

# Leadership for Literacy Grant, 2002

## EVALUATION REPORT

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*Summer 2002*

*Prepared for Independent School District 622  
by Timothy Sheldon and Kyla Wahlstrom, University of Minnesota*

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*Prepared for Independent School District 622  
by Dr. Kyla Wahlstrom and Timothy Sheldon*

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### **DISTRICT GOALS AND EVALUATION GOALS FOR 2002**

The Leadership for Literacy Grant, competitively awarded to School District 622, has had a goal of building leadership for literacy through the design and implementation of professional learning communities. Grant resources provided for a set of activities, which were designed to foster a collaborative culture in the district among teachers and staff.

The objective of the CAREI research team was two-fold:

- To determine the extent to which grant activities promoted professional learning communities and,
- To identify strengths and weaknesses of these activities from the perspective of the participants.

The evaluation was conducted from the mid-point to the conclusion of the initial year of work (2002). The evaluation team looked for evidence of sustainability based upon the responses of the grant participants interviewed. The complete report describes the activities conducted by the CAREI team for the evaluative portion of this grant.

#### **OVERARCHING THEMES RELATED TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

These five themes, listed in no particular order, emerge from the literature and are consistently cited as important considerations in efforts to develop and sustain professional learning communities:

- The capacity and commitment of the leadership to link the mission to specific visible actions
- The existence of shared meaning and shared decision making among staff and administration
- Evidence that observable outcomes are embedded in ongoing teacher practice
- Professional development activities that are grounded in adult learning
- The ability to tailor professional development activities to individuals

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTIVITIES

The following conclusions and recommendations are derived from all sources in the data collection process—focus group interviews, telephone interviews, observation of workshops, and meetings with grant administrators. They are “mapped” against what we know from the literature about successful professional learning communities, and intended to be a guide for what the district may choose to take as the next steps.

### CONCLUSIONS

- The district has done a good job of selecting a few goals that are connected to the district’s overall mission.
- The district has a divide separating teachers from school and district administrators.
- Participants resoundingly supported the continuation of lectures offered such as DuFour, Hargreaves and Serafini.
- Participants feel unprepared to lead groups and professional learning communities.
- Participants value this district effort. They believe in its method and would like to see the initiative expanded. Still, they remain anxious about the district’s ability to continue the activities.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

*For district leaders—*

- District needs to stay-the-course in developing professional learning communities, keeping in mind DuFour’s recommendation of a few simple goals.
- Clarify whether the initiative is to develop and advance professional learning communities or an attempt to focus on specific topical areas.
- Continue to provide conferences, workshops or lectures from educational leaders.
- Expand the program to include more teachers.
- Clarify funding sources for the initiative.
- Provide additional opportunities and encourage teachers to participate in activities that offer group facilitation skills and leadership training.
- Overtly praise teacher involvement.

*For planners—*

- Attempt to mitigate any power differential through the formation of teacher and administrator site teams at the outset.
- Spend some initial pre-work time with principals to ensure they are on board.
- Ensure that there are multiple opportunities for cross-building interaction.
- Make certain that teams are a combination of principals and teachers, not teachers or administrators alone.
- Provide some ground rules (expectations) to the professional learning community participants to allay the hesitation of some teachers to join in.
- Foster teacher buy-in through the solicitation of their input, with grassroots decision making at sites, and with ongoing evaluation of the initiative by them as participants.

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### **DISTRICT GOALS AND EVALUATION GOALS FOR 2002**

The Leadership for Literacy Grant, competitively awarded to School District 622, has had a goal of building leadership for literacy through the design and implementation of professional learning communities. Grant resources provided for a set of activities, which were designed to foster a collaborative culture in the district among teachers and staff. Over the course of the year, the Leadership for Literacy grant provided funds for meetings, study groups and conferences, with the objective of creating cadres of individuals in the district, across all disciplines that were committed to learning together<sup>1</sup>. The Center for Applied Research for Educational Improvement (CAREI) in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota was identified in the grant proposal as the external evaluator for the project.

The purpose of any formative evaluation is to provide information about past or present activities with the goal of either maintaining the current course of programming or, when necessary, altering the course for improvement or correction, thereby ensuring that anticipated outcomes are achieved. The objective of the CAREI research team was two-fold:

- To determine the extent to which grant activities promoted professional learning communities and,
- To identify strengths and weaknesses of these activities from the perspective of the participants.

The evaluation was conducted from the mid-point to the conclusion of the initial year of work (2002). The evaluation team looked for evidence of sustainability based upon the responses of the grant participants interviewed.

This report describes the activities conducted by the CAREI team for the evaluative portion of this grant. The report also summarizes the perspectives of a broad sampling of the grant participants and synthesizes these opinions in the Discussion section of the report. The final portion of the report is reserved for recommendations of the CAREI team in the event that additional activities are planned in the district in this area.

### **OVERVIEW OF EVALUATION ACTIVITIES**

The CAREI team met with district leaders at the outset of CAREI's involvement in order to develop the evaluators' scope of work (a detailed version of the Scope of Work is included as Appendix D in this report). Since January 2002, regular conversations were held among district

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the grant proposal, p. 13

leaders, the CAREI team and grant participants. The evaluators also attended several planned grant activities during and after which informal conversations were held with district leaders and participants.

The project evaluation consisted of these five key activities.

