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Refocusing a School: The Professional Learning Community as an Agent of Change

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Introduction

In the fall of 2003, the Parent Council at North Park Wilson School expressed a dream for their school. One of the members of the council asked, “Whatever happened to that idea about focusing on the fine arts at our school?” (It was interesting that this question would arise when the new principal at the school was an arts education specialist!)

A committee consisting of the school principal, teachers, parents, students and community members was formed to develop the idea. The term “fine arts” was replaced by “arts education,” and the Development Committee began to examine some of the information available on this topic, including the research on the benefits of arts education to student learning and achievement, the impact of arts education on brain development, the use of arts education as a powerful instructional model, the economic impact of the fine arts, and culture sector employment opportunities for fine arts practitioners. The committee examined the works of Howard Gardner, Elliot Eisner and Eric Jensen, as well as the work done by the Arts Education Partnership and other research organizations.

After the research was done, the committee decided to issue a special newsletter for the community that would outline the new ideas and invite community members to a meeting to discuss these new ideas. In early December of 2003, the members of the Development Committee made a presentation to the community and answered questions about their findings. Community reaction was positive and supportive. As a result, the committee decided to turn its ideas into an action plan.

At this point the first challenge in the process surfaced. What would the school offer and where would the process of school change begin? The school administration, which was charged with the task of implementing the committee’s findings, decided that the school had the capacity to do three things:

- Ensure that the arts education curriculum from Saskatchewan Learning was taught with integrity;
- Infuse the arts into other subject areas where appropriate; and
- Make use of community resources to supplement the focus on arts education.

A card was produced to explain the concept of a centre of excellence for education through the arts. Called “Sowing the Seeds of the Future,” the card used as its inspiration for the Natural Habitat Garden at the school. Designed to target families in the school catchment area who were not presently attending North Park Wilson School, the card and its accompanying seed packet were distributed throughout the area by hand and other means. The idea of “A Centre of Excellence for Education through the Arts” was launched.

The administration at the school also thought it was important to model what it looked like to infuse Arts Education into other subject areas. The school’s Natural Habitat Garden was a logical place to start. How could we learn about the garden through arts education? An ArtsSmart grant was applied for and received. The Arts Smart project was designed to show how arts education could be used to teach the concepts and understandings of science, language arts and environmental education.

In this project, a professional artist worked with the students to create murals based on the plants found in the Natural Habitat Garden at the school. A professional dancer worked with the students to develop dances. The students wrote a musical about the Natural Habitat Garden and presented their murals and dances in this

context. The success of this presentation reaffirmed the parent council's view that this school had the potential to become a centre of excellence. It was an excellent way for both staff and the community to experience the process and the results of learning through the arts. It gave the idea a concrete form.

Some of the staff at the school were not comfortable with the new teachings and learnings that would be part of the journey towards becoming a Centre of Excellence for Education through the Arts. They felt that they didn't have the training or time required to be part of the project. At the end of the school year, staff at the school were given the choice to remain and continue to work on the project or transfer to another school. It was recognized that the teachers needed for this project had to be prepared to alter their teaching styles and needed some expertise in arts education instruction to begin revamping the school into a centre of excellence through an emphasis on instruction through the arts.

The idea of a Centre of Excellence for Education through the Arts had become public by the spring of 2004. Several teachers called and volunteered to work at the school, and at the beginning of the 2004 school year, the school staff was complete. The staff members who left were replaced by teachers who had an interest in teaching through the arts and had indicated that they wanted to devote their energies to the project. On the staff were one senior teacher with a background in drama and music, two visual arts specialists (one senior and one primary), a classroom music specialist, a band teacher, a core French teacher with an interest in the arts, a kindergarten teacher with an interest in dance and several other staff members who had indicated their support for the project.

At the beginning of the first year, the staff at the school decided to use the three key components as guidelines for instruction and to "jump right in" to working with students. Since the school year had started and the staff had little planning time, getting right to work was deemed the easiest way to start. Teachers were given research to read including two books which explained strategies used in teaching through the arts. Throughout the first half of the school year, the staff supported and helped each other formally and informally.

Public presentations were made on the progress of the school towards its goal. One of the successful undertakings of this first year was the ArtsSmart project on "The River." In this presentation, students from all grades worked with a music composer on their own songs; they worked with a dance professional on dances; and they worked with a visual artist on various media to celebrate and examine the place in their lives of the South Saskatchewan River. Every class participated in the project, but the level of participation was decided by the classroom teacher. Each teacher relied on personal expertise and supplemented it with the knowledge of the artists hired through the grant. Not only was this a learning opportunity for the students; it offered a powerful professional development opportunity for the teachers.

