the school staff and the parents and community members exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.

Table 4.17: *Supportive Conditions – Relationships -- Brookside Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
33. Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.	1 (2.8%)	4 (11.1%)	18 (50.0%)	13 (36.1%)	3.19	0.739
34. A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.	1 (2.8%)	8 (22.2%)	23 (63.9%)	4 (11.1%)	2.83	0.645
35. Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.	0	3 (8.3%)	23 (63.9%)	10 (27.8%)	3.19	0.569
36. School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.	1 (2.8%)	13 (36.1%)	16 (44.4%)	6 (16.7%)	2.75	0.759
Supportive conditions – relationships (overall mean)					2.99	

The dimension of supportive conditions with regard to structures received the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest rating with a mean of 3.01 (See Table 4.18). First and foremost, they feel they have clean, attractive and inviting school facility (100%), and their grade level and department personnel are in proximity to allow for ease in collaboration. They also feel they have resource people who can provide expertise and support for continuous learning and that they have appropriate technology and instructional materials. However, 46% do not feel that there are fiscal resources available for professional development.

In summary, Brookside Elementary School is engaged to some degree with all the dimensions of a professional learning community. Their strengths are collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions – structures. The three areas that are in need of improvement by dimension for Brookside are shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, and supportive conditions with relation to relationships.

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Table 4.18: *Supportive Conditions – Structures -- Brookside Elementary School*

Dimension/ Item	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)	Mean	S.D.
37. Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	0	7 (19.4%)	22 (61.1%)	7 (19.4%)	3.00	0.624
38. The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	0	9 (25.0%)	21 (58.3%)	6 (16.7%)	2.92	0.641
39. Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	6 (16.7%)	10 (27.8%)	15 (41.6)	5 (13.9%)	2.53	0.928
40. Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	1 (2.8%)	2 (5.5%)	27 (75.0%)	6 (16.7%)	3.06	0.575
41. Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.	1 (2.8%)	3 (8.3%)	24 (66.7%)	8 (22.2%)	3.08	0.640
42. The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.	0	0	21 (58.3%)	15 (41.6%)	3.42	0.493
43. The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	0	2 (5.5%)	22 (61.1%)	12 (33.3%)	3.28	0.558
44. Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff.	1 (2.8%)	7 (19.4%)	24 (66.7%)	4 (11.1%)	2.86	0.630

45. Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.	1 (2.8%)	5 (13.9%)	26 (72.2%)	4 (11.1%)	2.92	0.595
Supportive conditions – structures (overall mean)					3.01	

### Summary

The researcher conducted a mixed methodology collective case study to examine the professional learning practices at three Title I elementary schools and the extent to which the dimensions of professional learning community are present in the three schools. The data were gathered from a review school documents, the Professional Learning Communities Assessment (PLCA) and interviews. The data from the PLCA were analyzed using Excel version 2003.

For research question one, (what professional learning practices that had been implemented school-wide), the research revealed that all three of the elementary schools had achieved accreditation by the Southern Schools and Colleges (SACS) during the 2005 school year. This occurrence was reported to be a professional learning experience in itself as the staffs at all three schools participated in the process by serving on various committees and developing a School Improvement Plan that is updated annually.

The staff at all three schools also participated in the Learning Focused Schools Training from 2003-2007. This training was initiated at the district level and was conducted by consultants. The staff development documents reviewed and those

interviewed reported training in strategies to increase student achievement such as unit planning using backward design, graphic organizers, differentiated instruction, catching kids up using acceleration, scaffolding grade level learning, writing essential questions, acquisition lessons, and activating and summarizing strategies.

Brookside Elementary School was also the recipient of a comprehensive school reform grant and chose the Modern Red Schoolhouse model. It was through this comprehensive school reform effort that the staff was trained to implement professional learning communities in the areas of technology, curriculum, standards and assessments, parent partnerships, organization and finance, and professional development.

There has been school-wide professional development in implementing the new Georgia Performance Standards that began in 2004 with the implementation of the new English Language Arts curriculum and will continue until 2009 with the implementation of the Social Studies curriculum. The staff at all three schools have received training and implemented the *Writing to Win* Program, and professional learning in the area of reading implementing strategies from the Florida Center for Reading Research. Professional learning has also been provided in the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment to allow for progress monitoring of students in the area of reading.

School-wide horizontal grade level collaboration has also been implemented at each of the elementary schools as mandated by the district. Grade level teams meet at least once weekly for the purpose of alignment of the curriculum, creating curriculum maps, looking at student work, creating common assessments, and reviewing data. At Brookside and Ellis there were also reports of some vertical grade level planning.