- Activity 1*      *Scan relevant literature and align with work of DuFour and Schmoker*
- Activity 2*      *Identification of a core set of outcomes / sources of data / development of instruments*
- Activity 3*      *Data collection activities*
- Activity 4*      *Data analysis and synthesis*
- Activity 5*      *Project management and coordination*

## **REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE**

To establish a context for the evaluation and to identify the key factors that support and sustain professional development communities, the research team undertook a literature review that scanned relevant articles on professional learning communities, professional development and leadership. In all, twenty-one articles, books and reports were reviewed and summarized as part of Activity 1<sup>2</sup>. The review, while not exhaustive, provides major themes as well as key conditions and attributes of successful professional learning communities. The following is a distillation of the overarching themes related to professional learning communities.

### **OVERARCHING THEMES RELATED TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

These five themes, listed in no particular order, emerge from the literature and are consistently cited as important considerations in efforts to develop and sustain professional learning communities:

- The capacity and commitment of the leadership to link the mission to specific visible actions
- The existence of shared meaning and shared decision making among staff and administration
- Evidence that observable outcomes are embedded in ongoing teacher practice
- Professional development activities that are grounded in adult learning
- The ability to tailor professional development activities to individuals

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<sup>2</sup> Full summaries with references are provided in Appendix F.

## **DUFOR AND SCHMOKER'S VALUES AND GOALS**

School District 622 specifically linked the grant activities to the works of Richard DuFour (1997; 1987) and Michael Schmoker (1996). Their work emphasizes the structure and design aspects of professional learning communities in particular, when they assert that the learning community goals must be:

- Linked to the school vision
- Few and simple to understand
- Describe behaviors, rather than beliefs alone
- Focused on the individual and connect it to their personal vision
- Focused on outcomes (desired results)
- Readily translated into performance standards
- Continuously monitored, and
- Designed to produce both short-term and long-term successes

When combined, the five themes of the literature and the works of DuFour and Schmoker provide attributes and conditions that support professional learning communities and can be organized under the four categories below. These categories were selected as broad indicators to assess the year's grant activities by the CAREI team, beginning with the next section.

## **EVALUATION INDICATORS**

### **1. SPECIFIC DESIGN AND STRUCTURE ATTRIBUTES OF COMMUNITIES**

This category focuses on the actual structure and design of professional development activities. (For example, "Who participates? Is the professional development activity based on solid principles of adult learning? Are the goals of the district clearly articulated in the activities of the initiative?")

### **2. LEADERSHIP CAPACITY AND COMMITMENT**

This category focuses on the district leaders in particular. It emphasizes the leadership's ability to articulate the broad goals of the district and relate them to the instructional/behavioral practices of the staff. Further, it attempts to discern the leadership's willingness to share decision making authority and its general level of support of professional development activities.

### **3. CULTURE OF READINESS**

This category centers on the beliefs, values, attitudes and dispositions held by staff in the school site or in the district as a whole. (Example, "To what degree does staff agree with the statement: Professional learning communities are the best approach to the professional development of teachers?") The category also includes the level of trust among district staff and the willingness (or lack of willingness) to buy-in to a particular practice or activity.

#### 4. RESOURCES IN SUPPORT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

This category connotes the amount of resources (time, financial, and human resources) committed to the initiative as well as the willingness to be flexible in reallocating time and activities to achieve certain ends.

#### DATA GATHERING SOURCES AND METHODS

In order to gather data about the utility of the grant activities for 2002, the CAREI team solicited grant participants' perspectives related to the topics described above. District leaders and evaluation team members mutually decided that CAREI would conduct four group interviews. Interview participants came from each of the major participant groups including, the core planning committee, principals group, secondary teacher leaders group, elementary teacher leaders group. Interviewees comprised a representative sample of participants across all grade levels and were also evenly distributed across district school sites. Further, efforts were made to interview a balance of enthusiasts and skeptics of the grant's activities.

Interviews were conducted in April, 2002. In all, three group interviews (planning, principals and secondary teachers groups) were held, with each session lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. The fourth group scheduled – the elementary teacher group interview, was not held because many elementary teachers were busy near the end of their school year and could not attend. As a result, four phone interviews were conducted with individual elementary teachers in early June, 2002 with interviews lasting approximately fifteen minutes each.

#### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Responses for both group and individual interviews were transcribed and analyzed. In the paragraphs that follow, dominant and recurrent themes are clustered into strengths and challenges for each of the four categories identified for the evaluation.

##### EVALUATION INDICATOR 1. SPECIFIC DESIGN AND STRUCTURE ATTRIBUTES OF COMMUNITIES

##### *Strengths of Design and Structure*

Questions about the design and structure of the grant activities elicited numerous positive responses from participants.

Nearly all interviewees **valued cross-grade, cross-subject and cross-school groups for professional development**. Many mentioned the value of receiving support from peers, exchanging opinions and listening to differing approaches across the district. A common sentiment expressed was that these mixed groups created a forum for discussing broader educational issues (as opposed to general “book-keeping” and management). There was general agreement around the efficacy of professional learning communities as a professional development strategy.

**Groups saw the grant initiative as a catalyst for additional opportunities for professional conversations** which aided staff in “*knowing better where we are going as a district and school.*” Many interviewees saw these groups as an opportunity largely missing in the district

and indicated that they looked forward to additional opportunities to meet in groups. Teachers and other district staff saw the grant as a chance to expand opportunities for all administrators and teachers to meet as a whole group and they were resolute on the need to expand the activities to more district staff.

