CHAPTER 1

Focusing on a Professional Learning Network

ManateeLearn has been an effective resource for my professional development. As a result of the site, I have been able to have access to resources that are beneficial to my instructional planning as well as collaborate and network with other faculty members from various content areas. The 24-hour access to the site accommodates my planning time and is accessible to me on weekends and nights. I have benefited from the instructional resources that are available and am confident that if I have a question that I am pondering, I can be certain that I can find resolution and support from ManateeLearn.

—Kellie Viera, reading teacher, mentor

WHAT IS A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK?

A professional learning network (PLN) is a platform (either online, face-to-face, or blended) from which professionals (in our case, educators) learn to become more effective practitioners by collaborating and studying with colleagues

and other experts, focusing on student data, learning styles, and achievement, while self-reflecting and revising instructional practices and pedagogical stances in order to better meet students' needs. A secondary goal and natural outgrowth of successful PLNs is the unification of stakeholders in a school community that results from increased collegiality, open communication, and common goals. Finally, inherent in the setup of a PLN, space is provided to address the complexities that coincide with any new district, state, or national initiative or directive and to scaffold both teachers and students toward success by providing ample opportunities to post new information, access and share resources, acquire expertise, and engage in professional conversations.

Why a PLN Focus?

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are designed to promote similar goals and values, and to foster collaboration by having participants work together using inquiry and applied practice. A PLN broadens this by embracing the goals of a PLC and infusing overarching themes that benefit the entire school environment. In a sense, a PLN is a planned development of a PLC, much like a planned neighborhood development. Each group has its own individual goals that feed into the larger and often more complicated goals of the PLN. By using a planned network approach, even the most diverse groups can achieve success in bringing their individual ideas to embrace the goals of the entire school.

Our PLN expands the current notion of a professional learning community, in that it

- Provides a platform from which to articulate and communicate the school's mission, vision, and goals to all community members (administrators, teachers, and staff)
- Creates opportunities for shared leadership by serving as a schoolwide depository to which all stakeholders may contribute and from which they may benefit

- Delivers differentiated professional development for collective and individual learning and instruction
- Ensures opportunities for all voices to be heard by building participatory forums
- Provides space for posting student data, publishing the resulting school initiatives, and collaborating with colleagues to determine best teaching practices with regard to common curriculum expectations
- Celebrates shared practices by housing and making available model lessons, presentations, and student products to all teachers

Our PLN simultaneously addresses and provides solutions to some of the frequently stated weaknesses of PLCs: insufficient time, resources, and space. It resolves these issues by communicating information, posting data, and providing professional development asynchronously, thus enabling the stakeholders to access it at their convenience, revisit it upon need, choose topics of interest, all while requiring no additional physical space or cost for resources.

A PLN also resembles a compilation of *personal* learning networks, if one thinks of the school community as the individual, linking PLCs, providing the latest feeds on political decisions that affect school communities, and posting common objectives. PLNs, or personal learning networks or environments, operate like a second brain in the sense that they allow an individual to synthesize information from a variety of sources in order to stay informed about the large amount of information that is available daily over the web. A person can run a calendar, track specific blogs and wiki pages, stay up-to-date with national and global information, and communicate socially through e-mail, forums, and instant messaging, all on one site that he or she has tailored to meet specific goals and objectives. By using a personal learning network or environment, less time is spent searching for information that aligns with set goals and objectives. In addition, the quality of information used to make decisions is heightened because unrelated sources are filtered appropriately.

We have incorporated all of the advantages of a personal learning network into our PLN in order to streamline, organize, and prioritize the onslaught of information available each day in the field of education. We have an interactive calendar, links to our databases and online grade book, resources for professional development that focus on research-based best practices, folders that are populated with lessons and student samples, and forums to communicate with other members of our school community. It's as if our school has a *personal* learning network that only hosts our professional interests; hence, our *professional* learning network.

Finally, the term *networked learning communities*, coined by Stoll and Louis, could also be associated with our PLN, because schools were united online as they developed community. We take this networking a step further, in that networking takes place in both face-to-face encounters and online. We especially want to emphasize the importance of the networking that occurs face-to-face. This is the time during which rapport is built, relationships are established, and we become a community of learners.