The administrators within the district also participated in training provided by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) designed to help in district wide improvement in student achievement, school culture, and organizational effectiveness. Principals and assistant principals at each school had also participated in Learning Focused Schools Walk-Through training to assess the degree of implementation of the strategies of the Learning Focused Schools Model that had been implemented district-wide.

For research question two, (what targeted or individual professional learning practices have been implemented), the research revealed the individual professional learning practices that have been implemented are those that were targeted by the school-wide or district-wide initiatives. There has been a definite shift from the teachers attending workshops and training sessions outside the district. According to the teachers, the Max Thompson Learning Focused Schools training strategies focus on many aspects of improving student achievement and they use many of the strategies in their classroom. The strategies include acquisition lessons, activating strategies, graphic organizers, summarizing strategies, extended thinking activities, and how to use rubrics effectively. The teachers also had training on differentiating instruction to meet the needs of learners at all levels through the Learning Focused School Training and also the Georgia Performance Standards Training.

For research question three, (what role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school), the research revealed the professional learning practices of the school have played a major role in their success. The combination of district-wide, school-wide and individual professional learning practices continue to impact the student

learning at these three schools. There has been participation in formal school reform model with the Max Thompson Learning Focused School Training in 2003-2004, and Brookside Elementary participated in the Modern Red Schoolhouse comprehensive school reform model. With both models, the staffs studied research-based best practices to employ with their students.

The collaborative nature of the school is such that they have time built in during the day for job-embedded professional development as they meet in horizontal and in some instances vertical level grade level meetings. Collaborative efforts have led to the creation of a common curriculum, instructional calendars, as well as common formative and cumulative assessments. Data is used extensively to inform instruction.

Learning Focused walk-throughs are conducted by the administration as a follow-up to ensure professional learning practices are implemented. Informal observations also indicate if teachers are following the curriculum maps that were developed at grade-level meetings. Although all three schools have areas in which to improve as indicated by the SAI survey, their professional learning practices seem to have impacted their student achievement and contributed to their success as a Title I Distinguished Schools.

For research question four, (to what extent do the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a professional learning community), the degree of engagement within the dimensions was different for each school. Julian Drive Elementary's strengths are in the following dimensions, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, and supportive conditions (relationships). Within the dimensions of Professional Learning Communities the following areas are reported to be the weakest at this school: shared



and supportive leadership, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions (structures).

Ellis Elementary is also engaged to some degree with all the dimensions of a professional learning community. Their strengths are shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, and supportive conditions – relationships. The three areas that are in greatest need of improvement by dimension for Ellis Elementary are shared values and vision, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions with relation to structure.

Brookside Elementary School is engaged to some degree with all the dimensions of a professional learning community. Their strengths are collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions – structures. The three areas that are in need of improvement by dimension for Brookside are shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, and supportive conditions with relation to relationships.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter provided an overview of the study including research questions, findings, discussion of the findings, conclusions, implications, recommendations, and concluding thoughts. This chapter was organized by the researcher to include a discussion of how the research findings related to the review of the literature. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for additional study and concluding thoughts.

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional learning practices in three rural elementary schools to determine how the professional learning practices contribute to the school's status as a Title I Distinguished School. In addition, the researcher also examined the extent to which these schools reflect the dimensions of a professional learning community.

The researcher administered the Professional Learning Communities Assessment (PLCA) during faculty meetings at the three schools for a 91% participation rate of the number of certified teachers within the three schools. In addition, the principals and Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and three teachers from each of the schools who serve on the school leadership team were interviewed regarding professional learning practices at the individual, school and county level, and artifacts and evidence were also gathered from documents at the school and district level. The research analyzed the responses to the assessment, interviews, and documents to respond to the research questions.

### Research Questions

The overarching question for this research study was: How do professional learning practices contribute to the school's status as a Title I Distinguished School?

5. What school wide professional learning practices have been implemented?
6. What individual/targeted professional learning practices have been implemented?
7. What role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school?
8. To what extent do the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a Professional Learning Community?

### Findings

The researcher explored the answer to the overarching question through the sub questions and by analyzing the responses provided by the teachers, principals, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, and artifacts. The findings to each sub question from Chapter IV are presented, followed by the researcher's discussion of the findings as related to the literature.