**Teachers also saw cross-grade conversations as an opportunity to find out how former students were getting along.** This was voiced by elementary and middle school teachers in particular. One elementary teacher remarked, “*Nothing tells us what happens to a child after they leave our class.*”

Similarly the majority of participants interviewed **valued visiting lecturers at district professional development conferences** and responded enthusiastically about their continuation. DuFour was considered one of the highlights of the year-long grant activities and was roundly praised for his visits. Many interviewees also readily incorporated DuFour concepts in their own language (e.g. pyramid of interventions) when describing district issues.

#### *Challenges of Design and Structure*

It was the general perception of the participants, with elementary teachers voicing this less often, that **literacy was not well-integrated into the grant activities.** One interviewee noted, “*It didn’t work. We tried to make rope out of different strands or different streams.*” The majority of participants saw the literacy focus as a secondary goal – a means to an end.

Several participants stated **a critical mass did not exist to adequately promote the professional learning communities in their schools.** In most cases, building-level involvement consisted of one teacher and one administrator. One teacher remarked, “*It is hard to spread an idea with only one teacher in the building.*” When ways were discussed to improve the programming, one theme that commonly arose was to expand the number of district staff involved.

**The method of participant selection was viewed negatively by all groups**, including the planning committee that was charged with the selection of participants. In the initial year, teachers were selected based on their previous participation in committees and other district activities – that is, people familiar to the planners. By the end of the year, nearly all participants agreed that this method was not optimal. In some cases, this required the involvement of people who would have preferred not to be involved; in other cases it missed an opportunity to engage a more diverse group or it failed to tap into teachers who may have had stronger group leadership skills.

- Teachers preferred that involvement be kept strictly voluntary. “*Teachers were not invited, they were forced,*” remarked one teacher.
- Planning members felt that there should have been a more equitable means of involving different types of people. One member of the planning group stated,

*“I think the reason that there were some groups that faltered really goes back to the whole selection process, it was faulty from the start. We sat around this table, and we shouted out names of leaders in this area and that. Although all of us know a lot of people in the district that was not a fair process at all, because we ended up inviting people who had been invited to many other things in the district, whereas maybe it would have been good to have more of a cross section. It just wasn’t fair. Either we should have issued a district wide invitation, and hoped for some seasoned people, and some young people, and some people who had axes to grind, and other people who were just open to learning, a real mix. Instead, I think we tended to get people who are like-minded, who were already convinced of the validity of [professional learning communities].”*

- Another planning member discussed the decision on the part of the planners not to involve principals in the selection of participants. One member commented,

*“The principals weren’t consulted in any way, shape, or form of who the leaders in their building were, and I’ll say that that was intentional, and we had a conversation around that, at least a very short one, which was that we didn’t want the principals picking them, because the principals didn’t necessarily pick the people that any teacher would go to for leadership. In hindsight, that probably was a mistake.”*

The teacher members of the core planning group appear to recognize these oversights and, given another opportunity, would probably approach selection and principal involvement differently in the future.

- A few members of the principal group felt that some the participants selected lacked specific skills of facilitation.

*“I had two that could have participated, and one was able to. Those people aren’t necessarily the right people for this project, and so I would like to see [the principals] be able to identify our grade level leaders, or our team leaders in the middle school case, or department chairs or whatever, and I have some additional training for those people.”*

Universally, **participants felt they lacked the skills and competence to be good facilitators and some were reluctant to take on the role**, which was intended to be a rotating position initially. *“We needed to give some training to facilitators to teach people how to lead groups. The focus on learning is not part of the culture,”* one planning group member indicated.

While the majority of participants indicated that they recognized the importance of struggling through diverse views and opposing opinions, **participants felt hesitant to discuss differences of opinion and ill-equipped to work through them**. Principals and planning members expressed identical concerns<sup>3</sup>. This finding appears to extend more generally throughout the district and is supported by several participant responses regarding their opinions about the main obstacles to change in the district. (This point is discussed in more detail later in the document.)

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<sup>3</sup> Language taken from the grant proposal (page 13) indicates that there was an expectation that principals would play a stronger facilitator role than they themselves felt prepared to play. *“Principals will be prepared to develop professional learning communities in their buildings with a focus on the improvement of student literacy. Principals will assume the role of instructional leader.”*

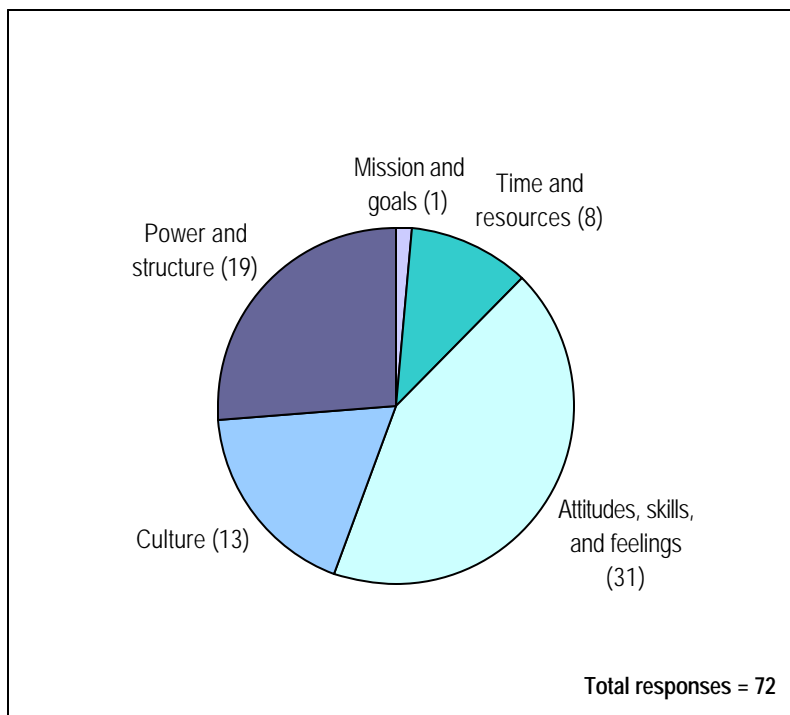
The workshop offered by Bernice McCarthy received a weak approval rating and a stronger disapproval rating. Most interviewees indicated that that workshop failed to challenge the ir current beliefs and practices – most characterizing *4-MAT* as a variation on learning styles research and Myers-Briggs domains.

