

S E C O N D E D I T I O N

REVISITING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AT WORK®

**Proven Insights for Sustained,
Substantive School Improvement**

**Richard DuFour Rebecca DuFour Robert Eaker
Mike Mattos Anthony Muhammad**

Solution Tree | Press



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“Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work, Second Edition is the cornerstone canon for all things PLC. Mike Mattos and Anthony Muhammad join PLC at Work architect Bob Eaker to lend their wisdom and voices to ensure the vision of the PLC process remains true to its origins, yet responds to the modern-day realities for creating the deep schoolwide structures and the culture necessary for successful student learning.”

—Timothy D. Kanold, Educational Consultant and Author



“Educational challenges around the world have never been greater, and the case for PLCs at Work has never been more compelling. The central question of educational transformation now is whether we are serious about meeting the needs of every student, or if we will settle for merely surviving. The latter course is the path of structural inequity and mediocrity, while the transformational opportunities in the pages of this book offer hope for a rebirth of the collaborative spirit and commitment to excellence and equity that is at the heart of PLCs. In this important update to a foundational text, the authors not only continue the pioneering work of Rick DuFour and his colleagues, but also make essential contributions to sustaining the work in the future. This book is a call to action that sweeps away the dangerous detours that substitute talk for action. Don’t just read this book. Study it, scribble in it, and most importantly, use it to achieve great things in your schools for every student.”

—Douglas Reeves, Educational Consultant and Author



“With this second edition of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*, the authors did something that is extremely difficult to do: they took an outstanding book and they made it even better. This edition is a must-read for teachers and leaders who are engaged in the PLC at Work process. With new insights and current research, this book provides essential information to help any school reach high levels of learning for all students.”

—Eric Twadell, Superintendent, Adlai E. Stevenson High School,
Lincolnshire, Illinois

*In loving memory of our dear friends
Rick and Becky DuFour.
Your words continue to inspire educators
and help children across the world.*



*To Jeff and Margaret Jones for their limitless
generosity and timeless friendship.*

—BOB

To my beautiful wife and soul mate, Anita.

—MIKE

*To my mother, Anna, my wife, Dronda, and
my children. Thank you for being my constant
support system and cheering section.*

—ANTHONY

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First and foremost, this work would not be in the hands of educators without the expertise and persistence of Jeff Jones and his amazing team of professionals at Solution Tree. Be it serendipity or divine intervention, Jeff became president and co-owner of the company just after Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker's first PLC book was published. Jeff is a true champion of the work and a dear friend. We thank Douglas Rife, president and publisher of Solution Tree International, for asking us to write this book, and for sharing his priceless advice and counsel about all things publishing. Shannon Ritz, vice president of professional development, has supported this work from the very beginning, leading the efforts to provide professional development of this content, and developing an exceptional team of PLC at Work associates. We hope that this book moves Solution Tree one step closer to achieving its vision of transforming education worldwide to ensure learning for all.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to our senior production editor, Suzanne Kraszewski. Sue has been the lead editor of the most important books in the PLC at Work library. It is both unique and extremely fortunate to have an editor that is both a gifted writer and has a great

depth of knowledge on the content. Like a master silversmith, she took our rough draft and helped us carefully polish it.

Our process is called Professional Learning Communities *at Work* because it is built on both research of best practice *and* field study conducted by front-line practitioners. No school has been more essential to this effort than Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois. Stevenson High School was the incubator of the original work beginning during Rick DuFour's tenure as principal, and the work continues to this day as Stevenson models a PLC's never-ending journey of continuous improvement. We appreciate Adlai E. Stevenson High School District 125 superintendent Eric Twadell's contributions to this book. Our profession owes a debt of gratitude to this exceptional school.

While the initial PLC site work started at Stevenson, the process has been successfully replicated and refined by hundreds of Model PLC schools across the world. We are exceedingly grateful to our family of PLC at Work associates from these schools. They have graciously shared what they have learned by doing the work and helped advance these proven practices across the globe. Many of these associates have contributed to the growing PLC at Work library of resources. We would like to specifically thank the following associates who contributed to this book: Brian Butler, Diane Kerr, Regina Owens, Jack Baldermann, Joe Cuddeemi, Jasmine Kullar, and Janel Keating.

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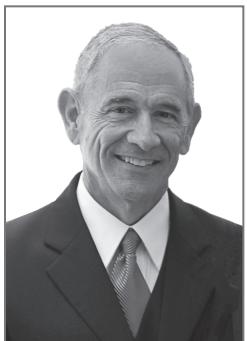
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A B O U T T H E A U T H O R S



Richard DuFour, EdD, was a public school educator for thirty-four years, serving as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. During his nineteen-year tenure as a leader at Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, the school was one of only three to win the U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon award on four occasions and the first comprehensive high school to be designated a New America High School as a model of successful school reform. He received his state's highest award as both a principal and superintendent.

A prolific author and sought-after consultant, Dr. DuFour is recognized as one of the leading authorities on helping school practitioners implement the Professional Learning Communities at Work® process in their schools and districts.

Dr. DuFour was presented the Distinguished Scholar Practitioner Award from the University of Illinois and was the 2004 recipient of the National Staff Development Council's Distinguished Service Award.

To learn more about Dr. DuFour's work, visit AllThingsPLC (www.allthingsplc.info).



Rebecca DuFour served as a teacher, school administrator, and central office coordinator. As a former elementary principal, she helped her school earn state and national recognition as a Model PLC. She is coauthor of numerous books, articles, and a video series on the topic of PLCs.

Serving as a consultant for more than fifteen years, Becky brought more than thirty-five years of professional experience to her work with educators around the world who are implementing the PLC at Work process in their own organizations.

Becky is the recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Award of the University of Lynchburg.

To learn more about Becky's work, visit AllThingsPLC (www.allthingsplc.info).



Robert Eaker, EdD, is professor emeritus at Middle Tennessee State University, where he also served as dean of the College of Education and as the university interim vice president and provost. Dr. Eaker is a former fellow with the National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development. He has written widely on the issues of effective teaching, effective schools, and schools and school districts functioning as PLCs.

Dr. Eaker is a frequent speaker at national, regional, and state meetings and regularly consults with school districts throughout North America.

To learn more about Dr. Eaker's work, visit AllThingsPLC (www.allthingsplc.info).



Mike Mattos is an internationally recognized author, presenter, consultant, and practitioner. Mike co-created the RTI at Work™ model, which builds on the foundation of the PLC at Work process to create systematic, multitiered systems of support to ensure high levels of learning for all students.

He is former principal of Marjorie Veeh Elementary School and Pioneer Middle School in California. At both schools, Mike helped create Model PLCs, improving learning for all students. In 2004, Marjorie Veeh, an elementary school with a large population of youth at risk, won the California Distinguished School and National Title I Distinguished School awards.

A National Blue Ribbon School, Pioneer is among only thirteen schools in the United States selected by the GE Foundation as a Best-Practice Partner and is one of eight schools chosen by Richard DuFour to be featured in the video series *The Power of Professional Learning Communities at Work: Bringing the Big Ideas to Life*. To learn more about Mike's work, visit AllThingsPLC (www.allthingsplc.info), visit his webpage at mikemattos.info, and follow @mikemattos65 on Twitter.



Anthony Muhammad, PhD, is a much sought-after educational consultant. A practitioner for nearly twenty years, he has served as a middle school teacher, an assistant principal, and a principal and as a high school principal. His Transforming School Culture framework explores the root causes of staff resistance to change.

Dr. Muhammad's tenure as a practitioner has earned him several awards as both a teacher and a principal. His most notable accomplishment came as principal of Levey Middle School in Southfield, Michigan, a National School of Excellence, where student proficiency on state assessments more

than doubled in five years. Dr. Muhammad and the staff at Levey used the PLC at Work process for school improvement, and they have been recognized in several videos and articles as a model high-performing PLC.

As a researcher, Dr. Muhammad has published articles in several publications in both the United States and Canada. He is author of *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division; The Will to Lead, the Skill to Teach: Transforming Schools at Every Level; Overcoming the Achievement Gap Trap: Liberating Mindsets to Effect Change; and Time for Change: Four Essential Skills for Transformational School and District Leaders*, and a contributor to *The Collaborative Administrator: Working Together as a Professional Learning Community*.

To learn more about Dr. Muhammad's work, visit New Frontier 21 (www.newfrontier21.com), or follow @newfrontier21 on Twitter.

To book Robert Eaker, Mike Mattos, or Anthony Muhammad for professional development, contact pd@SolutionTree.com.

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), educators across the world have acknowledged the need for professional collaboration and have implemented Professional Learning Communities at Work® (PLC at Work) practices. The schools and districts that have achieved significant and sustained growth in student learning have fully embraced the themes—the ways of thinking—that drive the work of a high-performing PLC. The first of these is a total and clearly articulated commitment to creating a culture of *continuous improvement* across an entire school district, within each school, and within each team. By its very definition, *continuous improvement* implies a journey that never ends. Until *every* student is learning at the highest levels, the educators in a PLC engage in collective inquiry to find the high-leverage practices that have a positive impact on student—and adult—learning, which becomes “the way we do things around here.”

However, we must recognize that creating a culture of continuous improvement is a difficult and complex endeavor that cannot be achieved absent a high degree of collaboration among the adults who are charged with the moral imperative of ensuring high levels of learning for all students. The second theme that drives the work of the PLC at Work process is the development of a collaborative culture that is characterized by the use of *high-performing teams*—teams of adults who teach the same or similar content or engage in the same or similar work. Teamwork is not viewed as an additional

professional responsibility, but instead as essential work needed to ensure student learning.

Successful teaming is challenging work. Continually improving the learning of each student—skill by skill—will be fraught with a myriad of roadblocks. Teams working within PLCs realize their best hope for success is to approach issues and problems by first gaining shared knowledge. One of the misconceptions regarding the PLC at Work process is the belief that the razor-sharp focus on learning only applies to students. In a *learning community* the goal of enhanced learning applies to students and adults alike. The work of a PLC is driven, in part, by the recognition that a key factor for enhancing student learning is improved adult learning. Hence, gaining shared knowledge—*learning together*—is the third theme that can be found in the work associated with the PLC process.

And finally, building shared knowledge will not impact student achievement unless this learning is put into practice. Effective PLC leadership realizes that gaining shared knowledge can best be accomplished through experiences in which adults “learn by doing”—the fourth theme of high-performing PLCs. This means *doing* the work associated with each task or activity. While formal activities associated with gaining knowledge such as workshops, book studies, and working with consultants are important, we learn best by *doing* the work, collaboratively reviewing and reflecting on the results of our efforts, and engaging in new and different ways to improve our professional practice (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

About This Book

Educators have been “doing the work” of the PLC at Work process since 1998. And, by doing the work, much has been learned. The goal of the first edition of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work* (2008) was to provide new insights gained in the decade following the publication of Rick DuFour and Bob Eaker’s (1998) *Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Over a decade has passed since the 2008 publication of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at*

Work, and again, much has been learned in the intervening years. Hence, this new second edition.

In each chapter we have provided new and updated research. It is important to note that we did not try to replace prior research with newer references, but rather built on the previous citations. Our goal is to demonstrate that the essential elements of the PLC at Work process have not only stood the test of time, but research and evidence continue to prove the power of the practices.

The primary differences between this second edition and the first are as follows.

1. **An increased emphasis on specificity.** Leaders who have successfully transformed their schools into high-functioning PLCs have learned ways to “drill deeper” and focus more sharply on the learning of *each* student, subject by subject, course by course, unit by unit, lesson by lesson, and skill by skill. Subsequently, this edition provides more specific recommendations and examples for each step in the PLC at Work process.
2. **A focus on school culture.** Since 2008, it has become exceedingly clear that PLC practices will not take root without effective leadership that has developed a healthy school culture. To this end, we are honored that Anthony Muhammad, a recognized global expert in school culture and equity, has added his research and insights in this critical area.
3. **More effective ways to intervene and extend student learning.** Unless schools develop an *effective and systematic* plan for providing additional time, support, or extension of learning within the school day, our efforts to ensure high levels of learning for *all* students will be limited. Both researchers and practitioners have developed more effective ways to intervene and extend student learning. To this end, we have added Mike Mattos, an expert in this area, to contribute to this edition.

While adding additional research and recommendations to this edition, we did not want the book to become too large and overwhelming for the reader. So we have revised and streamlined some content from the previous edition. While revising this book, it was equally important to us that we honor and amplify the insights and contributions of our dear friends, colleagues, and coauthors, Rick and Becky DuFour. This book—and the development and growth of the PLC at Work process—would not have been possible without them. Their words, wisdom, and love continue to inspire us.

Following is an overview of this second edition.

Chapter 1: Proven Insights Into Professional Learning Communities at Work

This book begins with a review of the foundational elements of the PLC process with a focus on the three big ideas that drive the PLC concept. It then identifies new learnings that have emerged as a result of the authors' work with schools and districts across North America and around the world.

Chapter 2: The Case for Professional Learning Communities at Work

This chapter demonstrates the extent to which the PLC concept has been endorsed by educational researchers and professional organizations serving educators. The challenge of improving schools does not depend on educators discovering new ideas; it depends upon their willingness to implement what is already known regarding best practices for student and adult learning.

Chapter 3: The Challenge of Cultural Change

This chapter emphatically asserts that creating a PLC requires, and is tantamount to, reshaping the traditional culture of schools and districts. It draws a distinction between structural and cultural change and stresses that changing the structure of any organization is not sufficient to change its culture—the assumptions, behaviors, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for the organization. Chapter 3

explores the nature of a substantive improvement process, obstacles to be overcome, and whether the best path for results-oriented change comes from the top down, or from the bottom up. It introduces the ideal of a culture that is simultaneously loose and tight, a concept that we will reference often throughout the book. Finally, it makes the case that transforming traditional school cultures to support the PLC concept is indeed difficult, but very doable.

Chapter 4: The Four Pillars of a Professional Learning Community: Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

Shared mission, vision, values, and goals are the four pillars that comprise the foundation of a PLC. The mission pillar answers the question, “What is our purpose?” to which schools often provide a trite and superficial response. This chapter suggests how the issue can be examined in a way that serves as a catalyst for improvement. The vision pillar answers the question, “What do we hope to become?” The chapter offers strategies for developing a shared vision, examines common questions related to articulating a vision, provides summaries of research that can be used to inform the process, and suggests criteria for assessing a vision statement.

The values pillar answers the question, “How must we behave, what commitments must we make and honor, in order to make our shared vision a reality?” Value statements articulate the collective commitments members of a PLC agree to put into action to create the school they desire. This chapter offers suggestions for developing such statements. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the goals pillar, which clarifies the indicators of progress the school will monitor and the timetable of the specific steps that will be taken to move the school toward its vision.

Chapter 5: Teaching in a Collaborative Culture

This chapter identifies the single biggest barrier educators must overcome if they are to create PLCs in their schools and districts: the long tradition of teachers working in isolation. The chapter asserts that the common practice of teachers continuing to work in isolation

today despite all that is known about the benefits of a collaborative school culture is a classic example of the “knowing-doing gap”—not doing what we know we should do. The chapter also challenges educators to avoid the half-truths of pseudo-teams rather than real teams and “coblaboration” rather than collaboration. It suggests the topics teachers would collaborate about if their focus was on student learning and describes the work of a collaborative team in an elementary school to illustrate. The chapter concludes with the story of a team of teachers who worked collaboratively and collectively to raise achievement for their students.

Chapter 6: Essential Learning and Assessment in a PLC

This chapter points out that historically the goal of assessment in education was to assist schools in what was universally accepted as their fundamental task: sorting, ranking, and selecting students. It argues that if schools are to fulfill a new purpose—high levels of learning for all students—assessment must take on a different purpose. The chapter draws a distinction between summative and formative assessments and asserts the latter are vital to schools that function as PLCs. While acknowledging that good teachers are constantly assessing student learning through multiple and varied checks for understanding as a part of each day’s lesson, the chapter also calls upon collaborative teams of teachers to work together to create a series of common formative assessments as one of the tools they use in their more formal investigations of student understanding. Educators are urged to use assessment not merely to monitor student learning or diagnosis problems in that learning, but also, more importantly, to inform and impact their instruction to improve student learning. The chapter explains the significance and benefits of such assessments and presents a brief overview of some of the principles of good assessments.

Chapter 7: Interventions and Extensions in a PLC

This chapter explores the question, “What happens when a student does not learn despite the best efforts of his or her classroom teacher?” It asserts that the honest answer to that question in most schools is,

“It will depend on his or her teacher.” The chapter argues that schools committed to high levels of all learning will ensure students who have initial difficulty receive additional time and support for learning in a timely, directive, targeted, and systematic way.

Chapter 8: The Role of the Principal in a PLC

This chapter begins with a review of the research on the importance of the principalship and continues with recommendations from researchers and professional organizations in an effort to help those in the position function most effectively. The chapter attempts to simplify the principal’s complex role with specific recommendations.

Chapter 9: The Role of the Superintendent and the Central Office in a PLC

This chapter examines the challenge of how the superintendent and central office can promote the PLC concept districtwide at the same time they provide the autonomy and freedom essential both to organizational flexibility and personal ownership on the part of school professionals. It examines the research on the role of the central office in promoting learning, considers the issue of top-down leadership, and returns to the concept of loose-tight leadership with specific suggestions regarding the practices about which central office leaders should be tight. The chapter concludes by examining the research on effective professional development and offering recommendations on how the central office can apply research to build the capacity of staff to implement the PLC concept successfully.