*Research Question 1: What school wide professional learning practices have been implemented?*

The research revealed that all three of the elementary schools had achieved accreditation by the Southern Schools and Colleges (SACS) during the 2005 school year. This occurrence was reported to be a professional learning experience in itself as the staffs at all three schools participated in the process by serving on various committees and developing a School Improvement Plan that is updated annually. It is from the goals identified in this plan that professional learning needs are identified and addressed.

The staff at all three schools also participated in the Learning Focused Schools Training from 2003-2007. This training was initiated at the district level and was conducted by consultants. The staff development documents reviewed and those interviewed reported training in strategies to increase student achievement such as unit planning using backward design, graphic organizers, differentiated instruction, catching kids up using acceleration, scaffolding grade level learning, writing essential questions, acquisition lessons, and activating and summarizing strategies.

Brookside Elementary School was also the recipient of a comprehensive school reform grant and chose the Modern Red Schoolhouse model. It was through this comprehensive school reform effort that the staff was trained to implement professional learning communities in the areas of technology, curriculum, standards and assessments, parent partnerships, organization and finance, and professional development.

There has been school-wide professional development in implementing the new Georgia Performance Standards that began in 2004 with the implementation of the new English Language Arts curriculum and will continue until 2009 with the implementation of the Social Studies curriculum at the kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels. The staff at all three schools have received training and implemented the *Writing to Win* Program, and professional learning was provided in the area of reading utilizing strategies from the Florida Center for Reading Research. Professional learning has also been provided in the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment to allow for progress monitoring of students in the area of reading.

School-wide horizontal grade level collaboration has also been implemented at each of the elementary schools as mandated by the district. Grade level teams meet at

least once weekly for the purpose of alignment of the curriculum, creating curriculum maps, looking at student work, creating common assessments, and reviewing data.

The administrators within the district also participated in training provided by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) designed to help in district wide improvement in student achievement, school culture, and organizational effectiveness. Principals and assistant principals at each school had also participated in Learning Focused Schools Walk-Through training to assess the degree of implementation of the strategies of the Learning Focused Schools Model that had been implemented district-wide.

*Research Question 2: What individual/targeted professional learning practices have been implemented?*

The research revealed most of the targeted practices were those that had been put into action as a result of the school-wide training. There has been a definite shift from the teachers attending workshops and training sessions outside the district, however, there are still instances of teachers participating in content specific training both inside and outside the district. There was some concern expressed by many of the teachers interviewed as well as data derived from the SAI and PLCA that teachers no longer feel that they have input into the types of professional learning they may choose or attend. Individual professional development selected by teachers is almost nonexistent at the school level.

According to the teachers, the Max Thompson Learning Focused Schools training strategies focus on many aspects of improving student achievement and they use many of the strategies in their classroom. The strategies include acquisition lessons,

activating strategies, graphic organizers, summarizing strategies, extended thinking activities, and how to use rubrics effectively. The teachers also had training on differentiating instruction to meet the needs of learners at all levels through the Learning Focused School Training and also the Georgia Performance Standards Training.

The teachers at Brookside Elementary School also were involved in the comprehensive school reform model, Modern Red Schoolhouse. These teachers received intensive three year training in this model from outside consultants that focused on the following areas: curriculum, standards and assessments, technology, school parent and community partnership, professional development and organization and finance. Each committee selected a chair and co-chair who facilitated the meetings and goals were established based the needs of their school. Teachers received training on how to align curriculum, develop units utilizing the backward design, how to align state standards and benchmarking tests, and how to differentiate instruction to meet the student's needs. Teachers were also trained on how to conduct and facilitate meetings, and gather and disaggregate data. This training began before and also ran parallel to the phase in of the new Georgia Performance Standards.

*Research Question 3: What role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school?*

The research revealed the school-wide professional learning and individual professional learning resulted from the goals of the School Improvement Plan as well as those that are mandated by district and state initiatives. The interviewees reported that they were being given input into some of the decisions on professional learning initiatives, but also recognized that there are outside forces that affect the decisions

relating to professional learning. They reported being provided time during their workday for job-embedded professional learning as they collaborate with their grade level colleagues on curriculum issues for the purpose of improving student achievement. The staff at each school also reported an increased emphasis on creating common curriculum maps, an instructional calendar, common assessments, and looking at student work. The research also revealed the staff at all three schools analyzes multiple sources of data for the purpose of identifying weaknesses.