### WORKSHOP DATA

The following comments emerged from an activity conducted by the Bernice McCarthy workshop on March 20, 2002. It tabulates 72 comments about obstacles to district change. It is important to note that these comments are not individual responses but rather the responses of groups of people. Yet from this we may infer that there existed some level of agreement with the responses which were posted for the entire group of approximately 100 participants to view. It is interesting to note that nearly half of all of the responses refer to teachers themselves not feeling personally equipped to effect change in the district. More than one quarter of the responses speak directly to the school power structure or the infrastructure as it is currently configured as an impediment to change. Combining Culture (referring to either district or school culture) with the Power and Structure group, we observe that more than four of every ten participant responses finds the district culture/superstructure as an obstacle to change in the district.

Only one response mentioned the district mission or goals as an obstacle to change or a point of serious contention. Interestingly, time was not noted as the greatest limitation.

CHART 1. RESPONSES ON OBSTACLES TO DISTRICT CHANGE



## EVALUATION INDICATOR 2. LEADERSHIP CAPACITY AND COMMITMENT

### *Strengths of Leadership Capacity and Commitment*

Some of the grant's success must be attributable to several actions undertaken by district leadership. First, **the district recognized the establishment of professional learning communities as a gradual process – and communicated that expectation.** The district has indicated<sup>4</sup> that it is committed to a three to five year process, acknowledges that the sites are at different stages of readiness, and identified three funding avenues for the continuation of the initiative (grants<sup>5</sup>, diversity and desegregation monies, site resources).

Second, **district leaders were able to link the grant's goals to broader district goals and effectively keep those goals focused and few in number**(two), as DuFour and Schmoker advise. Several interviewees said they believed that professional learning communities closely aligned with the district's educational goals. The yearly goals of the district easily center on the professional learning community goals and objectives.

Third, **district leaders formed a planning group that was well-respected and possessed extensive experience in the district.** District leaders also presented and discussed the assumptions of the initiative with the planning staff during implementation in spring 2002.

### *Challenges of Leadership Capacity and Commitment*

**There is some uncertainty about the district's leadership commitment to the continuation of initiative.** Interviewees, particularly from the planning group, acknowledged that there was little attention given to the initiative on the part of the superintendent or the board. While the district is aware of possible avenues for funding the initiative, that information has not been conveyed to the rank and file staff.

Participants, in part, associate the presence of senior district staff in sessions with overt support for the initiative.

*“There was no school board or cabinet level presence with the exception of Joe [Wemette] and Leslie [Steinhaus]. When you asked, ‘Do you feel there’s support at the top to make this continue to happen?’ We all sat here and looked at each other, and I think, where we are is, we’re not sure what’s happening, because of all the changes.... We still don’t quite know what the superintendent thinks about all of this<sup>6</sup>. Under these circumstances, we’re all wondering, ‘Does anybody have a clue here? Has anybody heard something I haven’t?’”*

*“It’s very hard to have long term commitments to a philosophy in school districts. So often they are reacting to problems and issues, and every year, you get a whole new set of issues you’ve got to evaluate. To sustain the concept of professional learning communities more than a year, the commitment needs to start from the school board, and also the district leaders, and obviously as*

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<sup>4</sup> April 2002 district memorandum

<sup>5</sup> In July, the district learned that funding would not be forthcoming from the state of Minnesota, the original source of the Leadership for Literacy funds.

<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, the research team has learned that the superintendent and two board members have attended meetings related to this grant initiative and also support this work.

*building administrators, we need to stay on board and keep pushing it through. After that, it tends to take a life of its own.”*

**Principals also seemed anxious about the prospect of lost funding** and their ability to sustain this initiative into the future with significantly fewer funds.

*“One of the things I fear is that the support would end, and then, as principals, we feel that it’s our responsibility to keep the momentum going. So we’re actually trying to train our staff, and we have limited training in the concept ourselves, or understanding of it. So the benefit is that we’re all learning at the same time, and I hope that we can all experience the same message, instead of trying to communicate a message to the staff that we’re not completely clear on all of it.”*

There appeared to be a disconnect between what some principals believed the district administration did, in terms of the articulation of goals and what actually happened in the school. For example, even though most participants were able to state both interim and long-term goals, which suggest that, the district **has done a good job of conveying the goals of the initiative to grant participants...**

*“The commitment obviously begins with the school board, and their implementation of yearly goals, including the need to enhance student achievement to build trust within the communities, to develop respect within the learning environment...all their goals kind of center around the philosophy of the professional community. That’s where the catalyst is, and building leaders, try to take those goals and use the approaches and strategies that have been provided, and kind of assess it from there, so that someone else can take it.”*

**... few participants believed that those goals were adequately communicated to and accepted by all school staff.**

*“I think we need to break down the barriers between management and teachers to look for the common ground. In many buildings some people are told, ‘Don’t mention professional learning communities, some people don’t think it’s good’, and we say, ‘Wait a minute, I’m spending a whole lot of time with the district in doing this, and I’m told not to mention it?’”*

### EVALUATION INDICATOR 3. CULTURE OF READINESS

#### *Strengths of Culture of Readiness*

There was a stated desire on the part of interviewees to see the initiative advance, which may be attributable to **their belief in the goals and methods of professional learning communities.** All groups, when asked whether the professional learning communities were the best means to achieve professional development, expressed a strong belief in the approach.