Chapter 10: How to Sustain the PLC Process

The final chapter acknowledges that while it is easy to identify what educators must do to improve schools—build their capacity to function as a PLC—implementing that knowledge is difficult indeed. It stresses that while there is no step-by-step checklist or recipe for becoming a PLC, there are certain key concepts that must be addressed. The chapter points out five dangerous detours and potholes to avoid on the PLC journey and reminds readers of the imperative of

persistence if they are to complete that journey successfully. Finally, it presents consistent advice from the world's leading organizational theorists regarding the very best strategy for fostering persistence while engaged in the challenge of substantive change.



We sincerely hope this book will be used as a tool to stimulate the shared mission, vision, collective commitments, and goals; the collective inquiry; the collaborative teams focused on learning; the action orientation; the commitment to continuous improvement; and the focus on results that we believe are critical to student success and the survival of public schools.



CHAPTER 1

Proven Insights Into Professional Learning Communities at Work

The key to pursuing excellence is to embrace an organic, long-term learning process, and not to live in a shell of static, safe mediocrity. Usually growth comes at the expense of previous comfort or safety.

—JOSH WAITZKIN

When Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker wrote *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work: New Insights for Improving Schools* in 2008, ten years had passed since the publication of Rick and Bob's (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) groundbreaking foundational work *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. Rick, Becky, and Bob's (DuFour et al., 2008) purpose for writing *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work* was to share with readers what they learned in the intervening decade about reculturing schools into high-performing professional learning communities (PLCs). They began their revisiting of *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) by writing of good friends Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who, as legend has it, would meet after a long separation, and ask one another, "What has become clearer to you since we last met?"

At the time of publication of this second edition, more than a decade has passed since Rick, Becky, and Bob (DuFour et al., 2008) wrote *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*. The number of schools and school districts that have implemented the practices of the PLC at Work concept has increased dramatically, both within North America, and increasingly, around the world. Again, it's timely to address the question, "What has become clearer regarding the promise, potential, problems, and pitfalls surrounding the PLC at Work process?" The place to start is by addressing the terms, concepts, assumptions, and practices that have stood the test of time and remain the foundation for the PLC at Work process.

What Is a Professional Learning Community?

Prior to 1998, the term *professional learning community* was used primarily among educational researchers; it has now become part of educators' routine jargon. In fact, the term is now used so ubiquitously to describe any loose grouping of educators, it is in danger of losing all meaning.

While the term *professional learning community* has become commonplace, the actual practices of a PLC have yet to become the norm in education. Too many schools, districts, and organizations calling themselves PLCs do virtually none of the things that characterize high-performing PLCs. Despite the increasing popularity of the term, actually transforming a traditional school into a PLC remains a complex and challenging task. We are convinced educators would benefit from both greater clarity regarding the PLC concept and specific strategies for implementing it.

We define a *professional learning community* as:

An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016, p. 10)

In 1998, when Rick and Bob decided on the title for *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, they chose each word of that title very purposefully. A *professional* is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. The knowledge base of education has expanded dramatically, both in terms of research and in the articulation of recommended standards for the profession. Educators in a PLC make these findings the basis of their collaborative investigation into how they can better achieve their goals. They practice teaching and leading by constantly enhancing their skills and knowledge in the same way doctors practice medicine or lawyers practice law.

The word *learning* also carries significant weight in the title. One of the major challenges in the implementation of the PLC concept is convincing educators to shift from a focus on *teaching* to a sharp focus on *learning*—to move beyond the question, “Was it taught?” to the far more relevant question, “Was it learned?” We advocate for learning communities, not teaching communities, and argue that the best way to improve student learning is to invest in the learning of the adults who serve them.

Learning suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. In Chinese, the term *learning* is represented by two characters; the first character means “to study,” and the second means “to practice constantly” (Hammonds, 2005). The only hope for creating schools and districts that are continuously improving their capacity to raise student achievement is to establish the expectation that educators must engage in the ongoing study and constant practice of their field. If all students are to learn, those who educate them must be life-long learners.

Ensuring higher levels of learning will undoubtedly require the adults to work collaboratively and take collective responsibility for student success. This collective commitment to seek best practice unites a staff into a *community* of learners.

The Three Big Ideas That Drive Professional Learning Communities

In 1998, Rick and Bob framed their book *Professional Learning Communities at Work* around three big ideas—ideas that formed the philosophical basis for the concepts and practices reflective of a high-performing PLC. More than twenty years later, these three ideas remain the primary organizing principles of the PLC at Work process.

Management consultant, author, and educator Noel Tichy (1997, 2002) contends that great leaders can translate the purpose and priorities of their organizations into a few big ideas that unite people and give them a sense of direction in their day-to-day work. We find it helpful to frame the PLC at Work concept with these three big ideas: (1) a focus on learning, (2) a collaborative culture and collective responsibility, and (3) a results orientation.

A Focus on Learning

First, the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure all students learn at high levels, and the future success of students will depend on how effective educators are in achieving this fundamental purpose. There must be no ambiguity or hedging regarding this commitment to learning, and schools must align all practices, procedures, and policies with this fundamental purpose. Members of a high-performing PLC work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, provide systematic interventions that ensure each student receives additional time and support for learning when he or she struggles, and extend and enrich learning when a student masters the intended outcomes. A corollary assumption stipulates that if all students are to learn at high levels, the adults in the organization must also be continually learning. Therefore, structures are created to ensure staff members engage in job-embedded learning as part of their routine work practices.

A Collaborative Culture and Collective Responsibility

Second, schools cannot achieve the fundamental purpose of learning for all if educators work in isolation. Therefore, school administrators

and teachers must build a collaborative culture in which they work together *interdependently* and assume *collective responsibility* for the learning of *all* students.

A Results Orientation

Third, schools will not know whether all students are learning unless educators are hungry for evidence that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed most essential to their success. Schools must systematically monitor student learning on an ongoing basis and use evidence of results to respond immediately to students who experience difficulty to inform individual and collective practice, and to fuel continuous improvement. Equally important, evidence of student learning is how a PLC evaluates the effectiveness of their practices, policies, and procedures. Decisions are based on more than good intentions; they are based on actual results of improved student achievement.

The Four Pillars and the Building Blocks of a PLC

In *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Rick and Bob (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) identify the four pillars of PLCs, and in *Learning by Doing* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; DuFour et al., 2016), the authors characterize and describe them in more detail.

Four Pillars: Shared Mission (Purpose), Vision (Clear Direction), Values (Collective Commitments), and Goals (Indicators, Timelines, and Targets)—All Focused on Student Learning

The very essence of a *learning* community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student, skill by skill. When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it. To achieve this shared purpose, the members of a PLC create and are guided by a clear and compelling vision of what their school or district must

become to help all students learn. They make collective commitments that clarify what each member *will do* to contribute to creating such organizations, and they use results-oriented goals to mark their progress. This foundation of shared mission (purpose), vision (clear direction), values (collective commitments), and goals (indicators, timelines, and targets) not only addresses *how* educators will work to improve their schools but also reinforces the moral purpose and collective responsibility that clarify *why* their day-to-day work is so important.

A Collaborative Culture With a Focus on Learning

If shared purpose, vision, collective commitments, and goals constitute the foundation of a PLC, then the collaborative team is the fundamental building block. A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work *interdependently* to achieve *common goals*—goals linked to the purpose of learning for all—for which members hold one another *mutually accountable*. It is difficult to overstate the importance of collaborative teams in the PLC process. It is equally important, however, to emphasize that collaboration does not lead to improved results unless people focus on the right issues. Collaboration is a *means to an end*, not *the end itself*. In many schools, staff are willing to collaborate on a variety of topics if the focus of the conversation stops at their classroom door. In a PLC, *collaboration* is a systematic process in which teachers work together, interdependently, to analyze and *impact* professional practice to improve results for their students, their team, and their school.

Collective Inquiry Into Best Practice and Current Reality

Educators in a PLC engage in collective inquiry into (1) best practices about teaching and learning, (2) a candid clarification of their current practices, and (3) an honest assessment of their students' current levels of learning.

Collective inquiry helps educators build shared knowledge, which, in turn, allows them to make more informed (and therefore better)

decisions, and increases the likelihood they will arrive at consensus. Educators in a PLC have an acute sense of curiosity and openness to new possibilities.

Action Orientation: Learning by Doing

Members of high-functioning PLCs are action oriented—they move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality. They understand that the most powerful learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and experience as the most effective teachers. In fact, the very reason teachers work together in teams and engage in collective inquiry is to serve as catalysts for action. *Learning by doing* develops a deeper and more profound knowledge and greater commitment than learning by reading, listening, planning, or thinking (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Furthermore, educators in PLCs recognize that until members of the organization *do* differently, there is no reason to anticipate different results. They avoid paralysis by analysis and overcome inertia with action.

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Persistent disquiet with the status quo and a constant search for a better way to achieve goals and accomplish the purpose of the organization are inherent in the PLC culture. Systematic processes engage each member of the organization in the following ongoing cycles.

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implementing the strategies and ideas
- Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

The goal is not simply learning a new strategy but rather, creating conditions for perpetual learning. This creates an environment

in which innovation and experimentation are viewed not as tasks to be accomplished or projects to be completed, but as ways of conducting day-to-day business—forever. Furthermore, participation in this process is not reserved for those designated as leaders; instead, it is a responsibility of every member of the organization.

Results Orientation

Finally, members of a PLC realize that all their efforts in these areas—a focus on learning, collaborative teams, collective inquiry, action orientation, and continuous improvement—must be assessed on results rather than intentions. Unless initiatives are subjected to ongoing assessment based on tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark, not purposeful improvement. As Fred Kofman and Peter Senge (2014) conclude, “The rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results” (p. 44).

What Has Stayed the Same?

It is helpful to begin an examination of the PLC at Work process since 2008 with a look at what has stood the test of time—the concepts, practices, and assumptions that have not changed. The following remain as fundamental and foundational as they were over a decade ago.

The Necessity (and Challenge) of Shaping the Culture of the School and District

Educators who seek to develop schools or districts into successful PLCs must engage in an intentional process to impact the culture of their schools and districts. When they are successful, their organizations will undergo profound cultural shifts. Rick and Bob (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) certainly stressed the importance of *culture*—the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for an organization—in *Professional Learning Communities*

at Work. What has become clearer to us is that those who hope to reculture a school or district will face two very significant barriers.

First, educators have been conditioned to regard school improvement as programs to adopt or practices to implement, rather than as an ongoing process to build their collective capacity to achieve the purpose, priorities, and goals of their organizations. It is not unusual for us to hear a faculty say, “We do PLCs on Thursday mornings”—a telltale sign they have missed the central premise of the PLC concept and have simply added a new practice to their existing school culture. When the culture has truly shifted, a faculty recognizes that they *are* a PLC; they do not *do* PLCs. They subject every practice, program, policy, and procedure to ongoing review and constant evaluation according to very different assumptions than those that guided the school in the past.

The second barrier to reculturing is particularly formidable. It stems from an idea grounded in the Talmudic concept of dream analysis: we don’t see things as they are; rather, we see things as we are. Every one of us develops patterns of thought or mental models that represent complex webs of our ideas and assumptions about the world in which we live (Senge, 1990, 2006). These models filter our observations and experiences and help us make sense of them. We process new information to conform to the ongoing stories we tell ourselves. We are likely to dismiss or ignore anything inconsistent with that story or contrary to our mental models. To paraphrase a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, we only see what we are prepared to see (Atkinson, 2000).

Organizational theorists advise that a key to improving any organization is honestly assessing the current reality (Collins, 2001) and confronting the hard facts (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). While dreams of a compelling future are important, successful people aren’t idle dreamers; they are grounded in current reality (Dalio, 2017). Who could oppose such sound advice? We have discovered, however, that the problem in improving schools is not presenting compelling evidence of the need for change, or even demonstrating the most promising strategies for raising student achievement; the problem is that the

evidence and strategies often get filtered through the mental models and mythology of the hard-working, well-intentioned educators who are ultimately called upon to do differently.

The case for operating schools and districts as PLCs is compelling; it is supported by research, proven in practice, endorsed by professional organizations, and best of all, grounded in common sense. We cannot recall a single time when we have reviewed the evidence in support of the PLC process with a group of educators and they then opposed the concept. No staff has ever argued schools are more effective when teachers work in isolation, when they focus on what is taught rather than on what is learned, when high-stakes summative assessments are the only tools used to monitor student learning, or when the response to students who are not learning is left to the discretion of each teacher. But later, all too often, the existing mental models and prevailing mythology begin to erode and distort the PLC concept. Examples of the prevailing mythology include the following.

- “Not all kids can be expected to learn at high levels, because learning is a function of ability, and ability is distributed along the bell-shaped curve.”
- “It is my job to teach and their job to learn.”
- “The schedule won’t let us.”
- “If we give students additional opportunities to learn when they struggle, we teach them to be irresponsible and deprive them of the important lessons to be learned through failure.”
- “We cannot go forward unless everyone agrees, because you cannot insist that people do something they do not choose to do.”
- “This is just the latest fad, and it too shall pass.”

The words U.S. President John F. Kennedy spoke at Yale University in 1962 are uncannily appropriate when applied to the world of public education:

As every past generation has had to disenthral itself from an inheritance of truisms and stereotypes, so in our own time we must move on from the reassuring repetition of stale phrases to a new, difficult, but essential confrontation with reality. For the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Mythology distracts us everywhere. (Kennedy, 1962)

There is no easy way to overcome the obstacle of mythology when engaged in school improvement. It involves making thinking explicit and calling upon people to engage in the difficult task of articulating and examining their assumptions. It calls for building shared knowledge and learning by doing. It requires breaking free of inertia by creating new experiences for people that call upon them to act in new ways. It demands constant and consistent commitment to a sustained direction during an extended period of time. There is no one *a-ha moment* when the existing culture will give way to new assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for the school or district. The transformation requires fierce resolve, tremendous passion, and relentless persistence. No matter how effectively the case is made for building the capacity of a staff to function as a PLC, much work will remain to be done. In this second edition, Anthony Muhammad, a global authority on this topic, adds greater clarity on how to create a culture that ensures learning and equity for all.

The Tendency for Hard Facts About School Improvement to Be Distorted Into Dangerous Half-Truths

Stanford University researchers Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton (2006) have concluded organizations often distort clear and compelling evidence of best practice into dangerous half-truths. We have repeatedly seen this phenomenon at work in schools and districts throughout North America. The existing mythology of schooling is so seductive that rather than recognizing the need to create a new culture based on new assumptions, educators are prone to adopt and dilute ideas and concepts to fit their existing culture. They opt for “sorta

PLCs,” and the concept begins a slow but inevitable death from the constant compromises of its core principles. Throughout this book, we will identify examples of how powerful hard facts are being distorted into dangerous half-truths in education.

The Importance of an Action Orientation or “Learning by Doing”

In *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Rick and Bob (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) stressed the importance of building the foundation of a PLC through the articulation of shared mission (purpose), vision (clear direction), values (collective commitments), and goals (indicators, timelines, and targets). We offered strategies and templates for leading the dialogue and generating the documents designed to reflect this solid foundation for moving forward. It has become apparent, however, that schools and districts often settle for merely creating documents rather than implementing ideas. In many instances, little is done to align organizational practices or individual actions with the expressed purpose and priorities. We have come to understand that *writing* a mission statement has often been used as a substitute for *living* a mission. Dialogue and documents can be used to create the illusion of change and to impede rather than promote meaningful action. Therefore, in this book we repeatedly return to the questions, “What would our district, school, teams, and classrooms look like if we really meant what we said?” and “What specific actions can we expect to see in light of our priorities?”

The Importance of Frequent, Common Formative Assessments

In *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Rick and Bob (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) listed two questions to guide the work of a PLC: “What is it we want our students to learn?” and “How will we respond when they do not learn?” Later in the book, they discuss teachers developing common assessments as part of their collaborative team process, implying that teachers would work together to answer the question, “How will we know if our students are learning?” But

in retrospect, Rick and Bob acknowledged they did not give this issue nearly enough attention. We have come to understand that one of the most powerful strategies available to a school that hopes to become an effective PLC is to engage teachers in the creation of high-quality common assessments. The question, “How do we know if our students are acquiring the intended knowledge, skills, and dispositions of this course, grade level, or unit of instruction?” is the linchpin of the PLC process and a critical component of the work of collaborative teams.

Furthermore, the work of Douglas Reeves, Dylan Wiliam, Paul Black, Richard J. Stiggins, Nicole Dimich, Tom Schimmer, Cassandra Erkens, and others has helped us come to a much deeper appreciation of the importance and power of formative assessments, assessments used as part of the teaching and learning process instead of assessments administered only to provide a grade.