Staff members were carrying out this project while still trying to organize and formalize their professional learning community. The teachers were still at various stages of commitment to the three key components established the year before. In February of 2005, the principal and a few staff members decided that the Professional Learning Community framework would be beneficial to the development of a centre of excellence and introduced the framework to the staff. The staff then started to formalize their vision and to examine the steps necessary to increase student learning at the school by focusing on their professional learning community. At this point, the staff decided to apply for a McDowell Foundation grant that would allow them time in which to discuss and research the changes in practice necessary to refocus the school.

Purpose of the Study

This study had two purposes:

1. To establish a professional learning community in arts education at North Park Wilson School, and
2. To use the professional learning community to support the arts education initiative at the school by actively seeking change.

The study focused on using the staff as agents of change. By creating a community that was actively involved in the process of change, by actively designing the change and by evaluating the results of the change, the staff hoped to gain insight into the process of educational change at the school level.

Data Collection

The data used in this study were collected in several ways from teachers, support staff and the school community.

Throughout the project teachers and other staff were encouraged by various means to concentrate on and reflect upon their role in the professional learning community, both individually and in groups. Teachers were asked to keep reflective journals over the course of the change. Notes were kept from all professional learning community meetings. Staff discussions were recorded during professional development and planning sessions. Teachers had input into the school planning document and were asked to assess their arts education implementation level and level of success of the professional learning community by using a rubric. At the end of the project teachers were interviewed and asked to assess their roles within the change happening at the school.

A parent survey was also distributed and analyzed.

The Professional Learning Community

A professional learning community, simply defined, is:

...a collegial group of administrators and school staff who are united in their commitment to student learning. They share a vision, work and learn collaboratively, visit and review other classrooms, and participate in decision making (Hord, 1997b). The benefits to the staff and students include a reduced isolation of teachers, better informed and committed teachers, and academic gains for students. Hord (1997b) notes, "As an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff-development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement." (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1997)

Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators." (DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker: 2006)

DuFour and Eaker (1998) state that a professional learning community has six characteristics: shared vision, belief and goals; continuous improvement; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and results orientation. The strength of the Professional Learning Community is its focus on student achievement as the central belief – the reason for being in the community. At North Park Wilson School, the staff seemed to have "the central belief" that education through the arts would benefit all students. However, it was important that everyone had the same vision and focus.

Developing the Mission Statement

A mission statement answers the question “why do we exist?” It outlines the shared vision and beliefs that the professional learning community embodies. It is constantly in the hearts and minds of the people throughout the school.

At North Park Wilson School, the first steps in establishing the professional learning community came through the negotiation of the mission statement. The staff worked in groups to generate and discuss the various foci of the school. Out of the many ideas generated, one focus emerged – that of learning through the arts providing an enriched environment for students in the school. Our formal mission statement became:

At North Park Wilson, our learning community is dedicated to providing an enriched learning environment for all students through the arts.

In addition to the mission statement, a number of core beliefs were also generated:

We believe that arts education is:

- A way of learning and knowing,
- An expression of and response to experiences,
- Creative expression and ideas,
- Joyful adventure,
- Integration,
- Celebration,
- Self-expression,
- A way to share our stories, and
- A valid way of communication.

Community norms, consistent with the establishment of a professional learning community, were also established:

At North Park Wilson School we have agreed:

- We share a common vision for our school.
- We demonstrate respect for difference and diversity and celebrate their qualities.
- We participate and communicate openly, honestly and respectfully.
- We reflect on our practices and are flexible in planning for positive change.
- We respect the time of others by being prepared, flexible and organized when collaborating or meeting.
- We create a positive atmosphere and take time to have fun.

Working Towards the Professional Learning Community

After establishing the mission statement, beliefs and goals for the professional learning community, staff began to look at professional learning communities in operation by reading the literature (see Appendix A) and by viewing and discussing other experiences with professional learning communities. Several activities were designed by the professional development committee, under the guidance of the principal, to encourage staff members to think about their involvement in the professional learning community and in learning through the arts.

One activity focused on viewing a professional learning community in the arts at work. The staff viewed, discussed and reflected on *The Arts in Every Classroom: a video library, K-5*. The staff also had access to this videotape series throughout the year. Many staff members viewed the tapes individually and in small groups.

Each staff member was given a journal in which to document his/her journey as a member of the professional learning community. These reflective journals were used throughout the year as a personal measure of the progress each person was making. The journals also offered the staff members an opportunity to formulate questions about their roles in the professional learning community and an opportunity for each staff member to document and think about his/her own journey in becoming an arts education leader. (See Appendix B for sample reflection questions.)