**Teachers have a great interest in continuing to learn through various outlets.**

*The number of people who went back to their own individual buildings after that first session, and said, ‘You’ve got to go to this thing next week. There’s an opportunity to hear this guy next week, you’ve got to sign up.’ It was amazing; we had about 40 additional people sign up for that second opportunity, just*

*simply as a total result of teachers talking about the first experience. The response of teachers throughout the semester has been, ‘I want to learn more about this.’”*

### *Challenges of Culture of Readiness*

There are three issues which need to be mentioned that extend beyond the Leadership to Literacy grant to broader issues of the district culture. These issues also affect the culture of readiness to adopt specific activities of this initiative.

- District-mandated initiatives and site-based follow-through
- Building climate relating to views of principals
- Clear distinctions between previous district initiatives

The point was made by teachers and planning groups that there is a **tension between district-led initiatives and site-level management of teacher time and professional development**. As evidenced in the statements below, many participants felt that the principal ultimately determines the success or failure of a district-led initiative.

*“We have this whole site-based management piece, and we’ve got the district-led initiatives, and to be perfectly honest, I think when I started this, I thought it would work, but the more I talked with the leadership, the more I believe that site-based management will always take precedence, and that they’re not willing to dictate to sites anything, so I don’t believe it’s going to work.”*

*“If the site chooses, and the district doesn’t care, it’ll work at that site, because whatever happens at the site is where the business happens in this district.”*

Building climate relating to views of principals was an unanticipated, but recurrent theme during group and individual interviews. An “us” and “them” mind-set among teachers and principals (administrators) seems to be a lingering attitude held by teachers and principals in District 622. Teachers offered that they frequently experienced fear about talking to administrators participating in the program. The planning group and teaching **groups noted that power differentials between teachers and administrators have not been fully acknowledged in District 622**.

*“The first two times we met together, it was like the church pews, I mean the guys on one side, and the gals were on the other, and we needed to have more opportunity to blend, and get comfortable, and develop that trust across the group...so when we get to that point about speaking about unspoken truths, we could do it with a level of trust.*

*...In some instances there was so much fear in their room that people felt they were not prepared to speak directly and openly, and they weren’t saying anything bad. So we set up a practice meeting.”*

Another interview participant expressed it this way,

*“We pretend it’s not there, and you walk into a room, and you see all the principals sitting together. You see that group, and you think, “Omigosh, we don’t group like this in anything else, and yet, we go in these rooms, and it’s like, others have described it – males and females, I*

*describe it as jobs, administrators, cabinet people... I mean, we find our little clique. It's like a clique, and who am I comfortable with, but it's very uncomfortable to break that apart."*

*"Principals don't feel safe, because the school board has been unbelievably non-supportive of the principals in the district on several occasions, so they feel like they don't have any support, and they're kind of standing out on a limb."*

Teacher **participants voiced resentment at some instances of high levels of principal disengagement in their schools.** In general, teachers acknowledged the role they also played in excluding the principal from activities as well. This finding likely plays a role in both the tension between the district and school sites and the culture within the schools between administrators and teachers.

*"I was just going to say that the key is anytime you're in a leadership position, that you model the things that you are expecting other people to do, and I think that many administrators aren't getting that idea, that they're not in touch with a student body. They don't have a clue. They don't go into the classrooms; they sit in their office and move data from one place to another. And, if we're going to make this work, they need to buy into what is learning, what is going on in the classroom, what is going on with the students, and I know that some schools are having difficulty with that, that the administration is not in touch with not only the student body, but the staff, and that's the fastest way to kill an idea, is to go in your office and shut the door."*

At the same time, **participants also wanted to find ways to foster additional support from their administrations.**

*"I want my principal to know what we're teaching, so that he can support what I'm doing, and support my program, I've got to let him know what's going on. That means, even though I'm tenured, I don't need to be observed any more. Maybe inviting him in..."*

*We need to reach out to [administrators] too. Because, they know that we don't want them around, and we know that they would prefer not to be bugged sometimes, but it's like if anything's going to change, we both have to do something about it....*

**Many staff related a bad experience with a previous district initiative with uneven implementation and they felt a reluctance to jump on the bandwagon again.** It was clear from these responses that the current professional learning community efforts must be clearly distinguished from the earlier study group activities initiated by the district in recent years.