The Importance of Providing Teachers With Relevant and Timely Information (Not Data) as a Catalyst for Improving Teaching

We have concluded schools and teachers suffer from the DRIP syndrome: they are *data rich, but information poor*. Most teachers are awash in data, but data alone will neither inform nor improve a teacher’s practice, and students will not achieve at higher levels unless teachers are becoming more effective in their classrooms. Without relevant information on their respective strengths and weaknesses, teacher conversations regarding the most effective ways to help students learn a concept will deteriorate into sharing of uninformed opinions (“This is how I like to teach it”).

Improving teacher practice requires informed and precise conversation about effective techniques, and the best way to provide teachers with the tools for that conversation is to ensure each receives frequent and timely information regarding the achievement of his or her students in reaching an agreed-on standard on a valid assessment in comparison to other similar students attempting to achieve the same standard. We will later review strategies and processes that

provide teachers with the ongoing information they need to improve their practice.

The Importance of a Systematic Response When Students Don't Learn, and a Process for Enriching and Expanding Learning When Students Are Already Proficient

In *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Rick and Bob (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) made repeated references to the significance of a collective response when students did not learn. They acknowledged they did not, however, adequately address what such a response would look like in the real world of schools. We attempt to address that here by providing parameters for and examples of systematic interventions that ensure students receive additional time and support for learning when they struggle. We have also asked educators to tackle the issue of how schools can expand and enrich learning for students who are already proficient in the skills being taught. To assist with these outcomes, we are pleased to add Mike Mattos to the writing team of this book—a respected expert in creating highly effective systematic interventions and extensions.

The Importance of Guiding the Work of Collaborative Teams

We have come to a deeper understanding of steps that schools can take to help teachers move from a tradition of isolation to a culture of collaboration; however, it has also become increasingly evident that simply providing educators with time to collaborate will do nothing to improve a school if they spend that time focusing on issues that do not impact student learning. One of the most pressing questions a school must consider as it attempts to build the collaborative culture of a PLC is not, “Do we collaborate?” but rather, “What do we collaborate about?” This book offers more specific and purposeful strategies to help educators engage in collaboration that impacts both student and adult learning.

The Importance of Widespread Leadership and the Role of the Central Office

Professional Learning Communities at Work focused on the school as the center of change and devoted little attention to the role of the central office in promoting the PLC concept throughout a district (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Furthermore, although it called upon principals to involve faculty in decision making and to empower teachers and teams, it offered few specific examples regarding widespread distribution of leadership. This book will address both the role of the central office and specific ways to distribute leadership throughout the organization. It will also explore the critical role of leaders in initiating and sustaining a substantive improvement process.

The Need for a Common Language

Harvard University researchers Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2001) find that changing the conversation in an organization can have a profound impact on its culture and the day-to-day work of the people within it. Changes in conversation, however, require specificity of language. Many organizations settle for superficiality in language, using terms so ambiguously and loosely that they can mean very different things to different people. We have come to understand that not only a common language but also precision regarding the meaning of that language are crucial to the culture of discipline essential to effective schools and districts. This book will attempt to provide clarity and exactness regarding the critical terminology of PLCs.

The Benefit of a Contemporary Context

Much has changed in public education since the mid-2000s. While state standards have attempted to clarify what students must learn, the number of standards has increased dramatically, and increasingly these standards call for higher and more complex learning from students. Additionally, teachers are being held to a higher degree of accountability than ever before, often with less resources and support. At the same time, students are increasingly being asked to learn at home in a virtual environment, creating a widening gap between

students who have support and resources at home and those who do not. Educators are not immune from the current context in which learning is expected to occur. This second edition attempts to recognize and respond to the current reality of American education and society at large.

What Has Become Clearer?

In the 21st century, there has been a dramatic increase in research and implementation based on the concepts and practices that, together, form the PLC at Work process. While the basic beliefs, foundation, and assumptions of the PLC at Work concept have been validated, much has been learned as increasing numbers of schools and school districts have implemented the process. Much has been learned about improving learning for both students and adults. Consider the following.

The Futility of “PLC Lite”

Since the release of the first edition of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour et al., 2008), our work has reinforced our understanding of the importance of *doing* the work of a PLC, rather than simply embracing the term. Douglas Reeves and Rick DuFour (2016) caution leaders who might be tempted to pursue any program with the label *professional learning community*: they must understand that labels alone are not synonymous with a deep, rich understanding of all the concepts and practices reflective of a high-performing PLC, much less the commitment required to embed the practices into the day-to-day structure of a school or throughout a district.

Why do so many educators settle for what Reeves and DuFour (2016) refer to as *PLC lite*? Reeves and Robert Eaker (2019b) highlight a number of the more obvious reasons. Often leaders choose to settle for PLC lite simply because some of the concepts and practices are easier and quicker to implement than others. These leaders pick and choose a few PLC practices, such as organizing into collaborative

teams, while declining to embrace others, such as embedding structures and processes that ensure additional time, support, and extension of learning during the school day, regardless of the teacher to whom a student is assigned.

This pick-and-choose approach results in only modest gains, at best. Reeves's (2016) research shows that *all* the major components of the PLC at Work process are required to see significant gains in student learning. The concepts and practices of a high-performing PLC are interconnected, with each dependent on and enhanced by the other. Since the publication of *Professional Learning Communities at Work* in 1998, the PLC process has been implemented in hundreds of schools across North America and worldwide. The experiences of these schools have taught us that anything less than full implementation of all PLC practices is problematic at best. Other educators choose to settle for the cosmetic elements of PLC lite. They opt for banners, lapel pins, slogans—and labeling any meetings or teams “PLCs.” These educators simply jump on the PLC bandwagon as the latest fad. Reeves and Eaker (2019b) caution:

It would be naïve not to recognize the fact that there are those who become instant experts in fads du jour. Leading the journey to becoming a high-performing professional learning community requires not only a deep, rich understanding of the PLC concepts and practices, but also *fidelity*—doing the right work, in the right ways, for the right reasons. (p. 8)

There is no shortcut to getting started, learning together, and doing the work—that is, *learning by doing!* Becoming a PLC that impacts student and adult learning for the better is not easy. The journey is complex, but it is inherently worthwhile!

Significant Improvement Doesn't Take as Long as Previously Thought

Each year, Solution Tree conducts PLC at Work Institutes across North America and around the globe. At each of these institutes, there is a panel discussion during which members of the audience can

ask questions. A frequently asked question is, “How long, typically, does it take before we can expect to see results—significant improvement in student learning?” Interestingly, the answer to this question has changed rather significantly since publication of the first edition in 2008.

For many years, the typical answer was between three and five years—three to five years for elementary schools, and perhaps five to seven years for secondary schools. What we have learned since the publication of the first edition in 2008 is that significant school change does not take as long as we previously thought.

Author, speaker, and consultant Michael Fullan (2019) reflects on systemic change in schools:

In the 1980s, I said that systemic change in schools and districts requires five to seven years of work. Now we know that change can happen at a much faster pace. Since then, research has shown that leaders armed with practical knowledge and partnering with their communities can achieve remarkable changes within a year or two. (p. xiii)

Reeves and Eaker (2019a) echo Fullan’s observation that significant school improvement can occur at a much more rapid pace than previously thought; they write, “In a single semester—usually about one hundred days—schools have achieved dramatically improved student performance, better climate and culture, improved faculty morale, and better discipline and attendance” (p. 2). Recognizing many educators might view these findings with skepticism, Reeves and Eaker (2019a) point out that there are numerous examples of remarkable accomplishments that have been achieved within a 100-day timeframe. The writing of the U.S. Constitution, Dostoevsky’s *The Gambler*, and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s enactments that lifted the United States from the grips of the Great Depression are a few examples.

As use of the PLC at Work process has rapidly increased since 2008, a constant theme has emerged. Leaders who capture the power of creating short-term wins linked to frequent, timely, and meaningful

recognition and celebration have seen significant school improvement in a relatively short period of time. While long-term goals are important, achieving more long-term goals requires momentum that can only be achieved through a series of shorter recurring implementation cycles. We have learned that after clearly developing a shared mission that focuses on enhancing the learning of each student, leaders can organize, provide initial training, and direct the work of teams rather quickly. Teams can begin to sharpen the focus on what all students must learn, and engage in the collaborative process of writing a few formative assessments. They can also take the initial steps of developing a plan for additional time, support, and extension of learning. These steps, which can be well underway after one year, will, in most cases, have a positive impact on student learning.

Superintendents and Principals Must Lead

The very definition of *school improvement* implies action, and causing people to act requires effective leadership, particularly from the district superintendent and each building principal. Implementing the PLC at Work concept in a wide variety of schools and districts throughout North America and around the world has led to our belief that *effective leadership is the one indispensable factor for sustained significant school improvement*. There is no way around this fact. As powerful as the PLC process is, it is not strong enough to overcome weak and ineffective leadership.

When analyzing why some schools within the same district demonstrate improved student learning while others do not, the explanation is most often the leadership effectiveness of the building principal. Fifty years of school effectiveness research has consistently pointed to strong principal leadership as a key factor in school effectiveness.

Leadership characteristics such as the ability to motivate and inspire, model the behavior expected of others, create a culture of caring and mutual respect, and show passion and persistence are vital to the success of PLC implementation. In addition, we have identified specific leadership actions superintendents and principals must take if schools

are to reap the full benefits of the PLC at Work process. Consider the following actions of effective superintendents and principals.

Accept the Responsibility for Embedding PLC Concepts and Practices Throughout the Organization

Effective superintendents and principals go beyond setting direction by announcing or supporting the PLC process; they take personal responsibility for leading a collaborative process of embedding practices and concepts deep into virtually every aspect of district- and school-level structures and culture. When a superintendent or principal declares his or her support for the PLC process, but also announces that he or she is assigning leadership responsibility to someone else, he or she is communicating the message, “I support this idea, but it is not my top priority; therefore, I’m passing this responsibility to someone else while I focus on what is more important.”

Begin by Building a Small Guiding Coalition

Rather than beginning the process of embedding PLC at Work concepts and practices on a districtwide or even schoolwide basis with the accompanying possibility of misunderstanding, lack of commitment, and pushback, a wiser course is to begin by working with a small group of respected and influential people in order to first learn together about the PLC process and its practices. As this small group—called a guiding coalition—gains new knowledge, and importantly, a commitment to move forward, the members become valuable advocates.

As learning and commitment deepen, the size of the group can expand to a point at which it is obvious there is enough support and enthusiasm to move forward as an entire district or school. How long this process will take and how many people should be involved in this initial guiding coalition will differ with each situation. But the efficacy of beginning by first learning together by creating a small, committed, and respected guiding coalition is an important step in reculturing schools into PLCs.

At its core, a PLC reflects the characteristics of a *learning organization*, meaning that the learning of adults as well as the learning of

students are paramount. In this regard, leaders who effectively reculture their district or school into a PLC begin by learning together with a small group of highly respected leaders who, collectively, represent various constituencies within the district or school.

Effective leaders select the members of the guiding coalition with great care. These individuals must be successful in their various roles and highly respected among their peers. Importantly, they must have the reputation and ability to positively influence others.

Consistently Connect Expectations to the Why

In *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek (2009) points out that effective leaders inspire others to take action by connecting improvement practices to the *why*—why we should do this and why these practices will help us achieve our core purpose of improving student learning. Importantly, the why must be connected directly to the district or school’s core purpose—its fundamental mission—of improving student learning, along with the vision of what the district or school has declared it seeks to become. And, equally important, the why must be directly connected to the collaboratively agreed-on commitments—what people agreed they would do to make the district or school’s mission and vision a reality. By connecting the why to specific decisions and actions, leaders connect the abstract to reality.

Focus on the District Office or Principal Team

Typically, school-improvement initiatives initially focus on teachers; for example, districts or schools implement merit pay, classroom observations, increased accountability, higher licensure standards, and so on. Principals are often viewed (and, more importantly, view themselves) as mere messengers. It is common to find principals who attend a meeting at the district office and then at the subsequent faculty meeting communicate, “At the principals’ meeting we were informed that they want you to . . .” Clearly, the message is, “Hey, I’m just the messenger here! Don’t blame me if you don’t like this. I have no stake in this. It’s just what I was told.”

Effective superintendents and principals are integral members of a district or principal leadership team. In other words, they understand and accept their responsibility for improving student success for all students within the district or school. In addition, district office and principal meetings do not resemble the nuts and bolts meetings of traditional schools. Rather, the focus is on learning of both adults and students. These meetings include such activities as collaboratively analyzing learning data and collaboratively engaging in collective inquiry and action research related to improvement strategies that focus on identified high-priority needs. The team also collaboratively anticipates issues and questions that might arise as they move forward with various school-improvement initiatives or practices, and they practice and rehearse the work that they expect teacher teams to undertake. They do not ask teachers to do work that they themselves have not experienced.

Embed a Simultaneous Loose-Tight Structure and Culture

In *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Rick and Bob (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) observed that the results of previous top-down reform initiatives have been disappointing. Similarly, bottom-up improvement efforts failed to achieve desired results. A more promising approach business management experts Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr. (2007) advocate in their best-selling book *In Search of Excellence* is for leaders to be both *tight* and *loose*—tight about the organization’s mission, vision, values, shared commitments, and data-based goals, along with a few specific strategies and behaviors, and loose by encouraging creativity, innovation, and initiative. Generally, this means effective leaders are *tight* about behaviors associated with the *what* and *why*, and *loose* about the *how*. The focus is on results: Are students learning, and how do we know?

Since the publication of the first edition of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour et al., 2008), we have sharpened the knowledge base regarding which behaviors effective leaders must view as *tight*. For example, every school must be organized into collaborative teams of teachers who teach the same or similar

content. The principal and school leadership team (composed of the principal and teacher team leaders) must lead and monitor the work of teams. While teams might engage in several tasks, the primary work of teacher teams must be focused on the four critical questions of learning in a PLC (DuFour et al., 2016):

1. What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient? (p. 36)

Effective superintendents and principals must be *tight* regarding the expectation that each school must collaboratively develop a systematic plan for providing additional time and support during the school day and regardless of the teacher to whom students are assigned. Absent additional time and support during the school day, the other aspects of the PLC process will have little impact.

It is important to note that as district or school leaders undertake initiatives designed to improve student (and adult) learning in specific areas, they must clearly communicate (1) why this initiative is important, (2) how the district or school staff are going to proceed, and (3) that this is a non-negotiable (*tight*) undertaking.

Frequently Monitor and Celebrate the Right Things

One important way leaders communicate what they truly value is by what they monitor—what they pay attention to—and what behaviors they frequently and publicly recognize and celebrate. Effective superintendents and principals recognize there is a huge difference between knowing that meaningful monitoring and frequent celebration are important and planning for monitoring and celebration of both student and adult work. They do not leave these fundamental leadership behaviors to chance.

Provide Resources and Support

It is unreasonable to think that adults and students will be able to fulfill the promise of the PLC process absent the necessary resources. If superintendents and principals expect others to successfully implement various initiatives and associated tasks, they must realize they have a corresponding obligation to provide the resources necessary for success. Educators will need time to accomplish their work, they might require training or specific materials, and they can almost always benefit from high-quality examples.

Limit Initiatives

The PLC at Work process is not one of many improvement initiatives districts and schools undertake. Rather, it is the organizing framework for embedding practices throughout the district or school that, taken together, research and practice have shown to positively impact student success. To reap the full benefits of becoming a high-performing PLC, administrators, teachers, and support staff (and students) must be spared a wide range of initiatives that are disconnected, redundant, or simply lack the promise of a significant positive impact. Time, clarity, deep understanding, and confidence only come when superintendents and principals limit initiatives.

Create a Systematic, Targeted Process for Interventions and Extensions

In their fifteen years of work with schools prior to writing *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Rick and Bob (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) would frequently ask superintendents and principals, “How does your school respond when students experience difficulty learning?” The answer almost always involved a response such as, “We have some really great teachers who go to extraordinary lengths to help students when they struggle.” In other words, answers rarely showed a *school* response. Most often, responses reflected a dependence on individual teachers.

Because it is virtually impossible for individual teachers to possess all the expertise and resources necessary to address the variety of

student needs in their classrooms, any school truly committed to all students learning at high levels must create a schoolwide, systematic intervention process. Only by leveraging the collaborative efforts of the entire staff—including administrators, classroom teachers, certificated specialists, and classified staff—can a school best meet the academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and environmental needs of their students. This is the primary reason why in the PLC at Work process, the entire school (or district) is considered the PLC—because the entire staff accepts collective responsibility for every student's success and readily contributes their specific expertise, experience, and efforts to achieve this outcome.

Certainly, collaborative teacher teams will be highly involved in this process. Nevertheless, it is unlikely a grade-level or departmental team of teachers alone can meet the diverse needs of their shared students, as their collective knowledge and skills are also insufficient. Equally important, teacher teams cannot unilaterally change the master schedule to create intervention time during the school day or independently determine the use of schoolwide support staff, such as special education teachers, instructional aides, counselors, school psychologists, speech therapists, subject specialists, and classified support staff. Instead, district and site leadership must take primary responsibility to coordinate, monitor, and revise the processes to intervene and extend student learning.