There is some concern expressed by the staff at all three schools that fiscal resources for professional learning are not readily available. According to the documents reviewed and the information gathered during the interview process, there are resources available, but the district has chosen to use those resources within the school district to pay substitute teachers to cover classes during extended collaborative planning, and consultants who are called upon for specific content related training. This has led to some concern expressed by the teachers that they can no longer choose the types of professional learning they feel would be most beneficial to them personally. Although the teachers are very supportive of the initiatives that have been implemented, they stated they wanted a balance between the goals at the district and school and their own professional growth.

The SACS accreditation process assisted all three schools in identifying their strengths and weaknesses to assist them in creating a School Improvement Plan. As a result of that plan, the professional development has been chosen carefully to support the goals outlined in the plan instead of random one-day conferences or workshops. The professional learning experiences each school received from the Learning Focused

Schools model during 2003-2007 provided training in strategies to improve student achievement. The implementation of the Modern Red Schoolhouse comprehensive school reform at Heart City School provided teachers with professional learning to implement professional learning communities in the areas of technology, curriculum, standards and assessments, parent partnerships, organization and finance, and professional development. The professional learning provided from the state for the phase in of the new Georgia performance Standards has also helped pave the way for standards based classroom instruction.

In summary, the professional learning practices in the Ace School District have become more job-embedded and collaborative. The focus of the district is on collaboration at the district and school levels. The internal mandate from the district office for the horizontal grade level meetings, as well as the outside influences of the implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards, the SACS accreditation process, and the comprehensive school reform models of Learning Focused Schools and Modern Red Schoolhouse has had a tremendous impact on the professional learning practices within the individual schools and the district as a whole and has impacted the success of each school.

*Research Question 4: To what extent do the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a Professional Learning Community?*

Since the professional learning community concept was mandated by the district with weekly horizontal grade level meetings, the PLCA was given to determine the extent to which the schools reflect the dimensions described in the literature. All three schools



are engaged at differing levels within each dimension of a professional learning community.

Julian Drive Elementary strengths are in the following dimensions, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, and supportive conditions (relationships). Within the dimensions of Professional Learning Communities the following areas are reported to be the weakest at this school: shared and supportive leadership, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions (structures).

Ellis Elementary School's strengths are in the dimensions of shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, and supportive conditions – relationships. The three areas that are in greatest need of improvement by dimension for Ellis Elementary are shared values and vision, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions with relation to structure.

Brookside Elementary School's strengths are in the dimensions of collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions – structures. The three areas that are in need of improvement by dimension for Brookside are shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, and supportive conditions with relation to relationships.

## Discussion of Findings

### *Introduction*

### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 1*

#### *What school wide professional learning practices have been implemented?*

All three schools have received accreditation through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. It was through this accreditation process that the schools

developed their School Improvement Plans and established goals to address areas of weakness. All three schools report that their goals from professional learning are derived from the goals established in their school improvement plans. Sparks (2002) stated that the key to school improvement is a sustained effort in which the entire staff seeks incremental annual improvement related to school goals. All three schools have also received professional learning from the Learning Focused Schools and Modern Red Schoolhouse comprehensive school reform models. This is in line with the research of and Fullan (1991) who has criticized schools for their fragmented approach to change and Sparks (1997) who believes that professional learning should be driven by a clear, coherent strategic plan for the school district, and each school. Schools should set their goals both to assist the school system in achieving its long-term objectives and address the challenges unique to their students' needs (Hirsh, 2004).

Perhaps the most compelling school-wide professional development that has been implemented in this school district, according to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, is the horizontal collaborative grade level meetings that occur on a weekly basis. The research indicated that it is during these collaborative meetings that teachers have aligned curriculum, created instructional calendars and common assessments, examined student work and analyzed test data from varied sources (Lieberman, 1995; Sparks & Hirsh, 2000; Little, 1999; Sparks, 2002.) This form of job embedded learning is also supported by the research of Sparks and Hirsh, 2000; Garet, et al., 2001; Little, 1999; Stiles, 1998 and Loucks-Horsley, et al., 1998. These types of activities also were reported in the research of Richardson (2005) and mirror the eight steps process identified in the study. The sustained, long-term collaboration of the

teachers in these grade level meetings to increase student outcomes is supported by the research of Garet, et al., (2001) and Dufour (2004).