The original intent of the project was for staff to keep the journals throughout the year and then submit them as part of the research for this project. However, this did not work. Many of the staff were uncomfortable with keeping a reflective journal as a public record. Writing in the journal and handing it in became optional activities for the staff. For some members the reflective journal exercise was very successful while other members preferred other ways to share and think about their involvement and their journey, e.g., discussions with other staff and the administrative team.

The journals included statements such as:

...[it is] exciting that we can step outside the box and are given permission at North Park Wilson to practice process rather than product. Meets all students' needs, especially kids who exhibit fear over reading and writing tests. These students are given an opportunity to express what they know through language other than written/spoken.

The learning community at North Park Wilson is very important to me as a beginning teacher. Everything is new for me and I am constantly learning new things. By having a PLC I feel encouraged that other teachers are taking risks and trying new things. I feel a real sense of community and we really celebrate each others successes. I think it gives a sense of excitement to the school. I feel confident to try new things and to take a risk as a teacher and with my students.

We expect our students to enjoy learning, want to come to school and participate and grow...I feel energized by all the new projects and ideas the staff comes up with...I need to feel my opinion is valued in our PLC. I need to develop better listening skills...speak out more.

Another group said arts education can facilitate meaningful connections between abstract concepts in the real world — does that mean it helps us connect our culture's world views or does it mean, for example, that arts education might take a concept like congruent triangles and help kids connect that to their real world?...I would like our school arts program to have more connection to the real world out there — authentic needs.

People in the midst of change need validation. They can not think from another's point of view — they can only grow out from their own thought-frames and seek a common ground...A pragmatic orientation is necessary, to link what we are trying to actually impact upon our students. However, if we are not thinking critically about what we are doing, we are simply implementing a series of activities — not acceptable.

In January of 2006, staff members at North Park Wilson were asked to discuss the progress made in realizing the mission statement over the first part of the school year. Staff members were asked to make a commitment to the learning community and were also asked to reflect on their role to date in the learning community. The staff were asked to list their thoughts — positive or negative — for discussion at a later meeting.

One of the first projects attempted through the professional learning community was a theme unit on bears for the K – 2 classes. Three teachers cooperatively planned this unit and used dance, drama and visual art to reinforce the learnings in language arts and science. Collaboration time was given to the teachers involved in the project. This time allowed them to work together on planning the unit of study and gave them the opportunity to gather their resources together. The students who participated in the unit of study were grouped in cross-grade groupings. One of the participating teachers stated:

All children tried to pose like several of the bears. All could recall information about bears, and had no difficulty in telling the difference between fiction and non-fiction...Content and process were made clear to students, and became texts we read as part of language arts.

During the 2005-2006 school year, the professional learning community at North Park Wilson had the opportunity to further enhance its collaborative skills and learning through the arts by taking part in an ArtsSmart project called "Saskatoon: 100 Years." This project gave the staff an opportunity to work with professional artists in dance, drama, visual arts and music to plan and produce a special celebration day for the city of Saskatoon. Collaborative planning was a key focus of the project. The project began with the teachers and other staff brainstorming ideas around the theme. Careful attention was paid to incorporating curriculum objectives from subjects such as language arts and social studies into the framework of the ArtsSmart project. The teachers in the professional learning community were expected throughout the project to plan with the artists, which allowed them to experience the arts in the same way as an artist and incorporate that perspective into their projects.

The learnings from this project were immense for both the students and the staff. Staff members stated:

The Mission statement was seen in action at the Arts Smart presentation.

I liked the whole school thing...And I like to have a goal to work towards. If you're going to work and work and work on a project, I like to have a chance to showcase that.

[Professional artists] are catalysts. They provide viewpoints that we wouldn't normally have as teachers. They see our children differently and react to them differently. They also have the expertise. They come in and they know how to create a dance and rehearse it. They have skills that by and large our teaching staff doesn't have here.

In February, 2006, a Learning Community Mid-Year Check-In was held. Staff members were given the list of questions, comments and concerns they had generated at their previous check-in in January. The questions had been collated into three categories:

1. Assessment – How do we know where we are?
2. Curriculum and Instruction – What else do we need to add? and
3. Climate – What do we need to see, feel and hear?

Three committees were formed and met to generate ideas that would help them address these broad areas of concern.

In March, 2006, the principal and vice-principal travelled to Edmonton to experience learning through the arts in three schools that had an arts education focus.

1. **Virginia Park K-6 School.** This school had two hundred students and since 1977 had been designated as an elementary school providing arts core programming. The belief statement for the school emphasized the importance of the arts:

We believe that the arts are essential to a rich and meaningful education as students gain skills in music, visual arts, drama, dance and the literary arts.

2. **Afton School (K-6).** The belief statement of Afton School says:

We believe that the arts encourage us to explore, to think in new and different ways and to examine the world around us. We also believe that the arts are the perfect vehicle to support and encourage learning across all disciplines.