Recognizing the importance of a timely, directive, systematic process to provide students with additional time and support, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 encourages the use of response to intervention (RTI) as an alternative to more traditional special education services. As the interest in and use of a multilevel system of supports (MTSS) have become more widespread, it has led many educators to ask, “We were working to become a high-performing PLC, but now we are thinking about switching to an RTI/MTSS model to improve student learning.” This kind of thinking fails to recognize that PLCs and RTI are not competing school-improvement approaches; rather, RTI, when implemented

properly, aligns with the PLC at Work process, particularly with critical questions three and four: How will we respond when students don't learn, and how will we respond when they do? A PLC is the perfect foundation for RTI, as the PLC at Work process provides the collaborative culture, instructional focus, and targeted assessment practices needed to effectively create a highly effective, multitiered system of interventions and extensions.

Increase Emphasis on Collective Inquiry, Action Research, and Continuous Improvement

While the first step leaders in an effective PLC take is almost always learning together, learning together is of little value unless it results in action, specifically, *doing*. Leaders who successfully embed the concepts and practices of a PLC into their school or district place a heavy emphasis first on learning, but then on doing. While workshops, courses, book studies, and so on are valuable, little will change unless administrators, teachers, and support staff move from learning to doing.

Those who wish to embed PLC at Work practices should not let their quest for perfection keep them from getting started. It is important to first get started, and then continue on a journey of getting better by creating a culture of continuous improvement. The question, then, is how to get started. What should we do? Leaders at every level can benefit from a conceptual framework of collaborative data analysis, collective inquiry, and action research, all leading to the long-term goal of creating a culture of continuous improvement.

While DuFour and Eaker (1998) and DuFour and his coauthors (2008) identify the use of collective inquiry and action research as foundational characteristics of a high-performing PLC, our subsequent experience with PLCs has led to the recognition that while the importance of action research and collective inquiry are widely recognized, observers are much less likely to see teams engage in action research and collective inquiry in a frequent and systematic manner as part of how they engage in their work day in and day out. This second edition of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*

includes an increased emphasis on both collective inquiry and action research as key components within a broader context of a culture of continuous improvement.

The key to capturing the full power of collective inquiry and action research is *focus*—focusing on collaboratively developed, data-driven, high-priority goals and by linking these goals to the practice of collectively identifying research-based and practitioner-proven best practices. In other words, *doing* should not be haphazard. Effectively doing requires a focus on the things that have been identified, through collaborative data analysis, as high-priority targets for improvement. Leaders in an effective PLC place high value on collaboration, but they do not see collaboration as a mere averaging of opinions. Instead, effective PLCs are data driven.

Once teams develop data-driven, high-priority goals, the next step is to engage in collective inquiry into actions that hold the most promise for positively impacting each goal—expressly, learning together by seeking best practices. Unfortunately, the idea of seeking and implementing best practices is often misunderstood. The key is to focus on the high-leverage strategies most likely to impact high-need goals, as well as strategies that can be reasonably adopted or adapted; it does not mean undertaking every new best practice that emerges.

Additionally, collaboratively engaging in the search for best practices requires distinguishing between practices that are statistically significant and those that are clinically significant. That is, research shows some best practices to be statistically significant, but as Reeves and Eaker (2019a) point out, success is much more likely when practices have been shown to be both statistically and clinically significant. In other words, best practices can be found in another classroom, team, school, or in a neighboring district, as well as in research reports or articles. The key question is this: What works?

Of course, identifying best practices leads to the question, “Yeah, but will this work in *our* school?” In high-performing PLCs, the answer to this question is, “Well, we don’t know for sure, so let’s try it out. Let’s engage in action research.” Again, the strategy is, *let’s*

learn together. Best practices often need to be adapted and sometimes rejected all together.

Collective inquiry and action research are critical elements of the larger process that creates a culture of continuous improvement. The very phrase *continuous improvement* implies a process that is never-ending. How then, can leaders maintain the motivation, focus, and energy required for successful continuous improvement? The answer is to create short-term wins to achieve long-term continuous improvement. Effective leaders utilize repeating cycles of roughly one hundred days that include collaborative data analysis, goal setting, collective inquiry, and action research that, over time, enhance the likelihood of long-term continuous improvement (Eaker & Sells, 2016).

An Ongoing Process

Improving student learning is an ongoing, never-ending process. DuFour and coauthors (2016) write that the goal of continuous improvement:

Is not to simply learn a new strategy, but instead to create conditions for perpetual learning—an environment in which innovation and experimentation are viewed not as tasks to be accomplished or projects to be completed but as ways of conducting day-to-day business, *forever*.
(p. 13)

Creating a culture of continuous improvement implies an ongoing process in which collaborative teams analyze data, engage in collective inquiry, set short-term goals, and act on those goals through action research; they monitor results and make adjustments along the way, celebrate small wins, and repeat.

No organization can continually improve unless its members create processes and practices that involve continual learning—for every student, every adult, every team, every school, every day! In the following chapters, we dig deeper into each essential element of the PLC at Work process to show how continuous improvement can become a reality in your school or district.



CHAPTER 2

The Case for Professional Learning Communities at Work

The use of PLCs is the best, least expensive, most professionally rewarding way to improve schools. . . . Such communities hold out immense, unprecedented hope for schools and the improvement of teaching

—MIKE SCHMOKER

One can argue that the single greatest contributor to political stability and economic prosperity in the United States is its public education system. The Founding Fathers believed that free universal education was critical to the vitality of the new republic, as an educated populace is the backbone of a strong democracy (Jefferson, 1782). From the smallest towns to the largest cities, local classrooms are where youth learn the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, the children of newly arrived immigrant families learn English, and the next generation of voters learns the skills needed to cast a ballot and write a petition. Regardless of a family's economic status, this opportunity is not only offered, but over time has been deemed mandatory.

An educated citizenry also transformed the U.S. economy from primarily labor driven to one of innovation and entrepreneurship. Business leaders gain options and opportunities from a growing pool of highly skilled employees, and subsequently have to offer

commensurate higher wages. For children born to families living in poverty, education provides the most reliable, realistic pathway to economic prosperity. Education is essential to protecting our most sacred ideals—the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. While U.S. citizens have debated and fought over many issues throughout history, they have been united in a collective belief that there are essential individual and collective benefits when children receive a proper education.

Yet while support for U.S. public education has been historically strong, an honest assessment of reality must conclude that access to school has not always been universal, nor has there been an expectation that all students should benefit equally. When Thomas Jefferson (1782) advocated for free universal education, he was implicitly referring to the sons of land-owning families, as they were the only future citizens allowed to vote at that time. A vast majority of women, African Americans, and children born in poverty were denied the right to attend public school. For the boys allowed to attend, there was not an expectation that all would derive similar benefits. While Jefferson (1782) proposed three years of public schooling for the boys of Virginia, he advocated for a system of education that ensured only the twenty “boys of best genius” in the state would be “raked from the rubbish annually” to receive up to ten years of schooling at the public’s expense, and that only half of those would ultimately be admitted to the university each year (Jefferson, 1782).

Subsequently, schools were specifically designed to sort and select students according to their perceived abilities and likely vocations—an outcome that has been a clearly articulated goal of U.S. public education for most of the nation’s history. Over one hundred years after Jefferson’s recommendations, when Congress debated the purpose of secondary education, it was determined that high schools should be selective institutions, “catering to the relatively few students who had the interest and the means to attend school after the primary grades” (as cited in Rumberger, 2011, p. 21). As Harvard University president

Charles Eliot, who in 1893 chaired the congressional committee on secondary education, states:

The main function (of high school) is to prepare for the duties of life that small proportion of all the children in the country—a proportion small in number, but very important to the welfare of the nation—who show themselves able to profit by an education prolonged to the eighteenth year, and whose parents are able to support them while they remain in school so long. (as cited in Dorn, 1996, p. 36)

This philosophy became reality, as only 14 percent of children fourteen to seventeen years old attended high school at the turn of the 20th century (Rumberger, 2011). Leaders within the teaching profession also advocated tracking students by perceived ability. In 1910, the National Education Association called on educators to recognize differences among children as they related to their perceived aptitudes, interests, economic resources, and prospective careers and to sort and select them accordingly (as cited in Lazerson & Grubb, 1974).

While the percentage of U.S. youth attending high school increased dramatically throughout the first half of the 20th century, the predominant view of school as a selective process remained. In his 1959 book *The American High School Today*, former Harvard University president James Bryant Conant argued for all students to attend high school but proposed the curriculum be differentiated to prepare students for diverse futures—some for advanced schooling and some for the workplace (as cited in Rumberger, 2011). In reality, the practice of tracking students based on perceived ability continued to favor students from affluent households, while keeping a disproportionate number of female, minority, and economically disadvantaged students in, as Jefferson (as cited in Rumberger, 2011, p. 21) suggested, the educational “rubbish pile.”

The Educational Assembly Line

If sorting and selecting students was the fundamental task of education, the *factory model*—the prevalent organizational model of the

late 19th and early 20th centuries—provided the ideal conceptual framework for completing that task. Frederick Winslow Taylor (1915), the father of “scientific management,” argued that “one best system” could be identified to complete any task or solve any organizational problem. According to Taylor, management’s job was to identify the one best way, train workers accordingly, and provide the supervision and monitoring needed to ensure that workers would follow the prescribed methods without deviation. Taylor’s model demanded centralization, standardization, hierarchical top-down management, a rigid sense of time, and accountability based on adherence to the system. The assembly line embodied Taylor’s principles and helped the United States become the world’s industrial giant.

Confident they had discovered the one best way to run any organization, business leaders and politicians argued that schools should adopt a similar model to produce the kinds of workers industry required. The uniformity, standardization, and bureaucracy of the factory model soon became predominant characteristics of the school district. The key was to have the thinkers of the organization specify exactly what and how to teach at each grade level, and then to provide strict supervision to ensure teachers did as they were told. Decisions flowed down the educational hierarchy to teachers who, like factory workers, were viewed as underlings responsible for carrying out the decisions of their bosses. The focus was on the process rather than the results. If teachers taught the right curriculum, utilized the correct textbooks, assigned students to the appropriate classes, and adhered to the correct schedule, the results would take care of themselves.

The factory model proved to work perfectly—for companies that required replicating identical production methods—and most of the workforce did not need to apply critical thinking and judgement skills to the process. But because a school’s “products” are students who do not all learn the same way, the factory model has proven to be a woefully insufficient way to structure schools.

A Monumental Shift

During the second half of the 20th century, a convergence of three powerful movements dramatically shifted the purpose and expectations of the U.S. educational system. First, the Civil Rights movement challenged the systemic, oppressive practices that denied access and opportunity to millions of American students. This demand for equity rightfully impacted public education, curbing segregation practices toward Black, female, and handicapped students, and moving the system closer to being truly universal. Subsequently, American educators were required to meet the educational needs of a more diverse group of students, many who have traditionally been marginalized and perceived less capable.

The second movement was economic. Driven primarily by technological advances, the U.S. economy became more globally competitive and innovation driven, and other countries challenged its position as the unrivaled world economic superpower. The prevailing opinion was that the U.S. educational system was not producing enough workers with the advanced skills needed to compete in this new economy. In April 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education captured this conclusion in their report's opening sentence:

Our nation is at risk. . . . The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (p. 5)

A Nation at Risk served as a catalyst for a flurry of school-improvement initiatives throughout the United States that came to be known collectively as the *excellence movement*. Within two years of the report, more than three hundred state and national task forces had investigated the condition of public education in America. Adopted reforms included requiring students to earn more credits for graduation in rigorous courses that required more homework. Schools needed to add more days to the school year and more hours to the school day. Schools needed to test students more frequently and expect more of teachers, both before offering employment and before extending

tenure. While these reforms proved generally ineffective at significantly improving student achievement (Ogle & Alsalam, 1990), the excellence movement has had a lasting impact on the U.S. public school system, increasing both the academic rigor students must learn to be career ready, and expecting more than a small number of “select geniuses” to reach this level of academic achievement.

The third movement happened within the teaching profession. A group of educators, citizens, and policymakers began to challenge the prevailing assumption that a student’s academic potential was primarily a by-product of an individual’s innate abilities and home environment. The Effective Schools movement, led by Michigan State University professor Ronald Edmonds, used academic and field research to demonstrate that schools could be reformed to ensure all students meet high academic standards, regardless of their environmental background. As Edmonds stated in 1979:

- (a) We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us;
- (b) We already know more than we need to do that;
- and (c) Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far. (p. 23)

This research, as other renowned researchers including Marzano (2003) and Hattie (2009) have validated and advanced, began to shift the responsibility for student achievement from what happens outside school to what happens within it.

By the end of the 20th century, the lasting impact of these three movements converged into a landmark change in U.S. educational policy: No Child Left Behind (NCLB). For the first time in American history, it was clearly stated that the goal of the public school system was not merely to provide students access to school—the right to be taught; instead, there was now an expectation that all students would actually learn. The law called for reporting student test results separately by race, ethnicity, and other key demographic groups, and it required schools to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state tests overall and for each group of students. If schools could not demonstrate AYP, they faced interventions followed by increasingly

severe sanctions. The law also stipulated that students could transfer to better-performing schools or receive tutoring if their schools did not demonstrate sufficient progress, required states to ensure every teacher was “highly qualified,” and mandated detailed reports to parents on school performance and teacher quality. Finally, the law designated annual increases in the percentage of students achieving proficiency on the state assessment until 2014, when the poor performance of a single student would designate the entire school as “failing.”

No Child Left Behind was clearly the most ambitious educational initiative in American history. As one report concludes:

NCLB has affected families, classrooms and school districts throughout the country. Virtually every aspect of schooling—from what is taught in elementary, middle and high school classes, to how teachers are hired, to how money is allocated—has been affected by the statute. (Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007, p. 14)

While one can rightfully question the effectiveness of the law, the ultimate goal was correct—to ensure every child succeeds in school. At the least, NCLB has changed the conversation about education in America. Questions regarding how to assess the quality of a school, what learning is most essential, and how to monitor the proficiency of each student are much more a part of the dialogue both inside and outside the educational community. Far more attention is being paid to the achievement of groups of students who were overlooked prior to NCLB.

If as a nation and as professionals, we are truly dedicated to *all* students leaving our school system with the academic skills and dispositions they need for effective citizenship and to pursue happiness, then it would be foolish to think perpetuating and refining the factory model and tracking practices that have defined our traditional school structures and instructional practices of the previous two hundred years could achieve this. Reforming our traditional system is required—a demand that has been increasingly thrust upon educators. Unfortunately, the history of educational reform since the

adoption of NCLB has produced more frustration and disagreement than increased student achievement.

Decades of Failed Reform Efforts

A case can be made that the United States has engaged in continuous, unabated, even frenzied efforts to improve schools. As education scholar Terry Moe (2006) observes:

Education reform has become the new status quo. Every president aspires to be the education president, every governor the education governor. The reform process has never ended because the reforms have typically led to disappointment—and to constant demands for still more reforms.

Generally, reform efforts have been based on two approaches: (1) incentives and (2) threats. This “carrots and sticks” philosophy assumes that by providing the proper enticements—or producing an effective level of fear—educators will embrace the need to restructure their schools and revise their practices (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). Examples of incentive-based reforms include merit pay, school-based financial bonuses for increased test scores, budget increases, class-size reduction, more local autonomy, and innovation grants. At the other end of the spectrum, fear-based reforms have included publicly ranking and labeling schools, sanctions, increased competition through vouchers and charter schools, more stringent teacher-evaluation processes, and seizing or closing chronically low-achieving schools.

After decades of “dangling crunchier carrots and wielding sharper sticks” to improve schools, there is little evidence that these reforms have significantly improved student achievement (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). This outcome should not be surprising, as the research and evidence supporting these reforms are virtually nonexistent. The National Center on Education and the Economy couldn’t find any research showing that the carrots-and-sticks strategies led to improved student achievement in the United States or that any of the world’s highest-performing school systems use such methods (as cited in Tucker, 2011). Organizational leadership research validates the same findings.

In his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel H. Pink (2011) provides compelling evidence that using force and fear has a decidedly negative effect on knowledge workers like educators. As Fullan (2006) contends, reforms based on sanctions and external pressure and control may help a school move from “awful” to “adequate,” but they work on only a small part of the problem, violate everything known about change processes that lead to sustainable reform, cause the best teachers to abandon a “failing” school, and actually create conditions that guarantee the improvements will not be sustained. As he writes, “There is, in other words, virtually no chance the approach will result in good let alone great schools” (Fullan, 2006, p. 29). We can assume that individuals with good intentions advocated, and often mandated, this litany of unsuccessful reform efforts. But as Jim Collins (2009) says in his book *How the Mighty Fall*, “Bad decisions made with good intentions are still bad decisions” (p. 148).

This quarter century of nonstop failed reform efforts has led to unprecedented levels of despair about the possibility of school improvement in the United States. Reformers inside and outside education have increasingly argued that American schools are simply incapable of transformation. The Koret Task Force on K–12 Education charged that schools were incapable of reforming themselves because they were bureaucratic, inefficient, unaccountable, and committed to preserving the status quo (as cited in Moe, 2001). Reforming schools has been likened to untangling the Gordian Knot (Whittle, 2006) and turning around a supertanker, although one critic suggested that analogy is “an insult to the speed and maneuverability of supertankers” (Greene, 2006). Even long-time advocates for public education seem despondent. As educational historian Diane Ravitch (2020) summarizes:

The education reform movement that started with George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind law is dead. It died because every strategy it imposed on the nation’s schools has failed. From Bush’s No Child Left Behind to Obama’s Race to the Top to Bill Gates’ Common Core

State Standards to Trump's push for school choice, the reformers have come up empty handed.