*Discussion of Findings from Research Question 2*

*What individual/targeted professional learning practices have been implemented?*

The individual professional learning practices that have been implemented are those that were targeted by the school-wide or district-wide initiatives (Sparks, 1997, Hirsh, 2004). There has been a definite shift from the teachers attending workshops and training sessions outside the district (Sparks, 1995, Little, 1993). However, this has led to some concern expressed by the teachers that they can no longer choose the types of professional learning they feel would be most beneficial to them personally. Although the teachers are very supportive of the initiatives that have been implemented, they stated they wanted a balance between the goals of the district and school and their own professional growth. This is supported by Sparks and Hirsh (1997) who feel this type of top-down model with lack of teacher input is not likely to improve teacher practice or student learning outcomes. In addition, Birman et al. (2000) suggest district-wide professional learning that is mandated fails to have the form, duration, collective participation, meaningful content, active learning, and coherence necessary to result in improved student achievement.

According to the teachers, the Max Thompson Learning Focused Schools training strategies focus on many aspects of improving student achievement and they use many of the strategies in their classroom. The strategies include acquisition lessons, activating strategies, graphic organizers, summarizing strategies, extended thinking activities, and how to use rubrics effectively. The teachers also had training on differentiating

instruction to meet the needs of learners at all levels through the Learning Focused School Training and also the Georgia Performance Standards training. Several teachers had also been targeted to receive additional training in content areas such as reading and math. This training was conducted at the school and at the local RESA. The teachers made reference to the fact that since being accredited by SACS the professional development activities have been undertaken are more focused and must relate somehow to the School Improvement Plan.

All of these activities are in agreement with the research of Sparks and Hirsh (2000) who believe that successful professional learning that improves achievement links teachers with other professionals within and outside their schools. Therefore, it is imperative that those at the district and school level who make decisions regarding individual professional learning remember that while collaboration among teachers within the school is important, teachers also need to talk with and have professed an interest in interacting with other professionals outside their schools.

### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 3*

*What role does professional learning practice have in the success of the school?*

In summary, the professional learning practices of the schools have played a role in their success. The combination of district-wide, school-wide and individual professional learning practices continue to impact the student learning at these schools. They participated in formal school reform model with the Max Thompson Learning Focused School Training in 2003-2004 where they studied research-based best practices to employ with their students. The collaborative nature of the school is such that they have time built in during the day for job-embedded professional development as they

meet in horizontal grade level meetings. It is in these horizontal grade level meetings that the teachers have formed professional learning communities and developed a common curriculum, instructional calendar, common assessments, and analyzed student work. Data is used extensively to inform instruction. These activities are supported by researchers Lieberman 1995; Sparks & Hirsh, 2000; Little, 1999; Sparks, 2002; Garet, et al., 2001; Little 1999; Stiles 1998; and Loucks-Horsley, et al. 1998. These types of activities also were reported in the research of Richardson (2005).

Learning Focused walk-throughs are conducted as a follow-up to ensure professional learning practices are implemented. Informal observations can also indicate if teachers are following the curriculum maps that were developed at grade-level meetings. Garet et al. (2001) have acknowledged that assessing teachers' use of new knowledge and skills is challenging. The most accurate evaluation is direct observation of teachers, however teachers are often asked to complete self-evaluations, written reflections, or learning portfolios as evaluation tools (Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 1998; Joyce & Showers, 1998). Although the school has areas to improve as indicated by the SAI survey, their professional learning practices seem to have impacted their student achievement and contributed to their success as a Title I Distinguished School.

#### *Discussion of Findings from Research Question 4*

*To what extent do the three schools reflect the five dimensions of a Professional Learning Community?*

A number of studies have identified the influence of the development of professional learning communities as an effective reform effort that enhances professional learning practices (Louis and Kruse, 1995; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995;

Hord, 1997a; Dufour and Eaker, 1998; Langer, 2000). The three elementary schools in this study had been mandated by their districts to form professional learning communities at their grade levels for the purpose of improving student achievement. Each of the schools was engaged at different levels within the dimensions of professional learning communities as identified by the literature. Hord (1997b) defines professional learning community as the professional staff studying and acting together to direct efforts toward improved student learning and conceptualized five related dimensions that reflect the core of a professional learning community: 1) shared and supportive leadership, 2) shared vision and values, 3) collective learning and application, 4) shared personal practice, and (5) supportive conditions (collegial relationships and structures). While the literature supports professional learning communities as an effective reform effort that enhances professional learning practices, these three Title I schools have been successful in the past without full engagement of all the identified dimensions.

Julian Drive Elementary is engaged to some degree in each dimension of a professional learning community. Their strengths are in the following dimensions, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, and supportive conditions (relationships). Within the dimensions of Professional Learning Communities the following areas are reported to be the weakest at this school: shared and supportive leadership, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions (structures).

