Learning Communities

This week I had the pleasure to read an in-depth report on a project that I had worked on for several years.
Building a Learning Community: A Tale of Two Schools by Dan Mindich and Ann Lieberman was recently published by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education and Learningforward.
The report examines the NJ State Department's Professional Learning Community project conducted with 33 lab schools and includes an extensive examination of the implementation and results in two case study schools.
In 2010, I facilitated the NJ Professional Teaching Standards Board which produced state policy for school-based professional development plans. The guidelines suggested, but did not mandate, professional leaning communities (PLCs). To support the process, statewide trainings were held for members of school-based planning teams. I was privileged to conduct those one day sessions which included the value of PLCs.
To extend the support 33 school teams were selected to receive training and coaching for PLC implementation. I developed and conducted several of those training sessions.
I believe the report has lots to offer school leaders:
The following are some key findings of the conditions that can challenge and support the success of PLCs:
• *Positive staff relations can help create the base for PLCs, but they can also create a sense that further collaborative work is not needed.*
• *In addition to training, time is an important support for collaborative activities, yet its allocation can cause inequity and resentment.*
• *Norms and goal-setting procedures seem to keep groups focused despite some teachers' distaste for the restrictions they create.*
• *Interdependent work seems to deepen practice, and use of data gives focus to teachers' work, yet data can also narrow the scope of teaching.*
• *Principals appear to play a vital role in making this work happen on a school-wide basis even when they are learners themselves.*
• *Principals need conviction to push their staffs to take on*

this effort, but they also need the flexibility to support and adjust the processes where necessary.

• *Teachers are understandably protective of their time, but many appreciate the space created by required PLC meetings to discuss their work.*

• *Leaders (and teachers) need to have the patience to allow the PLC process to develop despite a "results now" climate in American education.*

The study concludes with this thought*:*

"Professional learning communities have the potential to change the culture of teaching and leadership in schools. These two cases begin to show the complicated, yet promising process of change. Countries all over the world are struggling to change schools to meet 21st century demands. Perhaps PLCs will provide the kind of school culture that can promote and support the changes that will be necessary."