Educators have become increasingly defensive as they react to this constant stream of reform and criticism. Their defense typically falls into three categories.

1. We are not as bad as everyone says we are.
2. We cannot overcome the poverty and societal problems that impact our students and our schools.
3. We are victims of a political process led by those with personal agendas.

One can make a case for these arguments; however, this line of reasoning will do nothing to bring about the improvements so desperately required if schools are to meet the needs of the students they serve. If teachers and principals believe the impetus for student learning remains outside their influence and there is nothing they can do to overcome these external variables, the idea of school improvement will assuredly seem futile. If educators continue to argue they cannot be responsible for students' learning until all the problems of society are solved, they are essentially saying they will never accept responsibility for their students' learning. If they are content with the assertion, "We are not as bad off as everyone says we are," they will not create organizations capable of continuous improvement.

And while educators may rail against the accountability measures being imposed upon them by governmental fiat, they should also acknowledge that their own failure to address critical issues in the teaching and learning process has contributed to those fiats. If states have become more prescriptive about what students must learn, that prescription is at least in part a reaction to the fact that what students were taught in any given school depended more on the individual judgements of their teacher than on any common agreement about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions considered most essential to student success. If states have demanded scrutiny of the achievement of subgroups of students, it is because for decades educators ignored the achievement gaps of student subgroups and focused on the ambiguity

of averages. If states have stipulated specific steps that must be taken to address students who had not demonstrated learning, educators must acknowledge that in most schools and districts they have never developed a systematic response to assist students who were not learning, choosing instead to leave the issue to the discretion of individual classroom teachers or to wait for students to fall far enough behind to qualify for special education.

We do not accept the conclusion that it is impossible to improve schools. Nor do we believe that improvement can only occur if parents provide schools with better-prepared students, lawmakers solve the issues of poverty and inequity, and educators are freed of all accountability measures. Although much of the popular criticism of schools has been unfair and inaccurate, we contend that educators have both a professional and moral responsibility to constantly seek better ways of meeting the needs of their students. While we are sympathetic to the difficult conditions in which educators find themselves, we are not apologists for the status quo.

We also challenge the assumption that schools—and educators—are incapable of transformation. It would be difficult to find another profession whose members voluntarily work beyond their contractual hours in the service of others, while earning almost 20 percent less than similarly skilled and educated professionals (National Education Association, 2018). Overwhelmed by a series of disconnected, fragmented, incoherent change initiatives that seem to descend upon them one after another, it is understandable that educators often respond to calls for change with resignation and pessimism. Our experience is that most educators work tirelessly on behalf of their students, using the best practices they know, within the traditional structures that they worked within since they started school as kindergarteners.

On the contrary, we believe in both the possibility of improving schools and the collective capacity of educators to play the key role in that improvement. This belief is not based on naïve optimism or unbridled hope. Instead, it is grounded in compelling research and evidence that show significantly improving the learning for all

students is possible, and that the changes necessary to achieve this outcome are within a school's sphere of control. If, however, future efforts to improve schools are to be more productive than their predecessors, educators and policymakers alike must understand why prior reform efforts have failed and determine what course of action offers the best chance for success.

The Application of Professional Practice to Improve Learning

One can point to numerous reasons why past educational reform initiatives have failed, including the following.

- **Unrealistic expectations:** No Child Left Behind demanded 100 percent proficiency for every student in the United States—a goal that no state or nation in the history of the world has ever achieved.
- **Complexity of the task:** Changing any organization is difficult but changing something as complex as the American system of education is absolutely daunting, primarily because there really is no American system of education. Fifty different, very autonomous states are responsible for overseeing the public school system.
- **Lack of clarity on intended results:** A lack of clarity on intended results has characterized past reform efforts. While there has been general agreement that schools should improve, consensus on the criteria to use to assess that improvement remains elusive.
- **Lack of perseverance:** Because schools have been unable to articulate the results they seek, they have become susceptible to following the educational fads du jour. As a consequence of the constant cycle of initiating and then abandoning innovative fads, educators rarely pursue ideas with the diligence and tenacity necessary to anchor a change within the school.

- **Failure to appreciate and attend to the change process:**

Most educators have not been trained in initiating, implementing, and sustaining change. They have neglected the process of creating a critical mass of support or have failed to proceed because of the mistaken notion that they need unanimous support before launching an initiative.

While all these factors have contributed to the litany of previous reform failures, the primary reason why is actually quite simple: *we have not focused and sustained our efforts on practices proven to best improve student and adult learning.*

As educators, we are members of a profession—a vocation that requires specialized training in the practices deemed most effective in the field (“Profession,” n.d.). Professionals use two criteria for determining the validity of a practice.

1. **Research**—Reliable information demonstrating that a practice has a high likelihood of working
2. **Evidence**—Proof that a practice is actually working

The gold standard for a profession is when a preponderance of research and evidence supports a particular action, philosophy, pedagogy, or approach. When this is the case, educators have both a professional and ethical obligation to effectively use these tools on behalf of those they serve. Using these criteria, there is virtually no research or evidence that supports the continued use of the factory model as the most effective way to structure schools dedicated to improving student and adult learning. Likewise, the research and evidence are conclusive that incentives and threats do not effectively motivate educators to embrace change and seek more effective practices.

There is, however, a prevailing consensus on what pathway offers the best hope for significant improvement. Researchers from a variety of fields—organizational development, leadership practices, school improvement, teacher preparation, professional development, effective schools, and change processes—all offer remarkably similar models

for school improvement. It begins by restructuring schools and districts to function as PLCs.

The Evidence for PLCs

Transforming schools to ensure all students learn—regardless of the obstacles they face outside school—is a daunting task. Undoubtedly, it cannot be achieved through new governmental mandates or stop-gap measures. There is no groundbreaking technology or prepackaged program that can guarantee student success. No shortcuts or silver bullets. Instead, it will require restructuring schools so the professionals within them have ongoing, job-embedded time to collaboratively learn together about the practices proven to increase learning, apply this knowledge, and assess their impact through actual evidence of increased student achievement. Equally important, they must discontinue practices not improving student and adult learning. This is the very definition of a PLC:

An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is the continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 10)

The research and evidence supporting the benefits of structuring an organization around learning collaboratively are compelling. In fact, the research base has continued to grow since Rick and Bob published their first work about PLCs in 1998. In the appendix of this book, we have provided a sampling of the diverse longitudinal research that advocates for the PLC process. We highly recommend readers review this research summary, focusing on the breadth of highly-respected researchers—inside and outside of education—who advocate for organizations to function as PLCs, and for the depth of time that research continues to validate the effectiveness of the process.

Additionally, in the appendix we have provided references to professional organizations that endorse the PLC process. The list includes the following organizations:

- American Association of School Librarians
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American Educational Research Association
- Annenberg Institute for School Reform
- Association for Middle Level Education Board of Trustees
- Center for American Progress
- Learning Forward
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
- National Center for Educational Achievement
- National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE)
- National Center on Time and Learning
- National Commission on Teaching and America's Future
- National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics (NCSM)
- National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- National Policy Board for Educational Administration
- National Science Foundation
- National Science Teachers Association (NSTA)
- North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement

Finally, regarding field evidence that validates the effectiveness of schools functioning as PLCs, there are hundreds of identified PLC Model schools from across the world on the AllThingsPLC website (www.allthingsplc.info). To be recognized, these schools and districts must demonstrate evidence that they have fully implemented the PLC at Work process, and that these actions have led to at least three years of significant, sustained improvement in student achievement. The diversity of these models is impressive; they represent large and small schools, public and private, charter and traditional, affluent and economically disadvantaged, rural and suburban.

The educational universe—researchers, practitioners, professional organizations, and policy makers—has aligned in agreement: schools will achieve better results if they function as PLCs. As educational expert James Kadamus (2017) summarizes:

Successful charter schools and traditional schools have the same characteristics: high expectations for what students need to know and be able to do; a powerful curriculum that matches those expectations; instruction aligned to the curriculum that is substantive and creative; and a way to measure student performance and intervene if students fall behind expectations. Educators' and policy makers' time is better spent implementing known successful elements of good schools rather than debating what form they should take.

If professional educators are expected to utilize the practices deemed most effective in their field, an overwhelming preponderance of research and evidence proves that the best way to organize a school or district to increase student and adult learning is by functioning as a PLC. We can no longer consider this point an opinion or hypothesis; it is a fact.

Greater Clarity and Confidence

Since 1998 when Rick and Bob (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) published their book *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, the popularity of the term *professional learning community* has grown exponentially. While this

tremendous surge in interest and implementation is promising, it has also produced some potentially negative, unintended outcomes.

First, the term has become so commonplace and used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education, that it is in danger of losing all meaning (DuFour et al., 2016). While collaboration is a large part of becoming a PLC, just meeting together does not make a school a PLC.

Secondly, the growing interest in the PLC at Work process entices publishing and professional development companies to promote their own versions of PLCs. While we support researchers, organizations, and businesses that provide research-based products and services proven to increase learning, some of these new PLC adaptations are advocating for practices not adequately vetted in research, or are adding steps and popular educational buzzwords to sell their approach as “new and improved.” We fear such motives will perpetuate the revolving door of school reform and distract schools from deeply implementing the right work.

When Rick DuFour, Robert Eaker, and the educators at Adlai Stevenson High School began their focus on collaboration, there were not three big ideas or four critical questions to guide their efforts. Instead, they began by asking this question: “If we have limited time and resources to collaborate, then what are actions we can take that are proven to best increase student learning and build our staff’s capacity to work in high-performing teams?” They did not guess at what these actions would be, but instead committed to collective inquiry—learning together. Then they applied what they learned, gathered targeted evidence to determine if their actions were actually helping more students learn, and used that information to determine their next topics of study. Over time, a convergence of dependable research and field evidence led to the creation of three guiding principles (the big ideas), four foundational pillars, and four critical questions to guide their ongoing work—the essential elements of the PLC *at Work* process.

This collective study of research and evidence continues, enhanced by a growing team of associates and hundreds of model schools that have successfully implemented the PLC process. Since the first edition of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*, we now have greater clarity and confidence on exactly what a PLC must do—and stop doing—to ensure high levels of learning for all students.

Tight Elements in a PLC

To significantly impact student learning, professionals must do more than collaborate—they must focus their collective efforts on the right work. As Fullan (2001) states, “Collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are indeed powerful, but unless they are focusing on the right things, they may end up being powerfully wrong” (p. 67).

To this end, an organization truly committed to ensuring every student learns at high levels *must* do the following five things really well (DuFour, 2015).

1. Work in collaborative teams that take collective responsibility for student learning rather than work in isolation.
2. Implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum, unit by unit.
3. Monitor student learning with an ongoing assessment process that includes frequent, team-developed common formative assessments.
4. Use the results of common assessments to improve individual practice, build the team’s capacity to achieve its goals, and intervene or extend learning on behalf of students.
5. Provide systematic intervention and enrichment.

Work in Collaborative Teams That Take Collective Responsibility for Student Learning Rather Than Work in Isolation

While educators work in teams *within* a PLC, each teacher team is not “a PLC”; rather, the entire organization is the professional learning community. So, if a school functions as a PLC, then the entire school is the PLC. If a district commits to being a PLC, then the entire district is the PLC.

Some other collaborative models—such as professional learning teams (PLTs) and small learning communities (SLCs)—advocate for each teacher team to be a relatively autonomous learning community, each selecting the topics it wants to study and accepting responsibility for the students assigned to its team members. But if our mission is to ensure every student succeeds, it will take a schoolwide “all hands on deck” effort, utilizing the collective expertise and talents of classroom teachers, administrators, special education staff, counselors, school psychologists, and the entire school support staff. Likewise, it will take coordination between teacher teams to articulate curriculum across grades and subjects, and across schools if a district functions as a PLC.

Implement a Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum, Unit by Unit

If a PLC is committed to ensuring all students learn, it must clearly identify the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students must master in every grade and course to be prepared for future success. These essential academic and behavior standards do not represent all the curriculum taught, but instead what all students will actually learn. These outcomes unite and focus team collaboration, common assessments, and schoolwide interventions. Equally important, a PLC must ensure all students have access to their rigorous expectations as part of their core curriculum and discontinue traditional practices that place some students into lower tracks of learning. Focusing team collaboration on this outcome is captured in the first critical question

of a PLC: *What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level?*

Monitor Student Learning With an Ongoing Assessment Process That Includes Frequent, Team-Developed Common Formative Assessments

A PLC evaluates the effectiveness of its efforts through actual evidence of student learning. While this information will come through multiple sources—including high-stakes assessments, behavior data, surveys, classroom assignments and tests, and observational data—the linchpin to the process will be through the use of frequent, team-created common formative assessments. This is because team common assessments most align to a PLC’s essential standards and are given within the flow of instruction, and the results are available quickly to drive subsequent instructional decisions.

These assessments are *formative*, meaning that students not demonstrating mastery of an essential standard will be given additional time and support, with the opportunity to reassess. Equally important, a PLC will discontinue the exclusive use of summative assessments and grading practices designed to rank and sort student achievement and that often deny students the opportunity to try again. Focusing team collaboration on this outcome is captured in the second critical question of a PLC: *How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?*

Use Results of Common Assessments to Improve Individual Practice, Build the Team’s Capacity to Achieve Goals, and Intervene or Extend Learning on Behalf of Students

A PLC is dedicated to ensuring student *and* adult learning. Individual team members use common assessment data to gain a point of comparison for their teaching practices, identifying the specific instructional practices that had the greatest impact on student learning. When a team finds that no members utilized teaching practices that worked well, this will guide members’ collective inquiry into studying practices that should work better for their students. Finally, a

team uses its targeted common assessment data to guide interventions for students who need additional time and support and extensions for students who have met the target.

Provide Systematic Intervention and Enrichment

Undoubtedly, some students will need additional time and support to master essential curricula. Because an individual teacher—or teacher team—can't meet the diverse needs of all students, it will take a schoolwide, systematic effort to provide interventions and extensions. To ensure every student receives this support, a school must provide it during the school day, regardless of which teacher a student is assigned to, and without any student missing new essential classroom curricula. Equally important, traditional intervention practices not showing evidence of effectiveness must be revised or discontinued. Collaboration on this outcome is captured in the third and fourth critical questions of a PLC: *How will we respond when some students do not learn?* and *How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?*

A PLC is *tight* about these five outcomes, meaning they are non-discretionary. *How* they are implemented within and across schools might look different, but that collaboration within a PLC focuses on all five of these outcomes is non-negotiable—not because the organization is trying to be a PLC, but because these are the actions that research and evidence prove will have the greatest impact on student learning.

These outcomes are not a checklist, each to be crossed off as teams answer the four critical questions. Being a PLC is an *ongoing process* focused on getting better and better at what works. It is unrealistic to expect teacher teams to identify the perfect list of essential standards on their first attempt, or immediately write perfect common formative assessments. Likewise, it is unlikely a school will instantly create an impeccable system of interventions and extensions. When done well, being a true PLC requires continuous adjustment based on evidence of student and adult learning.

Additionally, these outcomes respect the professionalism of educators, honoring that individual teachers must also be empowered to practice the art of teaching, and engaging every educator in making critical decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment, interventions, and extensions. While each teacher will make hundreds of individual instructional decisions every day, the PLC at Work process requires that decisions relating to identifying essential standards, common assessments, and systematic interventions and extensions are studied, determined, and applied collectively, ensuring all students have access to the powerful outcomes.

And vitally important is that these five outcomes are realistic and doable. It would be unreasonable to advocate for school-improvement practices that require hiring additional staff, purchasing additional resources, or extending the teacher workday, as these are not possible at many schools. While additional time, staff, and supplies are helpful, they are not required to implement these practices. In fact, most of the Model PLC schools started their PLC at Work journey with no additional funding or staffing and have successfully continued their efforts in spite of significant budget cuts. (See AllThingsPLC [www.allthingsplc.info] for more information on Model PLC schools.) Finally, we do not know of any local, state, or federal laws that forbid a school or district from committing to these practices. It is within a school's direct sphere of influence to take these actions.

We are not suggesting that these outcomes are the *only* topics a teacher team can study, discuss, and apply during their collaboration time. For example, could a team use some of its collaborative time to study a new instructional practice, collectively plan a lesson, or do peer observations? Yes! The purpose of teacher collaboration time is to help educators improve their practices. But these additional actions must not replace or hinder a team's ability to successfully address the five essential outcomes. Rather than divide and dilute a team's attention on a multitude of activities, it is best to successfully implement a limited number of team outcomes proven to best impact student learning.

Engines of Hope

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001) states that greatness requires “the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be” (p. 13). In this chapter, we have tried to do just that. We do not offer this candid evaluation as condemnation of our profession, but as information to guide our next steps. If educators are going to better prepare students for success in the future, we must honestly assess the successes and failures of the past. We must acknowledge that our traditional school system was never designed to meet today’s diversity of student needs, or to prepare all children for success in a global economy driven primarily by information and technology. We must understand why previous, good-intentioned reform efforts have failed to significantly improve student achievement. And most importantly, we must embrace that we have—within our sphere of influence—the knowledge, ability, and resources needed to transform our schools into engines of hope for every child.