3. **Victoria School of Performing and Visual Arts (K-12).** This school also shared its mission statement:

At Victoria School of Performing and Visual Arts our combined focus of academics and the arts promotes student achievement and fosters the lifelong pursuit of excellence.

The principal and vice-principal had the opportunity to observe classes, take photographs, and talk with the administrative team at the different schools about the vision and focus of their schools. On their return to North Park Wilson School they shared the information they had gathered with the staff. Staff were able

to see how learning through the arts is measured in other places, examine what the facilities in other schools implied for the facilities in their own school, and visualize what learning through the arts looks like in practice.

Staff reaction to the administrative team's presentation was positive. The presentation helped to refocus staff efforts to incorporate arts education into their own programming. It also helped them clarify their vision of learning through the arts through careful discussion and analysis of learning through the arts in other schools. This exercise, in conjunction with the readings given to the staff by the professional development committee, hastened the acceptance of the learning through the arts model with the staff.

The three committees (measure of success; curriculum and instruction; and climate) each met after this presentation to begin planning activities for addressing the concerns assigned to them. Each committee presented its plan at a staff meeting. SMART goals were established for each plan and the committees began to work on their special areas.

In May, 2006, a survey form was given to all the parents at North Park Wilson School (see Appendix D). This survey was designed to allow community input into the planning for the next school year. It was also designed to encourage parents to comment on the shift in focus in the school. Although the number of surveys returned was low, the parents had some interesting comments about the arts education focus at the school:

Amazing! I love the focus of the school.

Seems to be good enrichment in this area and appreciate faculty's enthusiasm.

Wonderful. NPW provides so many opportunities for the kids to work with/benefit from professional artists, and to incorporate arts into the curriculum in interesting and entertaining ways.

We find the art activities very exciting and activities that build our son's confidence. We had our son in another school previous to this and have found NPW to be a much more pleasant environment and with many more activities.

These are excellent learning and learning enhancement exercises. My sons are very well adjusted because of arts ed.

In May, 2006, the staff had another opportunity to comment on the professional learning community and the work carried out to date in arts education. In preparation for the school's planning document, the principal asked each staff member to complete a survey form with questions about the programs and projects that had taken place in the last year. One key question related to arts education was: What is our evidence that we have infused arts ed. into our daily units of instruction? Staff responses to this question included:

I know that this year more than any other year of my teaching career, students are talking more about art and viewing their art everyday in the classroom.

Students speak about themselves as being writers, drawers, dancers.

This planning document also asked questions about the professional learning community. One question focused on the relationship between the professional learning community and student learning. Some staff responses were:

Too early to tell. There is a feeling of more cohesion on staff which has an effect on kids.

Shared enthusiasm for learning e.g. guest teachers came in and told about a favourite book.

Team teaching – planning units which include utilizing our strengths in dance, art and drama.

Staff are collaborating and sharing more which results in more developed and exciting learning experiences for the students. Staff has gained a better understanding and view of the purpose/goals of our Centre of Excellence and thus is better able to teach the students in this manner/through our goals.

One of the other questions in the planning document focused on the weaknesses in the professional learning community and the improvements that are needed to it. Staff responses included:

Understanding everyone's needs. We are all getting to know each other.

Some staff don't understand/haven't bought into the model.

More communication and sharing of ideas, celebrating successes, sharing ideas in regard to our goals with arts education and assessment for learning.

Awareness, promotion and structuring of staff collaboration on a regular basis.

It was announced that, starting in the fall of 2004, a massive renovation and revamping of North Park Wilson School would begin. The reconstruction was partially in response to the increase in enrolment at the school. The plans for the facility included: new windows; major overhauls to every classroom; the addition of a new gymnasium, washrooms, bootrooms and entrances; repairs to the roof; relocation of the library to a newly redesigned space; and complete upgrading of the whole school to the current building code. For the staff, the construction meant several classrooms had to move during the year to allow the new windows to be installed. During the spring of 2005 the whole school population became transient. Classrooms, teachers, and students were moved weekly while renovations were taking place. At the end of the 2005 -2006 school year, whole rooms had to be packed up and the contents moved to the gymnasium for storage during the summer. These rooms included the main office, the principal's office, the vice-principal's office, the library and some classrooms.

In September, 2006, the full plan for the renovations and new construction was revealed to the staff. They realized that in reality the 2006-2007 school year would be one of continual upheaval. The library would not be ready until November; classes would be moved from their spaces into temporary spaces throughout the year; and living with construction would become a fact of life for the students and the staff. The challenge for the staff was to continue to focus on learning through the arts in the midst of the construction chaos.

