

**ORGANIZING FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES:
EMBEDDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING DURING THE SCHOOL DAY**

[Kristen Ferguson](#), *Nipissing University*

This case study presents the struggles faced by a school administration in implementing a professional learning community (PLC) initiative without additional funds earmarked for implementation. In this case, Emily, the principal of Bayside Public School, creates a Buddy Day system for students that provides teachers with time during the school day to meet for PLCs; however, tensions among the principals, teachers, parents, and union guidelines arise. The teaching notes section explores other readings about professional development, the viewpoints of the various stakeholders in the case, and provincial documents about the implementation of PLCs.

Case Narrative

Bayside Elementary School

Bayside Elementary School is one of the largest elementary schools in a rural school board in Canada. It serves an amalgamation of communities of approximately 10,000 residents whose primary industries are agriculture and forestry. Bayside is a medium-large junior kindergarten to Grade 8 school. Bayside has special programming for students with behavior needs, autism, and also has a special education workplace skills program for the intermediate grades. It is also labeled a dual track school because of its French Immersion program. The students who attend Bayside come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and are mostly English-speaking of White European descent; Bayside also has a small but significant population

of First Nations students. It has 32 teachers, 12 educational assistants, a literacy coach, a vice-principal, and a principal. Most teachers are active within the teachers' union and teacher support for the union's guidelines and actions is high. Bayside also has an active and influential parent council, generally scores well on the province's standardized test, and receives no extra funding from outside the school board. Other schools in neighboring communities do not fare as well on the provinces' standardized tests and have received extra funding, such as monies from the Ministry of Education and from the Council Directors of Education, to help improve their scores.

Emily, the principal at Bayside, is an experienced teacher with more than five years of school administration experience but is new to Bayside this year. Emily had worked with some of Bayside's teachers as a peer when she was a teacher, including Grace, Bayside's literacy coach. Melissa has been the vice-principal of Bayside for two years. Before becoming a vice-principal, Melissa was a literacy coach at a neighboring school.

Implementing Embedded Professional Learning

Emily believes that professional learning is very important for teachers. She also believes that she too has much to learn and that she is not an expert in all curricular areas. Emily was eager to work with Grace to implement professional learning communities (PLCs) when she first arrived at Bayside. A PLC is a group meeting of educators who, as a collective, use inquiry and data to enhance student learning while at the same time increasing teacher knowledge and learning (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007). Because Bayside is a medium-large school, Emily, Melissa, and Grace decided together that PLCs should be conducted by division level, meaning the primary teachers (kindergarten to Grade 3) meet together and the junior and intermediate teachers meet together (Grades 4 to 8). Emily wanted to align her school's

improvement goals to those goals encouraged by the school board and thus decided that all PLCs for the year would focus on literacy. In order to address the dual purposes of PLCs (teacher learning and improved student achievement), Emily worked with Grace to develop two distinct types of PLCs: assessment PLCs and instructional PLCs.

Assessment PLCs take place every two weeks, are a half an hour in length, and always occur after school. Teachers are assigned dates throughout the school year when it is their turn to present students to the assessment PLC group. On this date, teachers are asked to select one or two students who are having difficulty in the area of literacy. At the PLC, the teacher shares his or her concern about the student and presents that student's achievement data to the group. The PLC group then gives that teacher ideas and suggestions about how student achievement could be increased. At the next assessment PLC two weeks later, the teacher shares how the student is doing, which strategies worked or did not work, and any further assessment data on that student. Grace, the literacy coach, attends all the assessment PLCs. Emily makes an attempt to go to the primary-level assessment PLCs and Melissa to attend the junior/intermediate assessment PLCs. However, many days Emily is torn between being a member of the PLC and her duties as a principal. Emily ends up missing a number of PLCs because she is dealing with issues from parents and students after school. Some teachers find attending assessment PLCs to be an added burden on an already busy to-do list at the end of a school day. As soon as the allotted time for the PLC is up, these teachers leave immediately. Other teachers stay behind and chat about student concerns and teaching issues after the formal PLC is over. A number of teachers feel that the assessment PLCs are too structured and forced, while others find it helpful for their teaching.

The purpose of instructional PLCs is to increase teacher knowledge. Instructional PLCs occur during the school day and usually last one teaching block (100 minutes). Bayside teachers

have one instructional PLC every month. Emily works with Grace to create the instructional PLC agenda. This year, Emily and Grace decided that the school should focus on reading comprehension strategies such as inferencing, questioning, and synthesizing (Miller, 2002). Grace usually presents teachers with information about the comprehension strategy using a powerpoint, then they spend much of the PLC discussing how they could teach this strategy. Emily makes it a priority to attend instructional PLCs but often student issues pull Emily out of PLC meetings.