In the coming chapters, we will dig deeply into the five essential outcomes of the PLC at Work process, starting with the first essential outcome: How does a PLC create the culture and collaborative structures needed to take collective responsibility for every student’s success?



CHAPTER 3

The Challenge of Cultural Change

[Schools] know how to change. They know how to change promiscuously and at the drop of a hat. What schools do not know how to do is to improve, to engage in sustained and continuous progress toward a performance goal over time.

—RICHARD F. ELMORE

External efforts to improve schools invariably focus on structural changes—the changes that impact policies, procedures, rules, and relationships. When a state or province increases graduation requirements, mandates more minutes of instruction in a content area, adopts more rigorous standards for teacher certification, or creates a system of sanctions for low-performing schools, it is engaged in structural change. When a district moves its high schools to a block schedule, reorganizes its schools into smaller units, announces its junior high schools will now function as middle schools, or requires students to wear uniforms, it too is engaged in structural change.

Policymakers are particularly fond of structural changes because these modifications are immediate and visible. A structural change can be announced with a flourish, and a legislator, governor, education minister, or school superintendent can point to tangible evidence of his or her efforts to improve schools. Unfortunately, structural changes typically neither impact the practices of teachers in their

classrooms nor the assumptions that drive those practices, and thus they are insufficient to improve schools.

In *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*, business team-management expert and author Patrick Lencioni (2012) addresses why structural change is such an attractive form of change, especially to leaders, even though structural changes typically don't lead to significant gains in performance. Lencioni (2012) refers to structural change as *smart change* and cultural change as *healthy change*. He discovered that a focus on structural (smart) change within the context of a system that is not culturally ready (healthy) is a waste of time and resources, and that ineffective organizations continually repeat this mistake. So why do organizations continue to make this essential mistake? According to Lencioni (2012):

Most people prefer to look for answers where the light is better, where they are more comfortable. And the light is certainly better in the measurable, objective, and data-driven world of organizational intelligence (the smart side of the equation) than it is in the messier, more unpredictable world of organizational health. (p. 7)

The companies that shine in the marketplace are those that work specifically on building a healthy culture that drives the development of innovation (smart changes).

The Importance of Cultural Change

Even a cursory review of literature on the change process indicates that meaningful, substantive, sustainable improvement can occur in an organization only if those improvements become anchored in the culture of the organization: *the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for that organization*. The study of school culture can be traced back as far as 1932 when sociologist Willard Waller writes:

Schools have a culture that is definitely their own. There are in the school, complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, and irrational sanctions, a moral code based upon them. There are games, which

are sublimated wars, teams, and an elaborate set of ceremonies concerning them. There are traditions and traditionalists waging their world-old battles against innovators. (p. 96)

All schools have cultures. They may foster collaboration or isolation, promote self-efficacy or fatalism, be student centered or teacher centered, regard teaching as a craft that can be developed or as an innate art, assign primary responsibility for learning to teachers or students, view administrators and teachers as colleagues or adversaries, encourage continuous improvement or defense of the status quo, and so on.

And while it is true that educators shape their school cultures, it is probably more accurate to say that their school cultures shape educators. Organizational development specialist Edgar H. Schein (1992) describes culture as “the assumptions we don’t see” (p. 21). Cultural norms exert a powerful influence on how people think, feel, and act, and because educators are so immersed in their cultures, they often find it difficult to step outside their traditions and assumptions to examine their conventional practices from a critical perspective.

It is understandable that policymakers focus on structural changes in schools. While they can pronounce a change in policy or procedures for schools, they cannot legislate or mandate a change in the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, or habits of the educators within those schools. Cultural changes are less visible, more amorphous, and *much* more difficult to make; yet unless efforts to improve schools ultimately impact the culture, there is no reason to believe schools will produce better results. Cultural change is hard! As educational consultant Anthony Muhammad (2018) states:

As human beings, we do not have the ability to control the thoughts and beliefs of others, so cultural change requires something more profound. It requires leaders to become adept at gaining cooperation and skilled at the arts of diplomacy, salesmanship, patience, endurance, and encouragement. It takes a knowledge of where the school has been, and agreement about where the school should go. (p. 25)

So we come to a central premise of this book, a point to which we will return again and again: *it is impossible for a school or district to develop the capacity to function as a PLC without undergoing profound cultural shifts.* Those who cultivate PLCs must engage in an intentional process to impact the culture. Restructuring can certainly facilitate the process and is often a prerequisite for moving forward, but merely changing structures is never sufficient to create a PLC. The work of developing PLCs is not the work of adopting new programs or implementing an innovative practice; it is the challenge of *reculturing*—the challenge of impacting the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm. When that work is done successfully, the school or district becomes a very different place. As researcher, writer, and speaker Andy Hargreaves observes, “A professional learning community is an ethos that changes every single aspect of a school’s operation. When a school becomes a professional learning community, everything in the school looks different than it did before” (as cited in Sparks, 2004, p. 48).

Table 3.1 shows the cultural shifts schools undergo on the journey to becoming a PLC—shifts in purpose, the use of assessments, responses when students do not learn, the work of teachers, the focus of daily activities, and approaches to professional development.

A Complex and Challenging Task

Bringing about cultural change in any organization is a complex and challenging task. Author and founder and CEO of the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform, Phil Schlechty (2005), refers to the challenge of reculturing as “disruptive change” because it “calls upon the system and those who work in it to do things they have never done” (p. 3). It has also been referred to as *second-order change*—innovation that represents a dramatic departure from the expected and familiar. Second-order change is perceived as a break from the past, is inconsistent with existing paradigms, may seem at conflict with prevailing practices and norms, and requires the acquisition of new knowledge and new skills (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Table 3.1: Cultural Shifts in a Professional Learning Community

A Shift in Fundamental Purpose	
From a focus on teaching . . .	to a focus on learning
From emphasis on what was taught . . .	to a fixation on what students learned
From coverage of content . . .	to demonstration of proficiency
From providing individual teachers with curriculum documents such as state standards and curriculum guides . . .	to engaging collaborative teams in building shared knowledge regarding essential curricula
From expecting some students to learn	to expecting <i>all</i> students to learn
A Shift in Use of Assessments	
From infrequent summative assessments . . .	to frequent common formative assessments
From assessments to determine which students failed to learn by the deadline . . .	to assessments to identify students who need additional time and support
From assessments used to reward and punish students . . .	to assessments used to inform and motivate students
From assessing many things infrequently . . .	to assessing a few things frequently
From individual teacher assessments . . .	to collaborative team-developed assessments
From each teacher determining the criteria to be used in assessing student work . . .	to collaborative teams clarifying the criteria and ensuring consistency among team members when assessing student work
From an over-reliance on one kind of assessment . . .	to balanced assessments
From focusing on average scores . . .	to monitoring each student's proficiency in every essential skill

CONTINUED →

A Shift in the Response When Students Don't Learn	
From individual teachers determining the appropriate response . . .	to a systematic response that ensures support for every student
From fixed time and support for learning . . .	to time and support for learning as variables
From remediation . . .	to intervention
From invitational support outside of the school day . . .	to directed (that is, required) support occurring during the school day
From one opportunity to demonstrate learning . . .	to multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning
A Shift in the Work of Teachers	
From isolation . . .	to collaboration
From each teacher clarifying what students must learn . . .	to collaborative teams building shared knowledge and understanding about essential learning
From each teacher assigning priority to different learning standards . . .	to collaborative teams establishing the priority of respective learning standards
From each teacher determining the pacing of the curriculum . . .	to collaborative teams of teachers agreeing on common pacing
From individual teachers attempting to discover ways to improve results . . .	to collaborative teams of teachers helping each other improve
From privatization of practice . . .	to open sharing of practice
From decisions made based on individual preferences . . .	to decisions made collectively by building shared knowledge of best practice
From "collaboration lite" on matters unrelated to student achievement . . .	to collaboration explicitly focused on issues and questions that most impact student achievement
From an assumption that these are "my students, those are your students" . . .	to an assumption that these are "our students"

A Shift in Focus	
From an external focus on issues outside the school . . .	to an internal focus on steps the staff can take to improve the school
From a focus on inputs . . .	to a focus on results
From a focus on a student's background	to a focus on the student's future (potential)
From goals related to completion of projects and activities . . .	to SMART goals demanding evidence of student learning
From teachers gathering data from their individually constructed tests to assign grades . . .	to collaborative teams acquiring information from common assessments to (1) inform their individual and collective practice, and (2) respond to students who need additional time and support
From independence . . .	to interdependence
From a language of complaint . . .	to a language of commitment
From long-term strategic planning . . .	to planning for short-term wins
From infrequent generic recognition . . .	to frequent specific recognition and a culture of celebration that creates many winners
A Shift in Professional Development	
From external training (workshops and courses) . . .	to job-embedded learning
From the expectation that learning occurs infrequently (on the few days devoted to professional development) . . .	to an expectation that learning is ongoing and occurs as part of routine work practice
From presentations to entire faculties . . .	to team-based action research
From learning by listening . . .	to learning by doing
From learning individually through courses and workshops . . .	to learning collectively by working together
From assessing impact based on teacher satisfaction ("Did you like it?") . . .	to assessing impact based on evidence of improved student learning
From short-term exposure to multiple concepts and practices . . .	to sustained commitment to limited, focused initiatives

Visit go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks for a free reproducible version of this table.

Those who hope to develop their schools and districts as PLCs must remember that every existing system has a well-entrenched structure and culture already in place. People working within that system will typically resist change and fight to preserve the status quo because the rules of engagement and success have been challenged (Kennedy, 2005). In fact, in the midst of the change process, educators are likely to perceive that their school has been weakened, their opinions are not valued, and that the stability of the school has been undermined.

One of the most damaging myths about school leadership is that the change process, if managed well, will proceed smoothly. That myth often causes educators to view problems and conflict as evidence of mistakes or a mismanaged process rather than as the inevitable by-products of serious reform. Muhammad and coauthor Sharroky Hollie (2012) contend:

When a person's need to feel adequate clashes with external forces too great to overcome, the result is a barrage of protective defense mechanisms and deflections. The combination of complex new tasks, few resources, and increased pressure and anxiety without consideration for human emotion can lead to disaster. (p. 37)

Principals and teachers should be advised (and should acknowledge) from the outset that transforming their schools from the industrial model to PLCs will be difficult regardless of how carefully they plan and how skillfully they manage the process. Still, they can make their reculturing efforts more effective by becoming students of the process of improving organizations.

How to Lead the Improvement Process

We made a conscious decision to title this section “How to Lead the Improvement Process” rather than “How to Lead a Change Process,” and we believe the distinction represents far more than semantics. While we are convinced that making the transition from a traditional school to a PLC will require substantive *changes* in both the structures and cultures of schools and districts, the effectiveness of those changes must ultimately be assessed by the extent to which they improve the

ability of educators to fulfill the fundamental purpose of their organizations: ensuring all students learn at high levels. The challenge for school and district leaders is not merely to become skillful in the change process per se. Neither students nor educators are served by the successful implementation of the wrong changes. We are not proponents of change for change's sake, and we are convinced that many educators have jumped aboard the never-ending parade of bandwagons touting the latest change to *avoid* engaging in sustained, substantive reform. The challenge facing educational leaders is to become skillful in the *improvement* process—a challenge they can only meet if they can sustain a collective focus on a few issues that matter over an extended period of time. Any references we make to a *change process*, therefore, should be considered in the context of improvement toward a particular end: helping more students learn at higher levels.

This challenge requires leaders of the improvement process to accept that human beings are unique and respond differently than structures. Positively influencing change in people is profoundly different than the challenge of creating better structures. Ultimately, we want to experience more students learning more, more often. The ultimate goal of change is improvement.

In the modern context, there is no term that confuses the concept of change versus improvement more than *program fidelity*. This term has become very popular as educational corporations try to sell curricular resources or programs to schools or districts that promise an increase in student achievement *if* the program is implemented with *fidelity*. This concept allows school or district officials and educational companies to take credit if the school or district experiences growth in student achievement and blame teachers if the program does not work. This is a classic *hedging of a bet*. Tom Rademacher (2017), a former Minnesota Teacher of the Year, writes:

“With fidelity” are some of the most damaging words in education.

Districts spend a ton of money paying people to pick out massively expensive, packaged curriculums, as if every one of a thousand classrooms needs the exact same

things. Then officials say, over and over again, that they must be implemented “with fidelity.” What they mean is that teachers better not do anything that would serve their students’ specific needs.

When that curriculum does nothing to increase student achievement, it is not blamed. The district person who found it and purchased it is never blamed. Nope. They say, “Well, the teachers must not have been implementing it with fidelity.”

The concept of program fidelity in schools is a gross misuse of a concept that is very important in clinical research. Researchers developed the concept of fidelity to monitor whether interventions were implemented as intended within a research study, thus making it possible to conclude that results were explained by the interventions and not factors related to variance of implementation, but the professional is the most important variable in the entire process. The judgment, instinct, and response of the practitioner cannot be ignored in successful program implementation (Harn, Parisi, & Stoolmiller, 2013).

As stated previously, in the PLC at Work process there are things we are tight and loose about. There are some outcomes (such as the four critical questions of a PLC) that are so important to the process ignoring or poorly implementing them would render the process ineffective (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). Students will learn more when teachers are given an opportunity to learn and grow from one another while focused on the right work. In the PLC at Work process, we bet on the growth of the educators as the catalyst to the growth of students. The concept of program fidelity in school improvement focuses the educator on the process and not the outcome.

Common Mistakes in the Change Process

John P. Kotter (1996) of the Harvard Business School identifies the eight most common mistakes in the change process in his seminal work *Leading Change*.

1. **Allowing too much complacency:** Kotter (1996) contends that the biggest mistake people make when

trying to change organizations is to plunge ahead without establishing a sufficient sense of urgency. He argues that this is a fatal error because change efforts always fail when complacency levels are high (Kotter, 1996).

2. **Failing to create a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition:** Individuals working alone, no matter how competent or charismatic they are, will never have everything needed to overcome the powerful forces of tradition and inertia. A key to successful change is creating first a guiding coalition and ultimately a critical mass of people within the organization who will champion the change process together.
3. **Underestimating the power of vision:** Vision helps to direct, align, and inspire the actions of the members of an organization. Without the clear sense of direction a shared vision provides, the only choices left to individuals within an organization are to “do their own thing,” to check constantly with supervisors for assurance about the decisions they must make, or to debate every issue that arises.
4. **Under-communicating the vision by a power of 10:** Without credible communication, and a lot of it, change efforts are doomed to fail. Three types of errors are common. In the first, leaders underestimate the importance of communicating the vision. They mistakenly believe sending a few memos, making a few speeches, or holding a few meetings will inform people in the organization of the change and recruit them to it. A second mistake is divided leadership. While the head of the organization articulates the importance of the change, other leaders in the organization may tend to ignore it. The third mistake is incongruence between what key leaders say and how they behave. Strategies to communicate vision are always ineffective if highly visible

people in the organization still behave in ways contrary to the vision.

5. **Permitting structural and cultural obstacles to block the change process:** Organizations often fail to address obstacles that block change. These obstacles typically include (1) structures that make it difficult to act, (2) insufficient training and support for people who are critical to the initiative's success, (3) supervisors who do not endorse the change, and (4) information and reward systems that do not align with the new vision. Simply declaring a new vision is not sufficient. The organization must make every effort to remove the structural and cultural barriers that threaten to impede the implementation of that vision.
6. **Failing to create short-term wins:** Change initiatives risk losing momentum if there are no short-term goals to reach and celebrate. Most people will not “go on the long march” unless they see compelling evidence within one year that the journey is producing desirable results. Creating short-term wins requires establishing goals, identifying performance criteria, achieving the goals, and then publicly celebrating the results.
7. **Declaring victory too soon:** There is also a difference between celebrating a win and declaring victory. Until change initiatives become anchored in the culture, they are fragile and subject to regression. Handled properly, the celebration of short-term wins can give the change initiative the credibility it needs to tackle bigger, more substantive problems. Handled improperly, this celebration can contribute to the complacency that is lethal to the change process.
8. **Neglecting to anchor changes firmly in the culture:** Change sticks only when it is firmly entrenched in the school or organization’s culture, as part of “the way we do

things around here." As Kotter (1996) concludes, "Until new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are always subject to degradation as soon as the pressures associated with a change effort are removed" (p. 14).

The issues Kotter outlines are compelling and formidable, but the challenge of change and improvement can get even deeper and more personal. The human component of systemic change and improvement is infinitely more complex than the structural component. Professor Zhouying Jin (2011) describes this challenge as the conflict between *soft technology* (human beings) and *hard technology* (structures and inanimate objects). Jin (2011) states that soft technology change challenges "the realm of ideology, emotion, values, worldview, individual and organizational behaviours, as well as human society" (p. 11). In essence, changes in practice or structure do not implement themselves; they require the cooperation of human beings.

