What are Learning Action Communities?
Professional Learning Communities are a recognized education practice in which teachers work collaboratively toward a shared vision and hold themselves accountable for results. We have chosen to call our communities Learning Action Communities, as each word holds an important meaning:

- **Learning**, because only by becoming learning organizations can we best adapt our strategies to meet the diverse needs of our students.
- **Action**, because we will put this learning into action in our school.
- **Community**, because we will do this collaboratively and will build our school into a learning community with a shared vision and shared responsibility for the success of our youth.

How are Learning Action Communities different from teams?
Teams are a group of individuals who are connected by a common goal or product that is limited in scope. Teams are defined by that goal and only that goal and thus are temporary and often exclusive. Communities are enduring, inclusive and go beyond the duration of the specific members. Communities define a culture, which members help to form and in which they are invested. Like teams, Learning Action Communities are also focused on a common goal but that goal is learning in order to improve the broader community.

What characterizes effective Learning Action Communities?
**Goal-oriented:** Learning Action Communities are focused on shared measurable, worthwhile goals as steps toward a vision. They are passionate about the questions they are investigating, and members consistently celebrate and communicate goals and results throughout the school.

**Evidence-based shared practice and accountability:** Learning Action Communities develop and use shared data systems with multiple measures of professional development and support. These may include examining student work samples, looking at particular students as case studies, conducting student surveys or focus groups or observing students. They also welcome opposing view points, because they realize that diverse viewpoints are important to developing the most effective strategies. Skeptics often have important views that when considered, will drive the group to invent a stronger solution.

**Persistent Learners:** Learning Action Communities are focused on schools as places of learning instead of places of teaching. Everyone in the school community is learning together. Learning is collaborative and focused on student improvement. Since the goal is on student improvement, persistence is required to find what will result in that improvement. Learning Action Communities welcome and thrive on different perspectives and are most effective when they are composed of members who have very different perspectives. They also recognize where they need more external support and seek it out. They learn from different disciplines and situations such as industry or other schools.
Contextualized Learners: Learning is grounded in student learning/ experience with the particular students at the Learning Action Communities’ particular school. Learning is based on a commonly felt need in members’ particular schools and strategies are tested in those situations.

Collaborative and connected to the larger school learning community: professional learning community members share responsibility for the success of every student. As such, they communicate and model the priority of collaboration to improve student success and they share information and learning throughout the school. Their practice is deprivatized so that all can benefit from learning from each other.

Supported by school and district leadership: Simply encouraging educators to collaborate will not result in collaboration. Learning Action Communities are most successful when leadership is actively supportive and is willing to adjust structures to facilitate learning community activities.

When Learning Action Communities are used as a tool of school improvement, they are also:

Role models: Members exhibit behaviors that match the values aligned with the vision. They are also inclusive, sharing and connecting their learnings throughout the school and inviting participation from any and all school community members.

Transformational leaders: Leadership is shared and distributed throughout the school, and members work in concert with school administrators to influence/change school climate/structures/processes to support an entire school that operates as a learning community.
How do Learning Action Communities operate?
Effective Learning Action Communities are "relentlessly testing the status quo, seeking new methods, testing those methods and then reflecting on those results." Learning Action Communities often use protocols and overarching processes that drive their work together, help provide focus for their work and help meetings to be productive. A popular overarching process is “cycle of inquiry” which can vary, but basically involves three core steps:

1. **Describing the current situation.** Professional learning community members publicly reflect together on the current state of affairs around their focus question. They come to shared meaning as a group in terms of what they mean by terms such as “respect” or “equity.” They discuss questions such as, “What does respect look like?” and “How do we know when respect is happening?” Then they ask, “What evidence do we have so far? How else can we collect data?”

2. **Trying new strategies:** When evidence has been collected, members look at this evidence and talk about what they might try. They share strategy ideas with each other and they also seek additional ideas externally through books, articles, workshops, observations or other resources. The community then designs action steps to test their shared insights and try some things out independently. They will also collect data to help assess the results of their experiment.

3. **Reflecting on results:** After trying some new strategies out, communities jointly reflect on the results of their experiment. By using the same data collection methods, they can also compare their results with each other and discuss possible causes of discrepancies. Based on their results, they generate new ideas for strategies of things to try and repeat the cycle.

4. **Share Out** Because Learning Action Communities are focused on building community across the school and on learning from each other, they periodically share their findings with other Learning Action Communities and with the whole school.

**Action Research** is a similar overarching process that can be used. The stages of this process are:

1. Brainstorm issues of concern
2. Define questions to explore based on these issues
3. Decide how evidence will be collected to answer these questions
4. Identify three ways that the data will be collected to triangulate data results
5. Discuss what the data means
6. Determine next steps and additional questions
7. Share results publicly

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What are the characteristics of individuals in effective Learning Action Communities?

**Good listeners:** Individuals are open to considering different ideas from their own, and the group is small enough to allow the group to take risks that can change ideas/beliefs.

**Reflective:** Individuals are willing to look critically at their own practices and change them to meet the changing needs of diverse students.

**Skeptical without being cynical:** Individuals question and critically examine methods withholding judgment until they have valid data to support it. They use professional, evidence-based critique instead of personal bias/opinion.

**Scientists:** Individuals are curious observers in wonder of the world without imposing judgment. They assume good intentions in others and pose questions such as “How is it that he is experiencing school that makes him act this way?” or “What do students think about this?” They are willing to experiment, take risks and to fail and they meet this failure with persistence to keep trying until they find something that works.

**Persistent through ambiguity:** The change process is unpredictable and has it’s ups and downs. Individuals who learn to be persistent and optimistic during ambiguity and to help others to maintain perspective during these times help the whole school community to effectively grow.
Works Cited