Unlike other schools in the area, Bayside receives no additional funding from the Ministry of Education to hire supply teachers to cover classes for PLCs. The school board also provides no additional funds for the implementation of PLCs. Yet the Ministry of Education encourages PLCs and the school board has informally mandated them. Because instructional PLCs occur during the school day, Emily had to be creative to find a way to release teachers from their classroom duties and thus she created a “Buddy Day” system. For Buddy Day, the junior/intermediate classes buddy up with a primary classroom and rotate through a series of stations (see Appendix A). Each student in the school has an older or younger buddy with whom they spend the day. For instance, each Grade 8 student has an assigned buddy in Grade 2. During the Buddy Day, a junior/intermediate teacher supervises both his or her own class and a primary class while the primary teacher attends the PLC. In the next teaching block, the teachers switch roles, and the junior/intermediate teacher attends the PLC while the primary teacher supervises both classes. The primary and the junior/intermediate teachers take turns organizing the different station activities for the students: one month the primary teacher organizes the station and the next month it is the junior/intermediate teacher’s job, and back and forth the duty goes.

While Buddy Day is a cost-free way to free up teachers to meet for PLCs, it is also causing problems. After a few months using the Buddy Day system, teachers started to talk amongst each other about the difficulty of supervising 40 students at a time, feeling that it was “chaotic” and “overwhelming.” Many teachers also believed that organizing a station was an extra burden and too much work. Some teachers felt that it was unrealistic to ask teachers to do the extra work for a Buddy Day when they were already staying late after school two days per month for assessment PLCs. Emily was aware of the teacher grumbling about Buddy Day. One of the teachers, who is also her friend, explained to Emily, “it works when you’re in the meeting, but not so much when you’re in the classroom with the kids.” Emily also saw that the stress of Buddy Day system was taking a toll on teachers. She noticed when the PLC begins, it takes teachers about a half an hour to relax and begin to participate in the meeting.

Emily has also received a call from the head of the teachers’ union. The union has concerns about teacher workload and the adequate supervision of students. In addition, the union has brought forth complaints from members that attending the PLCs took away their scheduled preparation time. Personally, both Emily and Melissa did not agree with this thinking since they see the PLC as a form of preparation: “You are looking at student work and planning for teaching. . . . How is that not prep?” However, not wanting to break any union guidelines, Emily took action and ensured that when supervising the Buddy Day groups, a preparation teacher would circulate and release teachers for their preparation time. However, this meant that the music teacher and the core French teacher could not participate in the instructional PLC. Emily was not able to find a solution to the issue of supervising large groups of students, and the Buddy Day groups remain at approximately 40 students each. Emily is frustrated with the union because

the union wants all professional development to occur during the school day and the Buddy Day system, despite its flaws, does that.

Emily is also fielding complaints from some parents about Buddy Day. Some parents feel that it is a waste of time, believe that no curriculum is being taught, and have thus decided to keep their children home on Buddy Days. However, Emily also is receiving some positive feedback from parents who have stated that their children enjoy Buddy Day and that it creates school spirit. Emily feels that it truly is building community and empathy in the school. Emily is steadfast to parents in regards to Buddy Day, believing that Buddy Day has positive psychosocial benefits for students. She tells parents that if they want to keep their children home, that is their choice.

Emily wants to be a proactive leader and take suggestions from teachers about Buddy Day. Towards this end, she adds an item to a staff meeting agenda that calls for an open discussion about Buddy Day. After some prodding from Emily and Melissa, teachers open up regarding their perceptions of Buddy Day. Despite their dislike for Buddy Day, most teachers do like meeting as a group. One teacher explains, “I don’t like Buddy Day, but I like the information.” Another teacher says, “I like the theory behind Buddy Day. I love the fact we get together.” Emily then asks teachers for suggestions to help make Buddy Day work better or for suggestions for a new system that would free up teachers for PLCs. Although many teachers do not like Buddy Day, no teachers have other alternatives. Some teachers feel the chaos of Buddy Day was “worth the trade-off” for teachers to meet together for a PLC.