Ellis Elementary is also engaged to some degree with all the dimensions of a professional learning community. Their strengths are shared and supportive leadership, collective learning and application, and supportive conditions – relationships. The three areas that are in greatest need of improvement by dimension for Ellis Elementary are

shared values and vision, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions with relation to structure.

Brookside Elementary School is engaged to some degree with all the dimensions of a professional learning community. Their strengths are collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions – structures. The three areas that are in need of improvement by dimension for Brookside are shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, and supportive conditions with relation to relationships.

### Conclusions

The researcher analyzed the findings from the study to conclude

- Professional learning is fundamental to school improvement efforts.
- Developing staff collaboration is an important tool for improving instructional programs in schools through professional learning teams to improve teacher knowledge and teaching skills.
- Professional learning is an integral component of school and district school improvement initiatives and should support the goals of the district and school's improvement plans.
- The option to choose professional learning activities is important to teachers.
- Teachers prefer time for professional learning and collaboration during the regular school day.
- Professional learning communities provide a context of collegiality to support teachers and administrators as they strive to improve student learning.

## Implications

This study is significant to other schools that have been identified as successful Title 1, as many schools receiving Title 1 funds will qualify as “in need of improvement” by the federal government as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* specifies that Distinguished Title 1 Schools should serve as models for schools identified for improvement with similar demographics. It will be beneficial for other schools with similar demographics to examine the professional learning practices at these three schools at both the school and individual level.

This particular study is also significant to the participating schools, as data has been provided that show similarities and differences in school practices even though the schools are located within the same school district. The study provided an opportunity to reveal barriers that have limited previous or current improvement efforts, as well as the strengths that have nurtured the development of community.

While the teachers in this study reported engagement to some extent in all of the dimensions of professional learning communities, the PLCA identified areas that impacted full implementation of the process. These areas need to be examined carefully by school and district leaders to discern what areas are impeding the process. As educators we are continually striving to provide appropriate learning environments and opportunities for children, and it is imperative that we provide similar environments and opportunities for our teachers. It is extremely advantageous to study the manner in which schools become involved in joint planning, and collaboration for school improvement while focusing on individual student growth and increased achievement.



Information from the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) and interviews from the teachers and principals revealed that while teachers collaborate effectively in horizontal grade level meetings and receive feedback regarding instructional practice, observations of each other's classroom is almost nonexistent at the schools. In addition, teachers feel that their prior knowledge and experience are not always taken into consideration when staff development activities are designed. While a vast majority of those surveyed understand and believe that professional development is an integral part of the School Improvement Plan, only a small portion of them believe that the school stays with the adoption of school improvement initiatives long enough to see if changes in instructional practice and student performance occur.

The individual professional learning practices that have been implemented are those that were targeted by the school-wide or district-wide initiatives. There has been a definite shift from the teachers attending workshops and training sessions outside the district. However, this has led to some concern expressed by the teachers that they can no longer choose the types of professional learning they feel would be most beneficial to them personally. Although the teachers are very supportive of the initiatives that have been implemented, they stated they want a balance between the goals of the district and school and their own professional growth.

#### Recommendations

1. To help educational leaders and teachers plan successful professional learning activities, longitudinal studies are needed to explore the complex relationship between professional learning practices, teacher learning and change, and student outcomes.

2. The research conducted in this study should be ongoing within the district to evaluate professional learning activities to try to establish a clear correlation between professional learning and student outcomes.
3. The research conducted in this study should be replicated within a few years to ascertain the effects the professional learning communities have on student achievement over time.
4. School districts may consider using the PLCA as a first step to assessing readiness for implementing professional learning communities in their schools.
5. Schools districts may consider utilizing the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) to provide an overview of school conditions with regard to professional learning to help pinpoint areas needing attention.

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APPENDICES



APPENDIX A  
IRB CORRESPONDENCE

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs	
Phone: 912-681-5465	Veazey Hall 2021
	P.O. Box 8005
Fax: 912-681-0719	Statesboro, GA 30460

To: Sandra K. Adams  
2428 Lankford Road  
Bowersville, GA-30516

CC: Dr. Linda Arthur  
P.O. Box-8131

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRE)

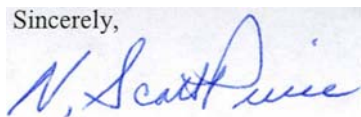
Date: December 5, 2007

Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered: H08104, and titled "An Examination of the Professional Learning Practices in Three Rural Elementary Title I Schools Within a School District", it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable.

*Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.*

This **IRB** approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter. If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRE with any information concerning any significant adverse event, whether or not it is believed to be related to the study, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRE Coordinator prior to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRE approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRE Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,  


N. Scott Pierce

Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs

APPENDIX B

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ASSESSMENT

**Directions:**

This questionnaire assesses your perceptions about your principal, staff, and stakeholders based on the five dimensions of a professional learning community (PLC) and related attributes. There are no right or wrong responses. This questionnaire contains a number of statements about practices, which occur in some schools. Read each statement and then use the scale below to select the scale point that best reflects your personal degree of agreement with the statement. Shade the appropriate oval provided to the right of each statement. Be certain to select only one response for each statement.

**Key Terms:**

- Principal = Principal, not Associate or Assistant Principal
- Staff = All adult staff directly associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment of students
- Stakeholders = Parents and community members

**Scale:**

1 = Strongly Disagree (SD)

2 = Disagree (D)

3 = Agree (A)

4 = Strongly Agree (SA)

STATEMENTS		SCALE			
	Shared and Supportive Leadership	SD	D	A	SA
1.	The staff is consistently involved in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.	0	0	0	0
2.	The principal incorporates advice from staff to make decisions.	0	0	0	0
3.	The staff has accessibility to key information.	0	0	0	0
4.	The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.	0	0	0	0
5.	Opportunities are provided for staff to initiate change.	0	0	0	0
6.	The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.	0	0	0	0
7.	The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.	0	0	0	0
8.	Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff.	0	0	0	0
9.	Decision-making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.	0	0	0	0
10.	Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.	0	0	0	0

	<b>STATEMENTS</b>	<b>SCALE</b>			
	<b>Shared Values and Vision</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
11.	A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.	0	0	0	0
12.	Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
13.	The staff share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.	0	0	0	0
14.	Decisions are made in alignment with the school's values and vision.	0	0	0	0
15.	A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.	0	0	0	0
16.	School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.	0	0	0	0
17.	Policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision.	0	0	0	0
18.	Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.	0	0	0	0
	<b>Collective Learning and Application</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
19.	The staff work together to seek knowledge, skills and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.	0	0	0	0
20.	Collegial relationships exist among staff that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.	0	0	0	0
21.	The staff plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.	0	0	0	0

22.	A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.	0	0	0	0
23.	The staff engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.	0	0	0	0
24.	Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
25.	School staff and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.	0	0	0	0
26.	School staff is committed to programs that enhance learning.	0	0	0	0
	<b>Shared Personal Practice</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
27.	Opportunities exist for staff to observe peers and offer encouragement.	0	0	0	0
28.	The staff provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
29.	The staff informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.	0	0	0	0

	STATEMENTS	SCALE			
		SD	D	A	SA
30.	The staff collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
31.	Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.	0	0	0	0
32.	Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.	0	0	0	0
	<b>Supportive Conditions - Relationships</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
33.	Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.	0	0	0	0
34.	A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.	0	0	0	0
35.	Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.	0	0	0	0
36.	School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.	0	0	0	0
	<b>Supportive Conditions - Structures</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
37.	Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	0	0	0	0
38.	The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	0	0	0	0
39.	Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	0	0	0	0



40.	Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	0	0	0	0
41.	Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.	0	0	0	0
42.	The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.	0	0	0	0
43.	The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	0	0	0	0
44.	Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff.	0	0	0	0
45.	Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.	0	0	0	0

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Source: Olivier, D. F., Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (2003). Professional learning community assessment. In J. B. Huffman & K. K. Hipp (Eds.). *Reculturing schools as professional learning communities*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

APPENDIX C  
PERMISSION TO USE ASSESSMENT



UNIVERSITY  
---OF-----  
LOUISIANA  
Lafayette

Sandra Adams  
Assistant Principal  
North Hart Elementary School  
124 Ankerich Road  
Bowersville, GA 30516

Dear Sandra,

This correspondence is for the purpose of acknowledging permission to utilize the *Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLeA)* in your research for your doctoral dissertation.

As first author of the measure, I would like to express our pleasure that this instrument will be able to contribute to your research. Through our previous emails, I have provided you with a copy of the PLeA, as well as background information pertaining to the validation process.

I am very interesting in hearing about your study findings. Should you require any additional information, please feel free to contact me. Thank you for your inquiry and interest.