Snapshot of *Our* PLN

Our PLN is comprised of five main elements, each serving a specific purpose in contributing toward our school community's goal of increasing student achievement. The entire network is adaptable, in that the components each offer diverse options, in any given order, for a variety of levels of stakeholders, thus meeting the needs of many individuals with a multitude of methods, time frames, learning styles, and goals. The main parts are

Technology. We chose a blended platform, as we have a large and diverse faculty with varying levels of knowledge about technology and its applications. This decision was based on the results of our needs assessment and technology survey, the technology resources available at our school, and the recommendation of our technology committee. Technology

Figure 1.1   Professional Learning Network
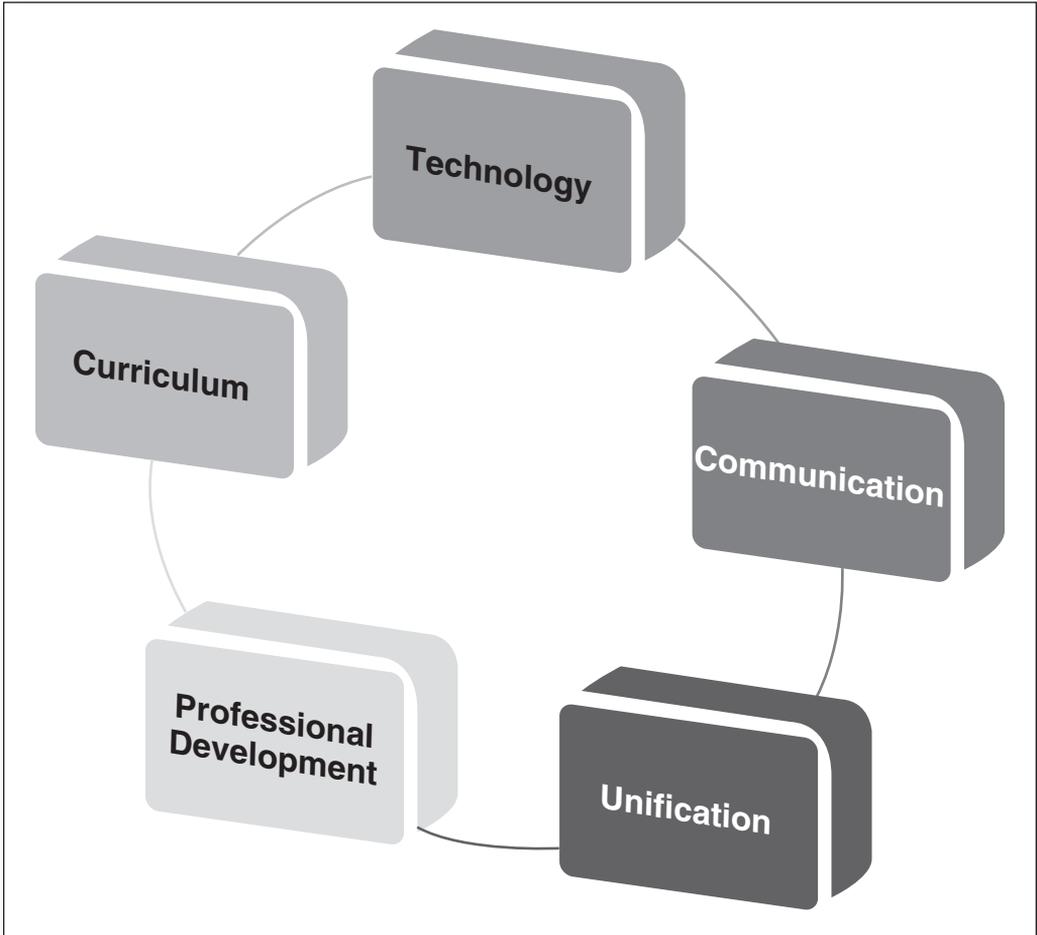
has two roles: it is a tool used to provide networked learning, and it provides teachers with scaffolding and experience in using higher level technology than that to which they are accustomed, which should lead to increased use of technology within the classroom.

Communication. Our PLN is used as a hub of communication for our school. We are able to communicate school goals and initiatives, provide resources, offer student samples and teachers' presentations, and post data. Our site has become a source of information regarding our school

community. In addition, we linked the already existing PLCs at our school with our small learning communities and academies, thus using our PLN to serve as a unifying agent within and across our school community.

Curriculum. Since increased student achievement was our overarching goal, we developed a daily instructional framework based on best practices and current research findings that would incorporate the requirements of our newly adopted core curriculum, while still serving our stakeholders' needs. We then introduced this framework to the school community, both online and face-to-face. We created folders to support our daily framework that could house teachers' lessons, samples of students' work, and assessments used.