After the meeting, Emily meets with Melissa and Grace. Grace feels that Buddy Day is a feasible and sustainable practice. Melissa believes that since Buddy Day is new, teachers are just getting used to it and, like any change, it will take time to adopt, and there will be a period of

unease. Emily strongly believes in the purpose and benefits of PLCs. However, she is frustrated with various stakeholder groups: the union wants all PLCs during the school day with no extra work for teachers; the Ministry of Education and the school board expect PLCs but do not provide financial support for supply teachers; and some parents and teachers do not like the proposed solution of Buddy Days.

Emily reflects on the past few months and the business surrounding PLCs. Her head feels like it is swelling with all of her thoughts. She wonders, “Are the PLCs truly collegial learning opportunities or am I merely enforcing the implementation of a ministry initiative? Are we having PLCs just so I can tell the higher administration we are? Have I been too controlling over the PLCs process?” Emily sighs and thinks to herself, “perhaps the union is right; the way I’ve designed PLCs both during and after school might be a significant burden to teachers. These teachers are so hardworking and are already so busy as it is. I know they feel overworked and stretched. Worse, since PLCs have been mandated and they are quite structured, maybe teachers aren’t learning anything through PLCs, and maybe they are just going through the motions. I also feel like I can’t contribute that much since I am so busy that I get pulled out of the PLCs. And I can see where the union and the parents are coming from. If I’m truly honest with myself, I’m not sure how much students are learning on Buddy Days and whether they are being adequately supervised. I don’t think I would want to run a Buddy Day station.” Emily knows she must continue with the PLCs because the ministry and the school board have given her directives, but she is unsure about what she should do next.

Teaching Notes

Emily, Melissa, and Grace recognize that teacher professional development is crucial to improving student achievement, a belief that is supported by research. Darling-Hammond's (2000) research shows that the most consistent and highly significant predictor of student achievement in reading and mathematics is the proportion of well-qualified teachers. It is also well noted in the research that traditional forms of professional development where experts present a one-time workshop are ineffective (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Fullan, 1995; Hawley & Valli, 2000; Joyce & Showers, 2002). The research on the qualities of effective professional development is voluminous, but there is a general consensus that effective professional development needs to involve active learning for teachers, be sustained and on-going, integrated with school-improvement plans, collaborative, and job-embedded (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2011). Professional learning communities at Bayside School meet these requirements, as teachers work collaboratively as a team to improve student learning using student achievement data (Dufour, 2004). While Emily is unsure about the future of the Buddy Day system, as a leader, her support of teacher professional development is well grounded in the research literature. Robinson, Hohepa, and Llyod (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 134 studies throughout the world exploring the links between school administrative leadership, teacher learning, and student achievement. They report that the leadership dimension of "promoting and participating in teacher learning and development" far surpassed the impact of other dimensions of leadership on student outcomes (Robinson, Hohepa, & Llyod, 2009, p. 39).

A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a group of educational professionals who come together to work collaboratively with the ultimate goal of improving

student achievement. According to DuFour (2004), in a PLC, educators engage in on-going dialogue and questioning about teaching and learning. Engaging in meaningful collaborative conversations encourages deep professional learning, and this teacher learning may result in higher levels of student achievement (Dufour, 2004). Emily, the protagonist of this case, tries to be an instructor leader in her school alongside the vice-principal, Melissa, and the literacy coach, Grace. In his research on PLCs in Manitoba, Cranston (2011) finds that school principals are key in building trust in a PLC, and that PLCs cannot be successful without mutual trust of all parties involved. Emily wants to be involved as possible in PLCs but often gets torn from PLCs to deal with other administrative issues at Bayside. Like Bayside, many schools across Canada are now actively engaging in PLCs. But it is questionable whether in practice and as presented in this case, if PLCs are truly a teacher-driven collaborative learning experience, as ideally described in the literature, or if in actuality, PLCs play out as another top-down method of controlling teachers and implementing reform initiatives. For instance, Tarnoczi (2006) reflects on PLCs in Alberta and proposes that PLCs can be viewed as a way of controlling teaching to use normalized teaching practices. Servage (2009) also challenges the notion that PLCs are professional in nature and argues that PLCs can limit teachers' professionalism, including teacher knowledge and critical perspectives on teaching and learning.