*"One thing that is fighting against a successful PLC implementation is the fact that we're coming off of a study group attempt that wasn't terribly successful across most of the district. It was not the same format, but similar. A leadership group was chosen to go to a training session in the summer. We went back to our buildings and it flopped. Again, it was the usual...and it wasn't a flop in all the buildings, but it was the understanding or the mandate that it was going to be district wide, and it was going to be done. It was going to be done according to the way we had been trained. So, it was successfully implemented in some buildings, but other buildings just fought tooth and nail about it, and continued to argue over the next three or four years. Some study groups exist today as a result of that initiative, but others never, ever had a study group that went anyplace, because either the leadership wasn't there, or there was too much resistance on the part of the teachers, or a combination of both."*

#### EVALUATION INDICATOR 4. RESOURCES IN SUPPORT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

##### *Strengths of Resources in Support of Professional Learning Community Activities*

The district clearly has resource **strength in the vision, skills, and commitment of members of the Planning Team** for the grant. During the focus group interview, it was abundantly clear that the members have a pragmatic view of the change process and the time that it will take to move forward. They also realistically perceive the training needed for them and their peers to broaden participation.

##### **Principals see the pause in the curriculum cycle (due to funding restrictions) as an opportunity to concentrate on and continue with this grant initiative.**

*“We have an interesting situation next year. A lot of our forward movement in areas of curriculum are somewhat placed on hold, and this provides an opportunity for that momentum to continue on, so that hopefully a year from now, we can be excited and have even more district support to push literacy forward.”*

##### **In some schools, teachers with the support of school administrators are initiating their own programs and projects.** One secondary teacher commented,

*I think there’s been a little change at [my school]. We’ve started a couple of initiatives, and surprisingly, they’re coming out of my department, and the assistant principal, and I’m not necessarily the one that’s bringing them up. We’re going to try to get them some study skills, and test taking skills, and meet the counselor. That came out of me talking, but another teacher finally saying, “You know, I think I’m going to do this, and I’m going to find some money.”*

##### *Challenges of Resources in Support of Professional Learning Community Activities*

**All elementary teachers interviewed were very sensitive to being asked to be doing something without providing adequate time to achieve it.** One teacher noted that in their fifteen years of teaching, things were always added but never dropped. Staff commented in one way or another that the allocation of time will signal whether or not the district is committed to the initiative.

Teachers zeroed in on time as a critical resource, both in terms of the number of people and the amount of time for each person. An elementary teacher noted, *“With only one person trained (me), staff buy-in is zero!”*

In terms of overall, scheduled time, one individual said, *“[The] district needs to say that the professional learning communities are something it values...”* and continued, *“buy in is associated with the amount of time allocated to achieve something across one (or many) years.”*

Another stated, *“It should not just be 20 minutes before school.”*

## **Principals recognize that they must provide the time for teachers to be involved.**

*“This was going to help them do what they do better, and was going to give them more time to do that. So, I think my staff does buy in, as long as we can come through with our promise to provide them time during student contact day, and then I think people will be ok with it.”*

One principal reaffirmed, *“The staff are not excited right now about something they view as additional duties, additional work”*

**There remains a concern about the long term support of these professional development activities.** One planning group participant outlined, *“We had six months for the project less holidays etc., etc. We can’t keep the momentum going without some source of funds. And I guess that is some indicator of the district support.”*

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTIVITIES**

The following conclusions and recommendations are derived from all sources in the data collection process—focus group interviews, telephone interviews, observation of workshops, and meetings with grant administrators. They are “mapped” against what we know from the literature about successful professional learning communities, and intended to be a guide for what the district may choose to take as the next steps.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

- The district has done a good job of selecting a few goals that are connected to the district’s overall mission.
- The district has a divide separating teachers from school and district administrators.
- Participants resoundingly supported the continuation of lectures offered such as DuFour, Hargreaves and Serafini.
- Participants feel unprepared to lead groups and professional learning communities.
- Participants value this district effort. They believe in its method and would like to see the initiative expanded. Still, they remain anxious about the district’s ability to continue the activities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *For district leaders–*

- District needs to stay-the-course in developing professional learning communities, keeping in mind DuFour's recommendation of a few simple goals.
- Clarify whether the initiative is to develop and advance professional learning communities or an attempt to focus on specific topical areas.
- Continue to provide conferences, workshops or lectures from educational leaders.
- Expand the program to include more teachers.
- Clarify funding sources for the initiative.
- Provide additional opportunities and encourage teachers to participate in activities that offer group facilitation skills and leadership training.
- Overtly praise teacher involvement.

### *For planners–*

- Attempt to mitigate any power differential through the formation of teacher and administrator site teams at the outset.
- Spend some initial pre-work time with principals to ensure they are on board.
- Ensure that there are multiple opportunities for cross-building interaction.
- Make certain that teams are a combination of principals and teachers, not teachers or administrators alone.
- Provide some ground rules (expectations) to the professional learning community participants to allay the hesitation of some teachers to join in.

**Foster teacher buy-in through the solicitation of their input, with grassroots decision making at sites, and with ongoing evaluation of the initiative by them as participants.**

**APPENDIX A**  
**EVALUATION INDICATORS:**  
**ATTRIBUTES AND CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

#### **INDICATOR 1. SPECIFIC DESIGN AND STRUCTURE ATTRIBUTES OF COMMUNITIES**

- Practice: learn to teach and lead by learning how to teach and lead activities include: theory demonstration, practice, feedback, and coaching
- Mission clarity and activity alignment to district/school mission, instructional framework in place related teaching activities to school effectiveness, school decisions based upon improvement
- Teams based on common interests
- Opportunities to reflect on and share experiences (reflective dialogue)
- Solid conceptual framework connected to meaningful change
- Individual opinions and differences are accepted and valued (support for informed dissent)
- Ongoing activities for professional development
- Review of teacher's behavior is a norm, randomly observed, regular analysis and self-corrected performance
- Outside experts who provide alternative theses
- Must be based on adult learning, and changing individual attitudes and behaviors, adult learning permeates professional development
- Variety of learning avenues provided
- Limit the number of unnecessary meetings
- Staff must learn how to provide constructive feedback to each other to resolve conflict
- Extend initiative beyond enthusiasts, including to new faculty
- Respect and capitalize on teachers' broader experiences
- Whole staff involved in professional development
- Chosen focus of the learning community will influence its outcomes
- Staff study and planning precede decisions concerning professional development
- School data confirms all students have equal access to programs and activities