The recognition of the human being as the center of the cultural change process is paramount in successful culture change. University of Michigan Professor Robert E. Quinn (1996) notes:

There is an important link between deep change at a personal level and deep change at an organizational level. To make deep change is to develop a new paradigm, a new self, one that is more effectively aligned with today's realities. This can happen only if we are willing to journey into unknown territory and confront the wicked problems we encounter. (p. 9)

So, what are the challenges we face, the deep challenges that make creating a PLC culture more difficult? What are the deep paradigm shifts that have to occur personally, organizationally, and socially for us to create a culture in which all students can learn at high levels? Should we simply see the world through rose-colored glasses and assume that everyone is personally and ideologically aligned with the premise of the PLC at Work process? There are mirrors of self-reflection, both personal and collective, that we have to examine and then have the courage to make the deep change that Quinn (1996) proposes.

In his book *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division*, Muhammad (2018) proposes three critical mirrors, or challenges of self-reflection, that healthy school cultures use to examine and correct behaviors incongruent with the stated objectives of the school or school system. These three mirrors are labeled by the author as *predeterminations* (Muhammad, 2018).

1. **Perceptual predetermination** involves reflection on an educator's own personal socialization and the impact of that socialization on his or her classroom, including expectations of student performance.
2. **Intrinsic predetermination** is a student's perception of his or her probability of achieving success in school.
3. **Institutional predetermination** is reflection on the institutional barriers or policies within the traditional public school system that make the goal of increased student learning more accessible to some students than others.

A group of educators coming to grips with how they see their students, how the students see themselves, and the fairness of traditional educational systems and structures can cause some serious cognitive dissonance. The unwillingness to go through this deep change can have a profound impact on the implementation of the structural change and innovation. Educators must be willing to examine the following.

- How they view power, privilege, and the human condition (race, class, religion, gender, national origin, language, and so on)
- Student access to opportunity and the fairness of traditions and systems
- The impact of students' view of school norms, traditions, and expectations, and then examine their worldview and adjust their thinking and practice that create an environment where all students want to engage and thrive

Eric Hoffer (1951), a renowned 20th century philosopher, addressed the clash between the comfort of status quo and the discomfort of change in his book *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. Hoffer (1951) studied mass movements and revolutions and finds there are some critical elements that must be present before groups of people are willing to let go of the predictability of their current environment (no matter how miserable) to move toward the uncertain promise of a new reality. The most critical element is a sense of *dissatisfaction*, the belief that the status quo is unacceptable, and where people are willing to pay the price, no matter how steep, to achieve a more desirable future. Hoffer (1951) contrasts that essential element of change with *discontent*, which is to recognize a need to improve, but being unwilling to go through the discomfort of deep personal and collective change to achieve the desired end. In short, if the presence of failing or underperforming students does not produce a sense of dissatisfaction, they will stick with the familiar.

Clearly, urgency alone is not sufficient to serve as a catalyst for change. Furthermore, it would seem impossible to create an adequate sense of crisis in a school with a good reputation where students are achieving reasonably well, parents are satisfied with the education their children receive, and the staff are content with the existing conditions. Yet even these schools must improve if all students are to achieve at high levels.

Leadership Strategies for Changing Culture

But what is it exactly that effective leaders do when it comes to transforming the very culture of the organization? Do they resort to tight leadership—imposing a new regimen and demanding employees adhere to the direction established from the top? Or do effective leaders change the culture of their organizations by using a loose approach to leadership that encourages those within the organization to pursue their own independent interests and initiatives in the belief that such freedom and autonomy will spark the energy and enthusiasm necessary for significant change?

DuFour and Fullan (2013) argue that this question of loose versus tight leadership represents the essential dilemma of large-scale school reform:

How should leaders engage people in the complex process of cultural change? Should they be *tight*—assertively issuing top-down directives that mandate change? Or should they be *loose*—merely encouraging people to engage in the change process, but leaving participation optional? The challenge at all levels of the system is to navigate this apparent dichotomy and find the appropriate balance between tight and loose, between assertiveness and autonomy. If we know anything about change, it is that ordering people to change doesn't work, nor does leaving them alone. (p. 33)

We argue that change requires *both* loose and tight conditions. Finding the proper balance in leadership can be a challenge. If the goal of change is improvement, then leaders must be skilled in their ability to influence others to improve their practice. A leader's success is measured by his or her ability to positively influence others. In *Time for Change: Four Essential Skills for Transformational School and District Leaders*, coauthors Muhammad and Luis F. Cruz (2019) assert that the ability to influence others lies in the leader's ability to understand and meet their needs. These four needs are (1) cognitive, (2) emotional, (3) professional (practical), and (4) performance. Instead of using the terms *loose* and *tight*, Muhammad and Cruz (2019) use the terms *support* and *accountability*. Most professionals respond to the complexity of cultural change when they receive adequate support, and some only change when there is a demand for performance. Muhammad and Cruz (2019) contend that support must precede accountability, because it is unfair to hold someone accountable for a task they have not been prepared to implement. In filling these needs, they describe the role of a transformational leader.

1. **Leaders must effectively communicate the rationale—the *why* of the work.** People tend to resist change to practice and lack motivation to improve when leaders have not skillfully communicated the rationale or case for improvement. To embrace a vision, people have to clearly

understand the vision and feel personally compelled to contribute to the vision.

2. **Leaders must effectively establish trust—the *who* of the work.** A transformational leader needs the very essential ability to connect with others' emotions. Facts and objective evidence alone do not inspire people; people need to connect with their leader on a personal level and know that their leader has not just an intellectual connection but also an ethical connection to their purpose.
3. **Leaders must effectively build capacity—the *how* of the work.** People will more willingly take a risk and try a new idea if leaders have prepared them professionally. Leaders must invest in training, resources, and time if they want educators to enthusiastically embrace new ideas and practices.
4. **Leaders must get results—the *do* of the work.** Ultimately, improvement cannot be optional. A transformational leader must skillfully assess and meet the needs of those he or she leads, but eventually, he or she has to demand full participation in the change and improvement process. (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019, p. 6)
The most fertile ground for cultivating PLCs is found in district and school cultures that are *simultaneously loose and tight*. Some elements of the culture are tight. These elements clarify shared purpose and priorities as well as the parameters within which all members are expected to operate on a day-to-day basis. Within those parameters, however, is tremendous latitude for individual and collective innovation, empowerment, and autonomy. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001) refers to this concept as “a culture of discipline” (tight) with an “ethic of entrepreneurship” (loose); it is “a culture built around the idea of freedom and responsibility within the framework

of a highly developed system” (p. 124). We will return to this concept of loose-tight cultures throughout the book, but for now we want to assert our contention that those who are successful in building PLCs will become adept at creating and operating within cultures that are simultaneously loose and tight.

First Steps in Reculturing

In this chapter, we have argued the following points.

- The culture of an organization is found in the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for that organization.
- Creating a PLC in a school or district requires—and, in fact, is synonymous with—changing the culture (that is, reculturing). Changing the culture requires shifts in both the individual and the organization.
- Reculturing is extremely difficult, and neither top-down nor bottom-up strategies have proven effective in reculturing schools or districts.
- The most powerful concept for bringing about the necessary transformation to become a PLC is the concept of a simultaneously loose and tight culture.

This list still provides no real specifics regarding what leaders should *do* to impact culture, no step-by-step strategy for reshaping the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, and habits of the people in their organization. But the answer to the question, “How do we impact culture?” is simple. Effective leaders do not begin by focusing on changing assumptions and beliefs; they begin by focusing on changing *behaviors*.

The “central challenge” and “core problem” in every phase of any organization’s improvement process is “*changing people’s behavior*,” that is, “what people do, and the need for significant shifts in what people do” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 2). In their analysis of improving

organizations, Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) write, “There is a large literature demonstrating that attitudes *follow* behavior. That means people accept new beliefs as a result of changing their behavior” (p. 65). Fullan (2007) insists “all successful change processes have a bias for action . . . behaviors and emotions change before beliefs—we need to act in a new way before we get insights and feelings related to new beliefs” (p. 41). Harvard University professor Richard F. Elmore (2002) urges educational leaders to embrace and utilize this research when he advises, “Only a change in practice produces a genuine change in norms and values . . . grab people by their practice and their hearts and minds will follow.”

Thus, it is essential to understand the challenge of changing culture begins with the challenge of changing behavior, and therefore actual changes in culture occur late in the process. Schools and districts can initiate new practices and processes to promote a new culture, stimulate dialogue to articulate and re-examine existing assumptions, and build shared knowledge and create new experiences to foster different beliefs and assumptions, but the culture will not really be transformed until new practices, processes, assumptions, and beliefs become the new norms, the new “how we do things around here.” That transformation takes place at the end, rather than the beginning of a change process. Leaders do not first change the culture to get people to act in new ways; they first change how people act in an effort to change the culture (Kotter & Cohen, 2002).

A Different Metaphor

The question facing educational leaders is not “Will our school or district have a culture?” but rather, “Will we make a conscious effort to shape our culture?” Once again, each school and district has a culture, and the collective assumptions, habits, expectations, and beliefs that constitute the norm for the people in the organization exist as surely as the school buildings themselves.

And although leaders are sometimes told they must “build” a strong culture, cultures cannot be built. Architects and engineers construct

a building using a linear, sequential model. They must address phase one before moving to phase two. The building process is both visible and time bound. Eventually, building ends and maintenance begins. The building is relatively permanent, specifically constructed to resist external pressures such as weather. Finally, a building is not constructed by accident. Unless there is a decision to erect the structure and purposeful steps taken to carry out that decision, the building will not exist.

None of this is true with culture. Tending to culture is nonlinear and requires rapid responses to unanticipated problems as they arise. Cultural norms are typically invisible, implicit, and unexamined, made up of scores of subtleties in the day-to-day workings of the school. Culture is ongoing. At no point can it be said that the culture is complete and permanent. In brief, school culture is organic rather than static.

The more accurate metaphor for the process of shaping culture is not erecting a building, but rather cultivating a garden. A garden is nonlinear, with some elements dying out as others are being born. Both internal and external factors influence a garden. Its most vital elements occur underground and are not readily visible. Most importantly, a garden is fragile and very high maintenance. Even the most flourishing garden will eventually become overgrown if it is not nurtured. Flowers left unattended eventually yield to weeds. The same can be said of school cultures. Unless educators carefully and constantly tend to their schools' cultures by shaping the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm within them, toxic weeds will eventually dominate (DuFour & Burnette, 2002).

Reason for Hope

We have stressed throughout this chapter that reculturing schools and districts to become PLCs is a difficult task; it is not, however, impossible. In fact, there is reason for optimism. Fullan (1997), one of the most thoughtful observers of school reform over three decades, sounded a pessimistic note when he wrote in 1997, "None of the

current strategies being employed . . . result in widespread change. The first step toward liberation in my view is that we are facing a lost cause” (p. 220). Ten years later, Fullan (2007) was decidedly more optimistic when he wrote, “I believe we are closer than ever in knowing what must be done to engage all classrooms and schools in continuous reform” (p. 19) and “breakthrough forces for educational change now seem to be in our midst” (p. 229). One reason for his optimism is that “developing PLCs has turned out to be one of the leading strategies of reform and PLCs are becoming more prominent and more sharply defined” (p. 98).

That optimism has not only sustained itself since Michael Fullan observed the promise of PLCs in 2007, but it has grown into a global movement. In 2019, a group of Dutch researchers focusing on understanding why many national and local reform efforts had failed, studied a group of schools operating as a PLC (Admiraal, Schenke, De Jong, Emmelot, & Sligte, 2019). The schools had the following five common characteristics.

1. Shared school vision on learning
2. Professional learning opportunities for all staff
3. Collaborative work and learning
4. Change of school organization
5. Learning leadership

The study concluded that school-improvement efforts are more impactful, more robust, and sustainable when schools operate as PLCs. The interconnected nature of the collaborative environment not only produces the right environment for improvement, but it produces a culture of sustained excellence as well.

Much difficult work remains to be done, but perhaps we are nearing the tipping point the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (2003) described when PLCs will no longer “be considered utopian” but will in fact “become the building blocks that establish a new foundation for America’s schools” (p. 17).

Since the first edition of this book in 2008, we embarked on a journey to monitor the full implementation of the PLC at Work process, and to find and honor schools that have used this process to make a significant impact on student learning. Schools able to prove they have implemented the important elements of the process can provide evidence to a selection committee and apply to be honored as a Model PLC school (see www.allthingsplc.info/evidence-submission-online). Schools that meet the structural criteria and provide at least three years of evidence on improved student achievement are officially honored as models of the process (www.allthingsplc.info/plc-locator/us). As of February 2021, there are over three hundred Model PLC schools in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Singapore; and the number of model schools increases every year. Our goal is to identify one thousand Model PLC schools to leave no doubt that the PLC at Work process is the best method to drastically improve student learning.

In setting out to create PLCs, effective leaders will help create a shared sense of moral purpose about the work to be done. They will continually come back to the *why* of school improvement as they move forward with the *how*. They will help to develop a shared sense of what the school or district might become, a clear and compelling future that is unarguably superior to the status quo. They will help shape the collective commitments that give people throughout the school or district clear parameters and priorities that guide their day-to-day decisions and enable them to exercise their professional judgment and autonomy. They will help establish widely understood indicators of progress to monitor on an ongoing basis both to provide staff with the feedback essential to continuous improvement and to provide a basis for celebration of progress. And they will effectively communicate the significance of this shared purpose, better future, collective commitments, and indicators of progress with clarity, consistency, and conviction. In short, they will lay the foundation of a PLC. In the next chapter, we will examine how they proceed in this challenge.



CHAPTER 4

The Four Pillars of a Professional Learning Community: Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

Great schools “row as one”; they are quite clearly in the same boat, pulling in the same direction in unison . . . tightly aligned communities marked by a palpable sense of common purpose and shared identity among staff—a clear sense of “we.”

—THOMAS LICKONA AND MATTHEW DAVIDSON

The PLC at Work process is not a program or an initiative; it is a fundamental shift in how schools do business. As we established in the last chapter, the improvement process is filled with volatility and challenges, and the ability to navigate those challenges relies heavily on the level of collective cohesion within a school or district. The cohesion forms when a school commits to creating consensus in four critical areas. These are the four pillars of a PLC at Work. See figure 4.1 (page 84).

1. **Shared mission:** Why do we exist?
2. **Shared vision:** What do we hope to become?
3. **Shared values:** What commitments must we make to create the school or district that will improve our ability to fulfill our purpose?
4. **Shared goals:** What goals will we use to monitor our progress?

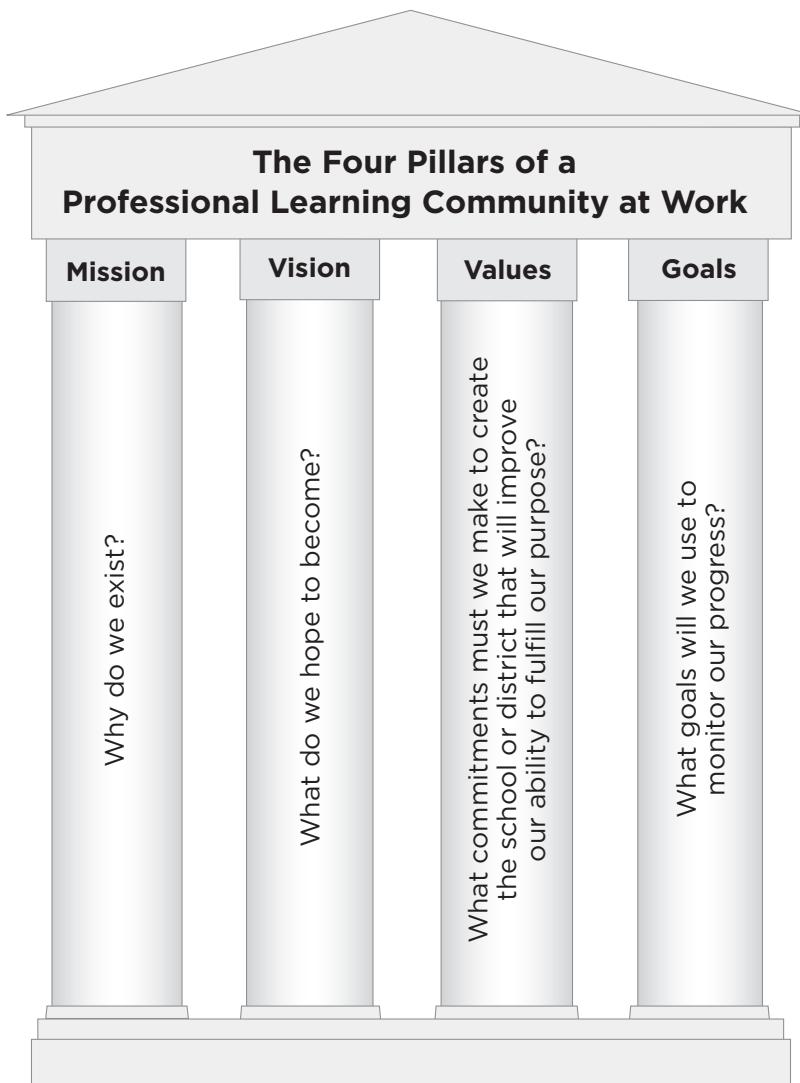


FIGURE 4.1: The four pillars of a PLC at Work.