This case study has been adapted from research conducted about professional learning in Canada, specifically the relationships among teachers, principals, and literacy coaches. It reflects a quandary that many administrators face in implementing current government educational initiatives, as well as the practical issues and tensions that the implementation of initiatives can create among the different stakeholder groups. Many of the dilemmas in the case could be solved simply with financial support from the school board or the ministry. However,

this case illustrates the reality of shrinking budgets at school board level, as well as the issues of school funding at the ministry level (where schools that tend to do well on provincial standardized tests generally receive little or no monies). To summarize, the case illustrates the following issues: the challenge of implementing initiatives driven by the Ministry of Education without sufficient funding from the province or school board; supporting teacher professional development in a context of increasingly intensifying teacher workload; teacher-driven vs. top down school initiatives; creative school-level scheduling to provide release teacher time; improving student achievement at a high achieving school without additional funding; and leading a school amidst the broader political tensions between teachers' unions and senior administration.

This case could be used for those educators taking principal preparation programs, supervisory officer training, or those taking other professional leadership training programs, such as literacy coach training. This case study would also be useful for graduate-level courses in leadership, administration, or professional development. The activities that follow were created to allow students to consider the dilemmas within the case as well as the perspectives of the various stakeholder groups in the case (the administration, teachers, the union, parents, and students). The activities also provide students with opportunity to reflect on the situation and consider the various possible next steps for the school administration in the case. The activities can be modified or adapted by instructors to best suit the needs of the students.

Activity 1: Discussion

Small group. In small groups, the students will use the “Save the Last Word for Me” discussion strategy (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Vaughn & Estes, 1986). The purpose of this

activity is to have students identify and consider some of the dilemmas within the case. In this strategy, each student selects a quotation from the case that they find poignant, thought provoking, interesting, or questionable. For this case study activity, the instructor should encourage students to select quotations that illustrate a tension, issue, dilemma, or problem within the case. Possible dilemmas include (but are not limited to): adequate supervision of students, union issues, upset parents and teachers, teacher change, and lack of funds for supply teachers but an expectation of having PLCs. The student then writes out the quotation that illustrates a dilemma, followed by a paragraph reflecting on why the quotation stood out to them and on the tension the quotation illustrates. The instructor can ask students to do this for one quotation or as many as is preferred by the instructor (the more quotations, the longer the small group discussion will be). The instructor should have the students read the case study and create their Save the Last Word for Me quotations and paragraphs before class. Once in class, students should be separated into groups of four. One person will read his or her quotation to the small group then the others in the group will each take a turn responding to the quotation and reflecting on its meaning within the case. After the three group members have each spoken, the student who initially selected the quotation will read the paragraph he or she wrote ahead of time about the significance of the quotation, essentially having the “last word” on the topic. Each student in the group then follows suit, and each person will have a turn having the last word. After the small group strategy, the instructor should bring the class together as a whole class for a debrief session. The instructor should have the groups share the dilemmas discussed during the Save the Last Word for Me activity.

Whole-class discussion. This whole class discussion will provide students the opportunity to think about the case within the context of the research on teacher learning and

professional learning communities. This activity involves students reading three research articles related to the themes presented in the case. Because of this additional reading, this activity is suggested if the instructor is using the case for more than one class period. The instructor should ask students to read Darling-Hammond and Richardson's (2009) research review on effective professional development and PLCs, Lujan and Day's (2010) article about the obstacles for PLCs, and Servage's (2009) article critiquing PLCs.

The following questions can be used to guide a class discussion about professional learning:

1. Why is traditional professional development (one-time workshops presented by experts) ineffective? How do PLCs have the potential to meet the criteria of effective professional development?
2. How can administrators help remove the barriers to PLCs? What is the administration's role in a PLC?
3. What does the "professional" in a professional learning community mean? How can PLCs deprofessionalize teachers? What can administrators do to help PLCs be teacher-driven professional learning rather than top-down forced collegiality?

Activity 2: The Stakeholders

To ask students to weigh the pros and cons of the Buddy Day system through the perspectives of the different stakeholder groups within the case; there are two possible activities presented below. For the first stakeholder activity, the instructor should separate the students into small groups (five or six students). As a small group, students will work together to complete a table on chart paper that lists the pros and cons that the Buddy Day system has for each of the following stakeholder groups: the Ministry of Education and the school board; the school administration (principal and vice-principal); Bayside's teachers; parents and students; and the union. Once completed, each group will post its chart on the wall and will orally share the items

on the chart to the class. Once all the groups have shared their charts, the teacher should ask the following questions to the whole class as consolidation of learning:

1. Who has the most to gain with the Buddy Day system?
2. Who has the least to gain with the Buddy Day system?
3. Knowing both the pros and cons, explain whether or not you believe Buddy Day is worthwhile.