#### **INDICATOR 2. LEADERSHIP CAPACITY AND COMMITMENT**

- Need for change is well articulated and balances teacher and district goals
- Strong leadership is a full and active participant rather than an authority
- Shared authority, teachers involved in decision making
- Recognize the collegiality already taking place
- Broad support for professional development activities at district and school site level seen as an essential component for achieving organizational goals

### **INDICATOR 3. CULTURE OF READINESS**

- Sense of community, mutual creation of shared meaning
- Undeviating focus on student learning and that all students can learn
- Collegial relationships
- Takes into account the cultural context of teaching in the particular school
- Culture of continuous improvement
- Recognition that change is a process not an event, professional development is ongoing and job-embedded – acknowledge the implementation dip (things often get worse before they get better)
- Clear goals and high expectations for hard work and risk taking
- Teachers prior knowledge and attitudes and content knowledge
- Teachers feel support and receive recognition for achievements
- Open communication among community, staff, and students

### **INDICATOR 4. RESOURCES IN SUPPORT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES**

- Time and resources available committed to professional development and those resources support ongoing professional development
- Rearrange time and resources so staff is supported by interactions during the school day
- Resources available to provide additional support to individual teachers
- Twenty percent of the work week is devoted to joint learning and collaborative work

**APPENDIX B**  
**WORKSHOP DATA**  
**FROM BERNICE MCCARTHY WORKSHOP, MARCH 20, 2002**

#### MISSION AND GOALS (1)

- Lack of a common goal

#### TIME AND RESOURCES (8)

- Time constraints
- Time to communicate
- Need time to build relationships
- Urgent versus important
- Brief conversations
- Deadlines
- Time
- Overload (garbage)

#### ATTITUDES, SKILLS, AND FEELINGS (31)

- Fear of sharing
- Fear of power
- Feelings of favoritism
- Feeling overwhelmed, needing to ask for help
- Lack of trust
- Lack of confidence
- Tired of trying
- Fear of disagreement
- Fear of being wrong
- Attitude
- Won't help anyway
- Resentment
- Personal communication skills
- Hurt feelings
- May be wrong
- Personalities
- "I can live with it."
- Not being able to move on
- No forgiveness, ever
- "We know what's best" attitude
- Betrayal
- Futility
- Inexperience
- Confidence

**ATTITUDES, SKILLS, AND FEELINGS (31) (CONT'D.)**

- Don't trust
- Fear of angry parents
- Don't want to hurt feelings
- Kill the messengers – fear of reprisal
- Isolation, shut the door
- False assumptions

**CULTURE (13)**

- Living in the past
- Culture of cynicism
- Non listeners
- Cultural norms don't encourage communication
- Avoidance of change
- Making deals with information
- Pre- and post-1986 groups set against each other
- Resistance to change
- Personal loyalties
- Rumors
- Personalities
- Organizational history
- Isolationists

**POWER AND STRUCTURE (19)**

- No rules or forum for arguing
- Position and roles
- Decision already made
- Top down – access to information
- Communication barriers
- Retribution
- Lack of information flow
- Lack of private
- Hidden agenda
- Mandates
- Machinery for effecting change
- Laws of data privacy
- Seniority
- Chain of command
- Size of organization
- Revenge
- Multiple team groups
- Building design and isolation
- Status quo

**APPENDIX C**  
**GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**



TIME AND RESOURCES

**7. What will the district need to do to sustain this work over the next three years?**

- *What will you be doing differently by the end of three years if this is working?*
- *What will be continued?*
- *What will be left behind?*

**8. Big picture – is this approach do-able?**

- *Regarding grade level divisions, is this a one-size-fits all initiative?*
- *Are the expectations realistic?*
- *Will it require that outside resources be continually brought in once a month per year? Will their presence transform practice?*

**9. Should the Leadership for Literacy initiative continue and expand?**

- *Who is involved currently in the project, why were they selected?*
- *Is there a plan for involving others?*
- *What is the plan for expanding the participation of other staff (including new teachers) using this initiative?*

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME–

**10. Final question or comment. What one thing you would like district staff to know about this initiative?**

**APPENDIX D**  
**SCOPE OF WORK**

School District 622  
Evaluation Work Plan  
September 10, 2002 – June 30, 2002

This project evaluation consists of five activities.

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <i>Activity 1</i> | <i>Scan relevant literature</i>  |
| <i>Activity 2</i> | <i>Identification of a core set of outcomes / sources of data / development of instruments</i> |
| <i>Activity 3</i> | <i>Data collection activities</i>  |
| <i>Activity 4</i> | <i>Data entry, coding, and analysis and synthesis</i>  |
| <i>Activity 5</i> | <i>Project management and coordination</i>   |

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*Activity 1*     *Scan relevant literature*     **20 hours**

The research team will perform a scan for relevant literature on professional development and leadership, and professional learning communities. We will identify key factors from the literature, which support and sustain professional learning communities.