Sincerely,

~ . ~

Dianne F. Olivier, Ph. D.  
Assistant Professor  
Educational Foundations and Leadership University of Louisiana at Lafayette  
P. O. Box 43091  
Lafayette, LA 70504-3091

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions for Title I Coordinator:

1. What process do you use to identify the professional learning needs of the staff in your district?
2. How is the impact of professional learning on teacher practices and student learning evaluated?
3. In what types of collaborative school-wide professional learning teams do teachers participate? How is this related to the district improvement plan?
4. What individual/targeted professional learning activities do teachers participate? How is this related to the district improvement plan?
5. What is the role of the Title I Coordinator in supporting and monitoring professional learning within the district?
6. In your opinion, what are the strengths of your system's professional learning program? How could it be improved?

Interview Questions for Principals:

1. How are your school's professional learning needs identified?
2. What professional learning practices have been implemented in your school?
3. How is the impact of professional learning on teacher practices and student learning evaluated?
4. In what types of collaborative school-wide professional learning teams do teachers participate? How is this related to the school improvement plan?
5. What professional learning activities in your school do you participate?
6. What opportunities are there for teachers to serve in leadership roles?
7. In your opinion, what are the strengths of your system's professional learning program? How could it be improved?

Interview Questions for Teachers who are members of the School Leadership Team:

1. How are your school's professional learning needs identified?
2. What professional learning practices have been implemented?
3. In what types of school-wide collaborative professional learning teams do teachers participate? Are topics related to the school improvement plan?
4. How would you describe the leadership team's involvement with supporting and monitoring professional learning in this school?
5. How are your professional learning needs identified?
6. How is the impact of professional learning practices and student learning evaluated?
7. Think about your three most favorable experiences with professional learning sessions. How do they compare to other professional learning sessions that your school system provides? (timing, location, content, compensation, etc).
8. In reflecting on the three favorable professional learning sessions, how has the knowledge gained in these sessions impacted your student's achievement?
9. In your opinion, what are the strengths of your system's professional learning program? How could it be improved?

APPENDIX E  
CONSENT FORM INTERVIEW

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PRACTICES CONSENT FORM

## Questionnaire

Dear Research Participant,

My name is Sandra Adams. I am an assistant principal in the Hart County school system and a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University. I am interested in examining the professional learning practices within Title I elementary schools and examining the extent to which the schools reflect the dimensions of a professional learning community.

This letter is to request your assistance in gathering data to analyze the situation. There is, of course, no penalty should you decide not to participate or to later withdraw from the study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire which should take approximately 10-15 minutes. Completion of the questionnaire will be considered permission to use the information you provide in the study. Please be assured your responses will be kept absolutely anonymous. The study will be most useful if you respond to every questionnaire item. There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort. If this occurs, you may choose not to answer one or more of the questions, without penalty.

If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-681-0843.

Let me thank you in advance for your assistance in participating in this research study. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent to keep for your records.

Respectfully,

Sandra Adams  
Doctoral Student  
Georgia Southern University

Title of Project: A Study of the Professional Learning Practices in Three Rural Elementary Title I Distinguished Schools Within a School District  
Principal Investigator: Sandra Adams, 2428 Lankford Road, Bowersville, Georgia 30516, (706) 49105567, [sadams@hart.k12.ga.us](mailto:sadams@hart.k12.ga.us)  
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Linda M. Arthur, P. O. Box 8131, Statesboro, Georgia 30640, (912) 681-0697, [larthur@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:larthur@georgiasouthern.edu)

APPENDIX F  
CONSENT FORM ASSESSMENT



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PRACTICES CONSENT FORM  
Interviews

Dear Research Participant,

My name is Sandra Adams. I am an assistant principal in the Hart County school system and a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University. I am interested in examining the professional learning practices within Title I elementary schools and examining the extent to which the schools reflect the dimensions of a professional learning community.

This letter is to request your assistance in gathering data to analyze the situation. There is, of course, no penalty should you decide not to participate or to later withdraw from the study. If you agree to participate you will take part in an interview process which should last approximately forty-five minutes to one hour. Completing the interview process will be considered permission to use the information you provide for the study. Please be assured your responses will be kept absolutely anonymous. The study will be most useful if you respond to every interview question. There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort. If this occurs, you may choose not to answer one or more of the questions, without penalty.

If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-681-0843.

Let me thank you in advance for your assistance in participating in this research study. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent to keep for your records.

Respectfully,

Sandra Adams  
Doctoral Student  
Georgia Southern University

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