Alternatively, a drama activity could be used to explore the perspectives of the different stakeholders. For this activity, the instructor should divide the class into five groups (one group for each stakeholder) and each group would be assigned to assume the role of people in their stakeholder group. The class would then participate in a large group “improv” drama, a school meeting, wherein the groups present their opinions about Buddy Day. After each group has presented their viewpoint, the drama continues with groups making commentaries to each other and asking the other stakeholder groups questions about their viewpoints. At the end of the allotted time for the drama, the instructor should debrief with the class and ask students if participating in the drama changed their own personal opinion about Buddy Day and what they think Emily should do next. As an extension for either stakeholder activity, the instructor should ask students to write a memo, as if they were Emily, to one of the stakeholder groups, explaining her rationale for the continuation or discontinuation of Buddy Day.

Activity 3: The Bigger Picture

The case study presents the specific situation of implementing PLCs at the school level. This activity expands upon the micro view presented in the case, to the macro views of the Ministry of Education and the teachers’ union. The students should read the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007) document that endorses PLCs, entitled, “Professional Learning Communities: A Model for Ontario Schools” and Elementary Teachers’

Federation of Ontario's (n.d.) advisory document for members, "Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)." The instructor should have the class discuss the following questions in small groups, as a whole class, or have students write their responses as an assignment.

1. Compare and contrast how the two documents define and describe PLCs.
2. How can schools implement PLCs as outlined by the Ministry given the conditions presented by ETFO?
3. How does the role of the school administration in PLCs differ between the Ministry of Education's document and in ETFO's document (which only implies a role)?
4. How do these macro or "big picture documents" impact the micro level, i.e. the case at Bayside?

If the instructor prefers, he or she can use one of the documents about PLCs from unions and governments from different regions of Canada listed in Appendix B. While not an exhaustive list representing all provinces or territories, the resources listed in Appendix B may be useful in comparing or grounding the case study in policy and procedures from different areas of Canada.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the benefits and drawbacks to professional learning taking place during the school day? After the school day?
2. What are the barriers to PLCs? How have you as an administrator addressed similar barriers in your schools?
3. How would you as an administrator approach implementing PLCs in your school?

Additional Suggested Reading

- Dufour (2004), "What is a 'professional learning community'?" This article succinctly describes the concept of what PLC is, and Dufour (2004) explains three big ideas for PLCs in practice: ensuring that all students learn, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results.
- Cranston (2011), "Relational trust: The Glue That Binds a Professional Learning community." In this study, Cranston (2011) researches issues of trust

and discourse between teachers and administrators during professional learning communities. Cranston explores the role of leadership in PLCs and finds that principals play an important role in establishing relational trust, and this trust is required for the growth of a PLC.

- Grierson and Woloshyn (2005), “Transforming Literacy Assessment Practices Through an Action Research Professional Learning Community.” This study is about the effectiveness of using professional learning communities in an Ontario setting. They report on a two-year study of teachers using the PLC model to implement a new literacy assessment initiative. Teachers successfully adopted the new literacy assessment and teachers’ perceptions reveal that PLCs were pivotal in implementation.

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Appendix A:

Buddy Day Schedule

Location	Station Description	Teacher Responsible for Station	9:05– 9:35	9:35– 10:05	10:05– 10:35
Grade 1 & 2 Rooms	Writing Buddies —Teacher reads a story and has the students do a response of writing and a picture. The older buddies take the lead role in scribing response.		Gr. 8 & 2	Gr. 6 & SK	Fr. 7 & 3
Gym	Centres or Sport --(depending on the age of the participants). Teacher may wish to set up 4 stations and have the younger grades rotate through with their older buddies		Gr. 7 & 3		Gr. 4 & JK
Computer Room	Computer Buddies —Younger students buddy up with their older buddies to play on pre-selected websites, Story Book Weaver, etc.		Gr. 5 & 1	Gr. 8 & 2	Gr. 6 & SK
Grade 4 and IB Room	Math Buddies —Teacher along with Math Lead plans a Math Activity that the older buddies can assist their younger buddies on.		Gr. 6 & SK	Gr. 7 & 3	
Library	Reading Buddies —Using the Home-to-School books in the Book Nook of the Library.		Gr. 4 & JK	Gr. 5 & 1	Gr. 8 & 2
Music Room	Karaoke			Gr. 4 & JK	Gr. 5 & 1

Appendix B:

Resources on PLCs From Different Canadian Contexts

- Alberta's Commission on Learning. (2003). Recommendation 13: Developing professional learning communities. In *Every child learns, every child succeeds: Report and recommendations* (pp. 65–66). Edmonton: author.
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