TASKS

- Identify 7-10 key references to review, obtain copies of each and prepare a list of those references
- Summarize reference findings and identify key elements of focus and best practices and approaches

PRODUCTS

- List of references in APA format
- Descriptive summary of key research findings with key elements, best practices, and approaches identified.

RESPONSIBLE

Tim Sheldon with possible assistance for a research assistant

ROLE OF DISTRICT 622

- District 622 staff will assist in identifying key articles, books, or book chapters

*Activity 2 Identification of a core set of outcomes / sources of data / development of instruments 40 hours*

The research team, in collaboration with District 622 staff, will determine what aspect of the grant will be evaluated in the grant period.

EVALUATION SELECTION

- Evaluation of the professional learning communities – Use the values and goals described by DuFour and Schmoker as a standard of comparison for professional learning communities in District 622

After the type of evaluation has been determined, evaluation instruments will be developed. We assume that given the restrictive time frame that only one of the above areas will be addressed.

TASKS

- Identify type of evaluation and instruments
- Determine sources of data and sampling methods
- Create an instrument (survey or interview protocol) that will be used to collect data on the attitudes and behavior (self-reported) of the participants.

PRODUCTS

- List of evaluation elements
- Data collection instrument

RESPONSIBLE

Tim Sheldon and Kyla Wahlstrom

ROLE OF DISTRICT 622

- Provide feedback on evaluation elements and instrument draft

*Activity 3 Data collection activities 70 hours*

Administer the instrument(s) to sample of grant participants.

TASKS

- Ascertain the most appropriate method for data collection
- Determine sample size and administer instrument
- Use feedback from sample to modify instrument as needed
- Schedule the times to administer instruments to group (meet with participants that attended many of professional development opportunities)

PRODUCTS

- Schedule for data collection
- Completed surveys/interview narratives

RESPONSIBLE

Tim Sheldon with possible assistance from a research assistant

ROLE OF DISTRICT 622

- Ensure that school sites and teachers are aware of CAREI's participation.
- Assist in the coordination and scheduling of CAREI evaluation activities.

*Activity 4 Data entry, coding, and analysis and synthesis 50 hours*

Prepare and code data

TASKS

- Enter data into a statistical processing program
- Conduct thematic analysis of teacher-participant responses to the instrument.
- Reduction of data set into prominent themes based on responses to the instrument(s) used.

PRODUCTS

- Produce 8-10 page report that identifies key findings and themes categorized into outcome areas.

RESPONSIBLE

Tim Sheldon, Kyla Wahlstrom

ROLE OF DISTRICT 622

- Read and comment on report draft
- Reproduce additional copies of report as needed

*Activity 5      Project management and coordination      10 hours*

Oversight and coordination of evaluation process

TASKS

- Chart and target due dates of key activities and products (February 15, updated March 1 and May 1)
- Regular meetings between Kyla Wahlstrom and Tim Sheldon
- Monthly meetings as needed among CAREI staff and District 622 administrative staff to review process, receive feedback on draft products, and coordinate activities
- Periodic meetings with key contact people at particular grade levels or cohorts

PRODUCTS

- Brief meeting minutes that summarize key decisions in the evaluation
- Activity chart with key activities and target due dates

RESPONSIBLE

Tim Sheldon, Kyla Wahlstrom, District 622 staff

ROLE OF DISTRICT 622

- Be available for periodic meetings
- Assist in the coordination of meetings with leadership groups
- Provide schedule of grant activities to the CAREI team

**APPENDIX E**  
**BACKGROUND ON CENTER FOR APPLIED RESEARCH AND EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT**

The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) is a collaborative organization that brings the resources of the College of Education and Human Development and the University of Minnesota to bear on educational issues in Minnesota and across the nation. The work of CAREI focuses on:

- (1) Linking Minnesota school districts and the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota;
- (2) Conducting applied research and evaluation studies for local, state, and federal agencies; and
- (3) Providing technical assistance and serving as a clearinghouse of information on innovative programs across the United States.

Some 30 Minnesota school districts currently are members of CAREI, paying relatively modest annual dues to support targeted research efforts, grants for collaborative research projects involving schools and the college, topical seminars, and an annual symposium. In addition, CAREI publishes and disseminates to all school districts in Minnesota a newsletter, *ResearchPractice*, which shares the most recent information and research on a given educational issue. A policy board composed equally of public school superintendents (two from urban districts, two from rural districts and two "at large"), faculty/staff from each of the six departments within the College, the Dean of the College, and an *ex-officio* representative of the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning sets direction for these aspects of CAREI's work.

Kyla L. Wahlstrom has been a research associate and associate Director at CAREI since 1990 and has a Ph.D. in educational policy and administration from the University of Minnesota. Her research has focused on leadership of change, impact of professional development, and school schedules which enhance learning opportunities for students. Dr. Wahlstrom is a former classroom teacher and school administrator.

Tim Sheldon is a research fellow at the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement. While his work focuses generally on educational policy and program evaluation, his current research is concentrated in the areas of professional development and curricular implementation in school districts throughout Minnesota. Sheldon is pursuing his doctorate in Educational Policy at the University of Minnesota.

**APPENDIX F**  
**REFERENCES AND ARTICLE SUMMARIES**

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**APPENDIX G**  
**COPIES OF REFERENCED ARTICLES**