Continuing the Journey

In September, 2006, the staff reviewed the progress made in the professional learning community by responding to a series of statements taken directly from their reflective journals. Part of the rationale for this activity was to have the new members of the staff experience the thinking behind the mission statement for the school and consider how that mission statement had an impact on teaching in the school. It also allowed staff members to share the successes and challenges of living within the mission statement. Reaffirming the mission statement and analyzing it in terms of the construction which would be happening in the school was another reason for the activity.

The statements used in this activity are listed below and followed by selected responses:

“Good arts education is like any other kind of instruction – activities are planned intentionally to focus students on acquiring skills, understandings and growing abilities. Our daily work with students should focus on goals rather than activities. Our fundamental purpose is to work together to implement the arts into our daily curriculum objectives.”

- *Just do it – embrace the challenge*
- *Flexibility and openness*
- *Show intention; forward motion*
- *Make reflections and insights of other evident and given freedom to express what they are doing*
- *Involving yourself in the process of (learning how to learn) of learning*
- *PWIM (Picture Word Induction Model) is a concern – how to tie in*
- *Plan from learning objectives – select activities to reach them including arts objectives and activities*
- *Key: focus on achievable objectives – integrate – narrow the focus to keep it simple enough for all to progress and to be able to keep in mind arts education*
- *Keep asking the question – will this activity cause growth in learning*

“At North Park Wilson we have made a commitment to teach in new ways and to actively reflect on new learning independently and together as a staff. We will need to have major discussions in the fall about arts education and how to deliver effective programming with our upcoming renovation/construction issues. The nature of where we will best pursue our goals will depend upon the new staff members who join us.”

Facility restraints affect programming

- *Frustration*
- *Confusion (new staff)*
- *“[S]pace” helps with learning through the year; visual cues, contents, processes*

Excitement

- *Opportunity to think outside the box*
- *Collaboration between designers and staff*
- *Renos have made some creative solutions for activities*
- *Renos taxing staff well/student wellness and increased anxiety levels*
- *Discussions about what's worked in past – to inform and help new staff*
- *Excitement = positive, no downside to reno's = great opportunity, celebrate!*

“Although our North Park Wilson staff members have a strong common purpose we still need to work more on establishing specific, measurable goals to determine our impact on student learning. We should assess our progress based on results rather than intentions. Our staff needs more time to grasp the concept and to work to develop the effective wording and establishment of strategies to measure the impact of our efforts in our student's learning. Can we only assess our effort in our student's learning? Can we only assess our efforts through student work, atmosphere in the school and special events?”

- *We all agree that learning through the arts is important/effective/good for all kids....where is the written data to back it up*
- *Pull out model (i.e. the ecoquest/science quest) and inclusive model arts ed K – 8*
- *Which kids come demographics vs. program*
- *Are we “bucking” the decreased enrolment trend*

“We have experienced the success of our collaboration over the last two years. We celebrate the students' successes through events like ArtsSmart and our Literacy Parade. As we proceed into another school year will our PLC strengthen and grow as we adapt to new ideas and staff changes? What do we need to put into place to ensure growth and to nurture our PLC?”

- *YES – we're confident it's working*
- *We're a committed group*
- *More kids reading*
- *Happier kids with opportunity to express themselves through art*
- *Change brings opportunity*
- *Confident our PLC will strengthen for certain*
- *Reassess goals of assemblies – Can we do these better and in a different way? Goal centred not production perfection*

At the end of the 2006-2007 school year, all teaching staff were interviewed about their experiences as a member of the North Park Wilson professional learning community by one of the researchers who had taken a position at Central Office and was no longer teaching at the school. Not all the staff had been here since the beginning of the professional learning community. Several staff changes had taken place since its inception. However, it was assumed that all staff would be able to answer questions framed around the professional learning community. The questions used in the interview (see Appendix D) centred on the following topics: information about the teacher in terms of career, teaching specialties and experience in arts education; perceptions of the school and reasons for school choice; familiarity with the mission statement and the use of the mission statement as a guide to instruction; collaboration; professional learning

characteristics and supports; and professional development in arts education and community involvement.

The teaching experience of the staff at the school ranged from zero years to over 30 years. Most of the teachers had between 10 and 20 years of teaching experience. Some of the teachers identified themselves as arts education subject specialists, either in terms of training or in terms of their interest in the subject. None of the teachers had taught at a centre of excellence before joining the staff at North Park Wilson.

Several of the teachers had chosen or had been selected to come to the school by the administrative team when the school was first established as a centre of excellence. Of the teachers who volunteered or were invited, most had either extensive experience or specialist training in at least one of the areas of arts education. Other staff were attracted to the school because of their own interest in the arts. The most recent additions to the staff were placed here for reasons that did not necessarily relate to arts education.