Professional Development. As many of the technology and curriculum pieces were new, complex, and multifaceted, we anticipated a need for differentiated professional development around a variety of topics, from which teachers could choose to glean an overview or to delve deeply and access additional resources, all while participating in professional conversations and reflecting on instructional practices. The professional development features are made up of a broad range of topics, are offered asynchronously, and occur both online and face-to-face.

Unification (bringing it all together). Each element in our PLN addresses specific needs of our school community. Each is linked to data. Each is aligned with the national, state, and district mandates to which we are required to adhere. Our school's focus and goals are reflected in every aspect. Unification focuses on tying together all the individual pieces in order to create an inclusive community.

Initial Steps in the Design of Our PLN

Some initial data gathering was necessary to inform our leadership teams of current perceptions and status of our school community. In order to construct a sustainable PLN, accuracy in our data collection and analysis was important. Furthermore, our long- and short-term goals were determined

by our data, so valid data from several sources were used to test and confirm hypotheses about current school needs. Following are some of the data we used to begin the discussions of what our PLN would look like. Although this is just a part of the data we used, it served us well in the beginning stages.

Technology Survey

We have a diverse faculty with regard to use and knowledge of technology. The goals of the technology survey we created were twofold. We wanted to find out the stakeholders' (administrators, teachers, and staff) perceptions of our schoolwide technology needs, based on what they visualized as an ideal technology environment; but we also hoped to find out each stakeholder's level of knowledge and what scaffolds would best lead toward increased technology knowledge, use, and comfort.

We analyzed the data from the survey and created two lists of priorities: first, a list that outlined and specified technology resources that we hoped to acquire over time; and second, a list that set out a series of levels of knowledge and detailed what each level included, with a corresponding number that indicated the number of stakeholders who requested more knowledge about specific programs, classroom uses, and hardware. This list enabled us to begin to plan for the technology component of our professional development program and to address some of the stakeholders' needs immediately. We have included the technology survey (Resource A) that we used, in order to provide a guideline as you enter into the process of identifying your technology goals.

Needs Assessment

Because we are a large public high school with approximately 2,175 students and over 100 teachers, it is nearly impossible to achieve consensus on every issue that requires attention during the school year. Administering a

needs assessment gives each person a voice while also providing an adequate amount of data that can be analyzed, prioritized, and organized so that it can be presented back to the faculty as a framework from which an action plan can be more readily designed and implemented. The needs assessment that we designed for our uses is included (Resource B). We have also included a worksheet that we developed to help us analyze and prioritize the results of the needs assessment (Resource C).

In order for the performance of administrators, teachers, and students to improve, a number of concerns need to be acknowledged and addressed prior to and during the implementation of objectives. As we started planning how to reach our first-year goals, we knew we needed to provide a multitude of supports that would be regarded as useful by the members of our school community; but until we administered and analyzed our needs assessment, we were not completely aware of our stakeholders' perceptions of our schoolwide weaknesses.

Goals and Objectives

Our initial checklist and goal-setting chart served as an outline in establishing concrete long-term goals with short-term steps. It also gave our team an opportunity to brainstorm as we completed it by filling in details that corresponded to our needs and objectives. A blank template similar to the one with which we began this process is included to be filled in with the appropriate areas of focus for your particular school community (Resource E). A copy of a portion of our completed chart is also included, in case it would be helpful for you to examine the one we used initially to track our progress and monitor our adherence to the needs of the stakeholders (Resource F).

Long-Term Goals

Because we wanted to ensure that our efforts would result in achievement of our goals, we developed a strategic calendar

to clarify the steps toward success. Because change takes time, our three-year plan allowed all stakeholders ample time to embrace the new curriculum, technology, and online learning processes.

Our three-year plan became, in actuality, a three-tiered system in which the focus became more targeted each year. The goal of the first year was to address our needs at the school level, while year two shifted the focus to the classroom, and finally the third year addressed the needs at the desk level (students). Our flexible long-term goals were representative of our overarching hopes for the future of our PLN. They were as follows:

Year 1: School Level

- Design a PLN that addresses specific needs of our school community.
- Familiarize teachers and administrators with an educational management system and provide scaffolding for the technology skills needed to use our PLN successfully.
- Have each teacher use our PLN regularly for online collaboration and asynchronous learning and sharing of information.
- Populate folders so they will be useful in providing sample lessons, lesson plans, sample student work, presentations, graphic organizers, professional development resources, departmental kickoffs, and other information.
- Provide a go-to area for access to new national, state, and district mandates and access to secure student data.
- Unite PLCs within the school environment to support common schoolwide goals.