Most of the staff members interviewed were intrigued with the concept of using arts education as a strategy for instruction.

I guess I came to the understanding that arts isn't a separate thing and I kind of knew that. But because I've seen it in action – the integration of it with math and different areas – you can focus on that and see it makes it easier to plan units.

The definition of art here seemed to be vastly different than the definition of art in other places. I really didn't think twice, to tell you the truth, about adopting the mission statement. It's a given. It didn't occur to me to even question it.

Being a very traditional teacher, I'd never really looked at curriculum as a whole. I'd looked at individual ones. I'd never really thought about how you could use one of them to organize and view the rest. For example, what we do here is use arts curricula as a portal, a window to view and use other curriculum. It had never crossed my mind.

Almost all the staff were willing to try teaching through the arts.

I had to rethink my whole program....these are a different type of kid.

It's incidental, it certainly is planned, but I don't actually follow the program. I focus on the curriculum. Coming here when you ask me my perception, I always thought "I think I'm doing this already."

The staff were asked to share a specific time when the mission statement directed their approach to instruction.

Like I said, I try to use a lot of songs, for example, to teach vocabulary and language structures. I find that's really good for specifically things like verbs. It can be very boring to just copy them out and practice where I can use the arts to mix it up a little bit. There is, for example, how to conjugate an "er" verb. There's a song about that and it's funny

because I see my kids doing a test and I actually hear some of them humming the song. That kind of tells me it is going to stick more. That would be an example of how I tried to do that through the arts.

The more I do it and the more I'm comfortable with it, the more I'm likely to do it. We have a big theme – the construction theme – coming up. And we're all going to be on the same page. We will all rely on each other for resources.

Our ArtsSmart project highlighted the mission statement. It was good learning especially for unit planning. It had active engagement. It is easy to see the mission statement in action in language arts. It is harder in other areas like Math and Science.

As the conversations and interviews progressed, the researchers noticed that although every person had a perception about learning through the arts, no two people shared the same perception. Each person had a slightly different view of how learning through the arts should look. Because of this, staff members had different ideas about which of the activities at the school represented the mission statement of the school.

The mission statement is seen in action at ArtsSmart presentations.

The mission statement is seen in my room but I'm not sure if it's happening in other rooms.

You can see the mission statement in action in assemblies.

The perception of the kids is that all they do is art.

ArtsSmart and specialists lead to better understanding of arts education. I'm a doer, I'll read, but I'm a doer and I like to talk to someone who has experience and does things.

You've got a decision – do you want to be involved or not and to not be involved would go against our mission statement because being involved will give the kids an enriched opportunity.

It's not just meaning all the projects are going to be arts based and all of the outcomes are going to be arts based but you could have that. The teaching is going to involve more arts based strategies and instructional approaches.

Well, I think the mission statement fits with me and my direction towards instruction – I'm a visual oriented person – and I think a lot of children are.

One characteristic of the PLC model is its focus on achieving common goals. Staff members were asked to comment on what they saw as the common goals for the PLC at the school:

Collaboration should be a common goal. How do you get everyone to share?

There are stated ones and there are unstated ones. Stated goals would be to work together, to collaborate, to increase our common vocabulary words when speaking about the arts, to increase our skills, to support each other in making some of it happen, to enrich our students' academic lives....It's unstated that we're constantly changing and we should expect it to happen. We don't just reach one way and one sequence of units that's perfect for this grade level and that's how I'm going to teach until I'm done!

I definitely see the common goal as we want to provide the enriched learning environment for the kids through the arts.

A lot of attention is paid to the arts. We are always reminded that this is the direction we're to go.

Staff members were quite vocal on the strengths and challenges of the PLC:

I think one of the bigger challenges and I think we're overcoming it is just showing that collective vision. Getting everybody to have the same idea. I think that was a challenge...Energy is another thing. Sometimes the energy level for this PLC just isn't as high as you'd like it to be just because there's so much going on.

I hope some of the challenges will disappear simply because the renos will be done and we'll have the facilities like the art room. That's been a big, big challenge.

There is as much happening at this school as there is at a school like Lakeview.

We need team players. Some people are too territorial of subject area and materials. They teach behind closed doors.

The staff changes have had an effect on the PLC. We need consistency.

The PLC needs to welcome newcomers. Our expectations can be a problem.

People must respect staff differences. Some staff are more advanced than others.

Downtown needs to support this school with more appropriate staffing. The School of Excellence gets no special support but everyone likes the accolades.

If you're going to have a PLC, everyone needs to make an effort to try to be part of it.

To be honest, if it is really going to be good, there are staffing issues. The key point with staff is choice.

Successes and strengths of the PLC were seen in several ways:

The involvement of students is higher.

We have great community support.

The framework of the PLC is solid.

Yes, it's valuable. It's improved the school and it is certainly working for the community. We have lots of kids who love it and enjoy every day. Is it improving academics? We just don't have the tools to measure it.

Another measure of progress, a descriptive rubric (see Appendix E), was used to assess the comfort level of the teaching staff during the change process. This rubric was distributed to the teaching staff and each staff member had the opportunity to discuss the rubric with the administrative team at the school. The rubric was designed to assist staff members in reflecting on their implementation of the mission statement at the school and also allowed staff to analyze their needs in terms of professional development. Because the rubric had three levels of implementation outlined in it, the staff could choose where they saw themselves on the journey to full implementation of the mission statement. This self-assessment served as a check on progress for each staff member. It allowed the staff to critically examine their own progress and make targeted plans for continuing their work. The information from the rubric also allowed the professional development committee to more closely address the needs of the teaching staff when planning for ongoing professional development.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A professional learning community is a work in progress. It changes and adapts to changing circumstances without losing the focus of the work, which is to increase student learning and achievement. The staff at North Park Wilson School was successful in establishing a professional learning community.

One recommendation that the researchers have for the staff is to continue to work on strengthening their professional learning community by focusing more on collaboration and relationship building.

One of the challenges the North Park Wilson School professional learning community will face in the future is the changing nature of its staff. If the learning community is to continue, provisions will have to be made for its continuation regardless of the people in it. The professional learning community at North Park Wilson is in an interesting position. Its core belief was generated by the outside community, not only by the staff members themselves. For the professional learning community to continue there has to be continued work between the staff and the community members to reinforce that bond.

Staffing issues were raised as a concern by several participants in the study. Several participants felt it was necessary for teachers with special training or extensive experience in the arts to be involved in the professional learning community to assist those teachers on staff who were not as highly trained or experienced. Some participants felt that the total success of the initiative hinged on staffing the school with appropriate specialists and teachers enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the arts. Most of the staff saw staffing as a concern if the focus of the school was to remain the same.

The professional learning community at North Park Wilson School also identified the need for more research and more collaborative work into assessment for learning, especially in arts education. The staff recognized the need for good measures of success to help gauge the progress which was being made in the school. One of the core beliefs of the learning community was that arts education increases scores in measures of literacy and mathematics. The professional learning community will need to continue its work to prove that belief is well grounded in fact.

Establishing a professional learning community is exciting and stressful. For the staff at North Park Wilson School, the stress of working to establish a professional learning community was made worse by the renovations taking place at the school during this time. Activities that would have normally taken place, such as school wide themes and school wide arts projects, were postponed because of the renovations. The delays slowed the development of the professional learning community at the school.

At the beginning of the study, the researchers posed the question: Can a school be refocused by using a professional learning community model to implement change? What we have learned in our study of North Park Wilson School would support the conclusion that a school can be refocused in this way. A professional learning community can assist in implementing change by making the participants conscious of how to change – how to work together to achieve change – and by

uniting them in their focus on the best instruction for students. When teachers work together to implement change in a school, students benefit.

The newly renovated North Park Wilson School is a lovely place – and it is filled with evidence of student visual art work; the sounds of students involved in band and other music programs; the sounds and sights of students conversing and discussing in and out of role many topics in language arts, social studies and science. The staff obviously enjoy being there and, more importantly, so do the students. Perhaps the situation is best summed up by one teacher's observation:

I see happy kids, that's what I see. I see kids that seem to be so content no matter what. I think the kids here feel an ownership here and that they're not standing apart even though they are different...I see a good year's growth in children... I think because they've had that opportunity to present themselves in different ways that they're probably more confident kids.

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Appendix A:

Articles Used with Staff in Developing Professional Learning Communities

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Appendix B:

Journal Writing Questions

JOURNAL WRITING: GUIDED QUESTIONS (OR USE YOUR OWN)

1. Why does the PLC at NPW exist?
2. Why are we doing what we're doing?
3. What is it exactly that we expect our students to do?
4. What do we hope to become?
5. What motivates and energizes me during this process – the school?
6. How do we establish standards of excellence in our classrooms and throughout the school?
7. How must we behave in order to make a shared vision a reality?
8. What needs do I have in relationship to our PLC?
9. Do I know the research as well as I should and if not what do I need in order to feel comfortable with the whole ideas of PLC?
10. How will we collect data to know if we are being successful?
11. How do we measure student achievement?
12. What do I need to develop in order to contribute to the mission of our school?
13. What does a PLC at NPW look like, sound like, feel like?