Year 2: Classroom Level

- Continue to address needs of stakeholders by continuously monitoring the use of the PLN at the school level

and consistently evaluate the usefulness of its components. Make improvements based on these data.

- Strengthen teachers' instructional practices by encouraging their consistent use of all applicable populated folders' contents, including lesson plans, lessons, presentations, graphic organizers, daily assessments, etc. Continue to add to each folder to increase the resources for teachers and rigor for students.
- Rely more heavily on the site, and begin to introduce online modules for professional development.
- Gather evidence that teachers adhere to and use common instructional goals found in daily classroom instructional models and strategies, and continue to monitor impact on achievement.
- The face-to-face piece of our blended professional network funnels to the classroom level, where the teachers learn to embed the uses of the two-way platform in their instructional practices.

Year 3: Desk Level

- Continue to address needs of stakeholders by continuously monitoring the use of the PLN at both the school and classroom levels and consistently evaluating their components. Make improvements based on these data.
- Provide a student platform as a sister platform to the teacher platform. Begin to introduce the use of a blended learning environment into classrooms, so that teachers use the educational management system as their own vehicle toward improved instructional practices.
- Increase the use of the information platform and add a two-way platform where students collaborate with each other.
- The face-to-face piece of our blended professional network funnels to the desk level, where the students learn to embed the uses of the two-way platform in their collaboration and communication with peers.

Short-Term Goals

We used the framework of our long-term goals to contextualize and detail our short-term goals. Once we decided on the specific short-term steps necessary to attain the long-term objectives, we were able to develop a timeline for achievement of our goals, thus building in a progress-monitoring device in which accountability was embedded.

Our overarching goal is always to enhance student performance. Our hope with the development of our PLN was to empower both teachers and students by increasing achievement of all stakeholder groups using research-based instructional strategies. This was a far-reaching goal and could include everything from celebrating a teacher's successful electronic uploading of lesson plans to facilitating a high-level discussion between two classes using Skype, blogs, and wikis.

A Bird's-Eye View of How to Build *Your* PLN

There are five initial practices that will be useful in building a PLN at any elementary, middle, or high school.

1. **Examine and evaluate availability of technology.** A clear understanding of the current status of the technology at your school is necessary before beginning to set up a PLN. As you design the technology survey for stakeholders (Resource A), it should only include realistic potential, and take into account the technology possibilities at your school site.

2. **Administer a needs assessment.** A needs assessment (Resource B) offers data from many perspectives and participants, from which unexpected results may emerge. It empowers all members of the school community and provides a space in which participants have a voice.

3. **Assemble a learning leadership team.** Based on the results of the technology survey, the needs assessment, and any additional data you have, put together a team that includes experts in each of the areas of weakness indicated in your data analyses. If not already indicated, include a technology expert, a curriculum specialist, and a representative from the administrative team of the school (preferably the principal).

4. **Use data to determine short- and long-term goals.** Once you've put together your learning leadership team, one of the first tasks that should be addressed is the gathering and analysis of all the teacher and student data you have available (Resource C). From this analysis, long- and short-term goals can be identified (Resource E).

5. **Communicate your goals with the entire school community.** In order for your goals to be accomplished, the entire school community needs to be aware of what the goals are and how they will be accomplished, and to have an action plan to achieve them.

REVIEW

Our hope is that, as a result of reading this book, each school community can successfully design and implement its own unique PLN that addresses its specific needs and increases student achievement. Based on the data available to us, we decided that our focus would include a blended use of technology that would support our schoolwide curriculum and professional development goals. Your areas of weakness may include discipline, attendance, morale, instruction, or others. Whatever areas you decide to focus on in your school community, a PLN can provide a framework from which members of your school community can

- Access information and resources
- Learn best instructional practices that would support your areas of focus
- Take leadership roles in addressing needs
- Communicate expectations and policies that align with goals and mandates
- Practice applying technology to daily instructional practice
- Collaborate with others to improve instructional strategies

Online Resources Included

All of the resources described and presented in this book are also available at www.your professionallearningnetwork.com.