Appendix C:

Parent Survey Form

NPW PLANNING FOR 2006 – 2007 PARENT SURVEY

During this current school year, our school focused on two major priorities for improvement: literacy and arts education. That doesn't mean that we weren't focused on other subjects and activities, but those two were our priorities. We constantly monitor the progress of our school plan as it unfolds. At the end of the year, it is beneficial for us to ask for feedback as we at the school adjust our plan for the next school year.

Several times during the school year we do share and discuss our plans with our Parent Council. We also try to keep everyone informed through our classroom and school newsletters. With this in mind we would like to now go to a wider audience and involve you, our parents and guardians, in the process. We would like you to support our improvement efforts by providing us with your thoughts and opinions about the focus on NPW. If you could take some time to complete the questions below and send them back to school by Tuesday, May 23, we would very much appreciate getting your feedback.

Please comment on the following:

1. The quantity and usefulness of the Literacy for Life information
2. The collection of the Just Read data (the titles and numbers of books read by each student at home)
3. The picture word induction model (PWIM)
4. Our Read to Succeed program
5. Our new band
6. Our arts education activities
7. Our ArtsSmart project
8. Anything else you would like us to know or consider

Appendix D:

Interview Questions for School Staff

THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR NORTH PARK WILSON

1. You will be asked to identify yourself in your career:
 - a. years of experience
 - b. identified specialty areas
 - c. previous school history
 - d. previous history with professional learning communities
2. How did you come to work at North Park Wilson? What perceptions did you have of the school before you got here?
3. What's been your experience in arts education as a teacher? Describe a time where you felt comfortable teaching arts education?
4. A mission statement for North Park Wilson has been adopted by the staff. It states:

“At NPW our learning community is dedicated to providing an enriched learning environment for all students through the arts.”

Tell me about a time when the mission statement directed your approach to instruction.

Tell me about a time when you felt the mission statement could be seen in action.
5. Part of belonging to a PLC is working in a collaborative way to achieve common goals. What do you see as the common goals of the PLC here at NPW?
6. Look at the PLC characteristics and supports
 - a. Could you comment on the challenges and strengths of the PLC here at NPW?
7. What learning experiences – print or professional development; formal or informal – have helped you in developing a better understanding of arts education?
8. What community supports have assisted you in developing your arts education focus?
9. Collaboration strictly means working with each other. What have been your most successful collaborations here at North Park Wilson? What did these collaborations look like?

Appendix E:

Rubric for Developing and Assessing Classroom Arts Education Practice

<p>Foundational Goals and School-based Outcomes</p> <p>The desired changes we are striving for:</p>	<p>MAXIMUM EFFECT</p> <p>3</p>	<p>MODERATE EFFECT</p> <p>2</p>	<p>MINIMUM EFFECT</p> <p>1</p>
<p>All teachers will understand the mission of the school and the philosophy of the Saskatchewan Arts Education Curriculum.</p>	<p>Teacher consistently and deliberately uses the mission of the school and the philosophy of the Saskatchewan Arts Curriculum as a foundation as a basis for student learning.</p>	<p>The teacher often makes an attempt to use the school mission and the Arts Education philosophy as a basis for his/her planning for students.</p>	<p>The teacher occasionally takes the mission of the school into consideration when planning for instruction. Teacher rarely used the Arts Education Curriculum Guide to guide lesson planning.</p>
<p>All teachers will have read extensively in the area of arts education and be familiar with the current research in this area in order to apply this understanding to practice.</p>	<p>Teacher consistently and deliberately searches out the current research in the arts education area in order to expand knowledge and improve the quality of instruction in the classroom.</p>	<p>The teacher often reads the research available in the arts education area and combines it with knowledge teacher has used in the past.</p>	<p>The teacher occasionally reads the research given out by the school administration but rarely makes changes in practice.</p>
<p>All teachers will work collaboratively with each other and make use of community resources in the arts area.</p>	<p>Teacher consistently and deliberately books time with colleagues to plan and work collaboratively. Teacher makes use of staff meeting and PD days to share resources and expertise. Teacher plans for and uses community resources to enhance student learning.</p>	<p>Teacher will often share his or her expertise with colleagues and will often look for and make use of community resources to enhance student learning.</p>	<p>The teacher will occasionally plan collaboratively and sometimes make use of community resources if available but rarely seeks them out.</p>
<p>All teachers will infuse arts education into other subject areas.</p>	<p>Teacher consistently and deliberately infuses the arts into daily life in the classroom and across the curriculum. Looks for connections on a consistent basis.</p>	<p>Teacher often infuses the arts into the daily curriculum when connections are obvious.</p>	<p>Teacher rarely infuses arts education with other subjects and keeps the arts education as a separate subject.</p>

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