The key term in all four of the pillars is *we*. One of the most critical shifts in making this process work is the ability to help educators view their work as collective work (*we*) as opposed to individual work (*me*). Unfortunately, the field of education has a history—more than a century—of cultivating a tradition of isolation. Professionals have

traditionally operated in individual spaces (classrooms and offices) with individual goals and near-total autonomy.

The transition from a *me* mentality to a *we* mentality is a challenge that every school will face when implementing the PLC at Work process. Muhammad (2018) describes this struggle as *the old contract* versus *the new contract*. “In this case, the term *contract* refers to the universal set of expectations that guides every member of the school community and defines his or her roles and responsibilities within the context of the public school system” (p. 80). Table 4.1 shows the expectations of the old and the new contract.

Table 4.1: Transitions From the Old Contract to the New Contract

Old Contract	New Contract
Curricular autonomy	Shared curricular decisions
Instructional autonomy	Shared review of instructional effectiveness
Assessment autonomy	Collaborative assessment
Assumed or unquestioned expertise	Collective expertise
Autonomous description of success	Collective definition of success

These transitions happen most effectively in a culture where leaders have the willingness and skills to help the school professionals make these enormous shifts in beliefs, perceptions, and commitments (Allensworth & Hart, 2018). This chapter will provide a clear road map to achieving these essential shifts.

Shared Mission: Why Do We Exist?

In the first edition of this book, we stressed the importance of a faculty developing a shared understanding of and commitment to the fundamental purpose of its school. We still do. After all, a Center on the Organization and Restructuring of Schools five-year study of more than 1,500 schools in sixteen states finds the most successful schools function as professional communities “in which teachers pursue a clear shared purpose for all students’ learning, engage in collaborative activity to achieve that purpose, and take collective

responsibility for student learning” (as cited in Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 30). That conclusion continues to be true today. In 2018, a group of Alabama State University professors (Brown, Horn, & King, 2018) found that “professional learning communities, when successfully implemented by school leaders and embraced by participants, have shown to improve student achievement as well as teacher perception” (p. 58).

Certainly, clarity of purpose and a willingness to accept responsibility for achieving that purpose are critical to school improvement.

Unfortunately, many educators have interpreted our advocacy for shared mission as a call to write a new mission statement. They engaged staff in painstaking wordsmithing to draft yet another variation of the standard commitment to help all students learn, celebrated the completion of their task, and then returned to business as usual.

There is an enormous difference between writing a mission and *living* a mission. In fact, Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) find that ineffective organizations often resort to writing a mission statement to create the illusion of action, substituting writing a mission statement for actually taking meaningful steps to bring that mission to life. They could find no evidence that merely crafting and displaying a new mission statement impacted how people in an organization act. We concur. We have found no correlation between the presence of a written mission statement—or even the wording of a mission statement—and the ability of a school to function as a PLC. In fact, the evidence is clear that teachers tend to be inspired by leaders who model desired behavior much more than those who can articulate their ideas in writing or verbally (Allensworth & Hart, 2018). As DuFour and coauthors (2016) note, “The words of a mission statement are not worth the paper they are written on unless people begin to *do* differently” (p. 19). The mission of a school or district is not revealed by what people say, but rather, by what they do.

The ultimate goal of a shared mission is to inspire people to invest in a potentially uncomfortable change in behavior to achieve an end greater than self. Shared mission is about moral commitment

and passion. “There are two ways to influence human behavior; you can manipulate it or you can inspire it” (Sinek, 2009, p. 17). Unfortunately, most educators have experienced manipulation more often than inspiration. As we discussed in chapter 2, American schools have been pushed to improve based on some false and ineffective external drivers for performance. In his book *In Praise of American Educators*, DuFour (2015) describes a series of false narratives and counterproductive motivators placed on the shoulders of educators. These assumptions include the following.

1. Charter schools will improve other public schools.
2. Providing vouchers to send students to other public or private schools will improve public schools.
3. More testing means more accountability.
4. Intensive supervision and evaluation will lead to the dismissal of ineffective teachers.
5. Value-based testing provides a valid way to reward effective teachers and dismiss ineffective teachers.
6. Merit pay will improve teaching and therefore improve schools.
7. Closing low-performing schools will improve remaining schools.

DuFour’s (2015) review and critique of these failed assumptions, and the policies that accompany them, provide insight into the damage of trying to effect change through manipulation. Developing a shared mission is an exercise in human inspiration, and that process starts with examining some of the old assumptions and behavioral drivers that have been normalized over time in education.

Consider for a moment, what if schools were subject to a “truth in advertising” law that required them to post their “real” mission statements—the candid statements based on actual actions and assumptions of those within the school? We suggest the following statements represent the candid missions of many schools.

- “It is our mission to help all students learn if they are conscientious, responsible, attentive, developmentally ready, fluent in English, and come from homes with concerned parents who take an interest in their education.”
- “Our mission is to create a school with an unrelenting focus on learning; failure is not an option. But ultimately it will be the responsibility of the student and his or her parents to take advantage of the opportunities for learning.”
- “Our mission is to take credit for the accomplishments of our highest-achieving students if our student test scores are higher than the norm and to assign blame for low performance to others if our student test scores are lower than the norm.”
- “Our mission is to ensure success for all our students. We will do whatever it takes to ensure their success—provided we don’t have to change the schedule, modify any of our existing practices, or adopt any new practices.”
- “It is our mission to ensure the comfort and convenience of the adults in our organization. In order to promote this mission, we place a higher value on individual autonomy than we do on ensuring that all students learn. We will avoid any change or conversation that might create anxiety or discomfort or infringe on individual autonomy.”

What all these candid mission statements have in common is that they hedge—place qualifiers—regarding the willingness and ability of the school’s faculty to ensure every student learns at high levels.

When what schools declare greatly differs from the commitments the members of that school organization are willing to commit to do, a gap between reality and rhetoric develops. People tend to become comfortable with being allowed to live a professional life different

from the egalitarian claims the school has declared publicly. Anthony Muhammad (2015) has described that condition as *functional hypocrisy*, and it allows schools to be comfortable living a duplicitous professional life.

It is time for educators to move beyond the rhetoric of *learning for all* to embrace that sentiment as the core purpose of their schools. Assuming your current mission pays homage to *learning for all*, it is perfectly serviceable. Do not waste another minute writing a mission statement, but instead begin the hard work of aligning all the practices, policies, and procedures of your school with that mission.

Our colleague Janel Keating, superintendent of the White River School District in Buckley, Washington, helped move educators in her district from rhetoric to action when she pressed her staff to answer the questions, “What would it look like in our schools *if we really meant it* when we said our fundamental purpose is to ensure all students learn? What would people see us doing?” Those are powerful questions. We offer the following answers.

If we really mean it when we say we want all students to learn, certainly we would create systems to ensure the following.

- Every teacher is engaged in a process to clarify exactly what each student is to learn in each grade level, each course, and each unit of instruction.
- Every teacher is engaged in a process to clarify consistent criteria by which to assess the quality of student work.
- Every teacher is engaged in a process to assess student learning on a timely and frequent basis using teacher-developed common formative assessments.
- Every school has a specific plan to ensure that students who experience initial difficulty in learning are provided with additional time and support for learning during the school day in a timely and directive way that does not cause the student to miss any new direct instruction.

- Every school has a specific plan to enrich and extend the learning of students who are not challenged by the required curriculum.
- All professionals are organized into collaborative teams and are given the time and structure during their regular workday to collaborate with colleagues on specific issues that directly impact student learning.
- Every collaborative team of teachers is called upon to work interdependently to achieve a common SMART goal for which members of the team are mutually accountable (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2014).
- Every teacher receives frequent and timely information regarding the success of his or her students in learning the essential curriculum and then uses that information to identify strengths and weaknesses as part of a process of continuous improvement.
- Building shared knowledge of best practice is part of the process of shared decision making at both the school and team levels.
- Every practice and procedure in place in the school has been examined to assess its impact on learning.
- School leaders are held accountable for ensuring all the preceding happen.

We will elaborate on these points and cite the research base to support them in subsequent chapters. We contend, however, that none of the points is counterintuitive. It makes sense that if we are collectively committed to all our students learning, we would clarify what we want them to learn, monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, respond with additional time and support when students struggle, and enrich and extend learning for those who are not challenged. It makes sense that we would work together collaboratively rather than in isolation, and that our collaborative teams have goals, because without a goal they would not be teams. It makes sense that we would

be hungry for evidence of our effectiveness and use that evidence in an ongoing process to strengthen our skills, insights, and understandings of our craft. It makes sense that as a *learning* community, we would build learning into our decision-making processes, and we would be willing to examine all our practices and discard those that discourage student learning. It makes sense that school leaders would be held accountable for focusing on the fundamental purpose of their schools.

This assertion—that the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure all students learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions most essential to their success—is the biggest of the three big ideas that drive the work of PLCs. When educators embrace that idea and act on it, all the other elements of a PLC begin to fall into place. If they reject the premise or merely pay lip service to it, they will never fully develop their capacity to create a PLC. Therefore, we assert that this is an area where leaders *must* be tight; they must insist their schools and districts be organized and operate in accordance with a commitment to high levels of learning for all students.

There are strategies and processes to engage staff in the consideration of the issues listed here, and plenty of latitude in terms of how those issues might be addressed in individual schools and classrooms. In other words, within the tight parameter of a commitment to learning for all, there are many opportunities to be loose—to provide staff with the autonomy and freedom to move forward in different ways—and we will again offer examples in subsequent chapters. The bottom line, however, is this: if educational leaders are not prepared to be tight regarding the core purpose of their organizations, if they are not prepared to communicate that purpose clearly and consistently, if they are not prepared to insist that their schools and districts align their practices with that purpose, then they will not create PLCs, regardless of what else they are tight about.

Shared Vision: What Do We Hope to Become?

People often use the terms *mission* and *vision* interchangeably: “Oh sure, we have a mission/vision.” We contend that in applying the terms to the foundation of a PLC, they represent distinctly different issues. Whereas mission addresses the question of *why* an organization exists by clarifying its essential purpose, vision asks, “*What* must we become to fulfill our purpose? What future do we hope to create for this organization?” When colleagues address the question of vision, they are attempting to describe a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization—a future that is better and more desirable in significant ways than existing conditions. Award-winning educator and author Timothy D. Kanold (2011) writes, “The concept of *vision* often feels vague and out of reach. Yet vision is and will be one of the most potent change weapons in your leadership life. Vision, when led extremely well, becomes the driver of change for your district, school, or program area” (p. 11).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of shared vision in the establishment of a PLC. Researchers within and outside education routinely reference the significance of vision both in the improvement process and as an essential element of an effective organization (Blanchard, 2007; Eastwood & Louis, 1992; Fullan, 2007; Grissom & Bartanen, 2018; Kouzes & Posner, 2006; Newmann & Wehlage, 1996; Schlechty, 2005). It has been described as essential to a successful change process (Kotter, 1996), and an absolute requisite for any learning organization (Senge, 1990). The ability to craft and communicate a shared vision has been cited as a critical element of effective leadership (Bennis, 2003; Dagen & Bean, 2020; Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, 1996; Kanter, 2004; Krasnoff, 2015; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Tichy, 1997). The assertion of leadership expert Burt Nanus (1992) reflects the conclusion of many researchers who have explored how to improve organizations: “There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile and achievable vision of the future, widely shared” (p. 3).

But the development of shared vision has been particularly troublesome for educators. Reformers and critics of education have bombarded teachers and principals with countless (and often conflicting) images and ideas about how schools should function and the purposes they should serve. Inundated by this cacophony of mixed signals and anxious to be all things to all people, educators have often resorted to vision statements filled with sweeping generalities.

So, the lack of a compelling vision for public schools continues to be a major obstacle in any effort to improve schools. The foundation of a collaboration is a common purpose. People tend to rationalize sacrificing for a goal bigger than self when there is a clear articulation of a compelling vision worth deep sacrifice (Root, 2016).

Like every task in the PLC at Work process, creating a collective vision begins with collective inquiry—*learning together*. A vision statement should not be the organization's collective wish list. If the school's mission is to ensure higher levels of learning for all, then the school's vision should be based on the practices, structures, and beliefs proven to improve student achievement.

Those who hope to develop a school's capacity to function as a PLC cannot overlook the importance of this critical building block in achieving that goal. Until educators can describe the ideal school they are trying to create, it is impossible to develop policies, procedures, or programs that will help make that ideal a reality. In the indisputable logic of the great Yankee philosopher Yogi Berra, "If you don't know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else" (BrainyQuote, n.d.b).

Ken Blanchard (2007) warns, "The process you use to develop a vision is as important as the vision itself" (p. 233). It is not by chance that we repeatedly refer to this building block as *shared* vision. When a group has a collective sense of ownership in and commitment to the future they are working together to create, a vision can exert a powerful influence on their organization. If the vision represents the proclamation of a single leader or the words on a paper drafted at a board of education summer retreat, it will have little impact.

Arizona State University English professor Bryan Smith (as cited in Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994) offers five scenarios for implementing a vision within an organization.

1. **Telling:** The boss assumes that he or she knows what the vision should be and announces it to the organization in the grand dictatorial tradition: “It’s my way or the highway.”
2. **Selling:** The boss assumes he or she knows what the vision should be and attempts to persuade members of the organization before proceeding.
3. **Testing:** The boss has an idea about what the vision should be but seeks reactions from those in the organization to help him or her refine and redesign the vision before proceeding.
4. **Consulting:** The boss puts together a representative committee of members of the organization and encourages it to develop a vision for his or her review and approval. The boss then reserves the right to accept or ignore the recommendations.
5. **Co-creating:** The boss and members of the organization, through a collaborative process, build a shared vision together.

This co-creating strategy is certainly not the most efficient way to develop a written vision statement, but it is the strategy most likely to result in the shared vision critical to a learning community. A vision will have little impact until it is understood, accepted, and connects with the personal visions of those within the school or district. The key to developing a *shared* vision is not to impose a new direction on an unwilling faculty, but rather to build consensus regarding common goals and aspirations, and agreement on the most effective practices to achieve these outcomes. Thus, creating a shared vision requires engagement and dialogue rather than a monologue (Axelrod, 2002). As Blanchard (2007) writes, “The best way to initiate, implement, and

sustain change is to increase the level of influence and involvement from the people being asked to change, surfacing and resolving concerns along the way. Without this strategy, you cannot achieve the cooperation and buy-in you need from those responsible for making the changes you've proposed" (p. 225).

Leaders who are the most skillful in building consensus need not resort to saying, "Listen to me, I have decided what we must become," but will instead be able to say, "I have listened to you, and this is what I heard you say you want for yourselves and for our students."

How to Build Consensus in a PLC

The best-intentioned leaders can often fall victim to the following common mistakes as they attempt to help staff develop a shared direction and desired future for their schools and districts.

Mistake 1: Leaders Attempt to "Go It Alone"

One of the most consistent cautions of those who have studied the improvement process both inside and outside education is that significant and complex change requires dispersed leadership. Consider the following samples of their advice.

- "No one individual is ever able to develop the right vision, communicate it to large numbers of people, eliminate all obstacles, generate short-term wins, lead and manage dozens of change projects and anchor new approaches deep in an organization's culture. A strong, guiding coalition is always needed. . . . Building such a team is always an essential part of the early stages of any effort to restructure a set of strategies." (Kotter, 1996, p. 52)
- "We expected to find that the first step in taking a company from good to great would be set a new direction, a new vision and strategy for the company, and then to get people committed and aligned behind that direction. We found something quite the opposite. The leaders who ignited the transformation from good to

great, first got the right people on the bus. . . . They built a superior leadership team.” (Collins, 2001, p. 41)

- “The first step a school leader should take to enhance the achievement of students in schools is to create a strong leadership team.” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 98)
- “Rather than focusing on the character traits and actions of individual leaders—in the heroic American tradition of charismatic leadership—we will increasingly have to focus on the distribution of leadership.” (Elmore, 2004, p. 42)
- “Unless the right team leads the process, the anxiety and inevitable obstacles inherent in this level of change will overwhelm the best organization’s intentions.” (Buffum, Mattos, & Malone, 2018, p. 36)

A *guiding coalition*, the “right people on the bus,” *leadership team*, *dispersed leadership*—while the terminology may vary, the underlying premise does not: individual leaders must have allies if they are going to establish and pursue a new direction for their organizations. This group could take a variety of forms—the *school-improvement committee*, a task force created to lead the investigation into a specific improvement initiative, a representative from each of the grade-level teams, people who have volunteered to work on an issue because of their interest in the topic, staff who are recognized to have particular expertise or influence—but it is a mistake to move forward with substantive change without a group to guide the process. A leader who is unable to persuade a small cadre of key people to champion the journey has no chance of winning the support of the entire staff. One of the first questions a leader should ask in considering the challenge of co-creating a vision is, “Who is our guiding coalition?” Failure to attend to coalition building is probably the most neglected step in the change process (Kanter, 1999).

Mistake 2: Leaders Use a Forum That Is Ill-Suited to the Dialogue Necessary for Consensus

Principals or superintendents who convene an entire faculty in an effort to build consensus make two mistakes. First, they give the impression they are going it alone, trying to sell the group on their idea. Second, they use a format designed for presentations rather than conversation. If people are going to consent to a new vision—a significant departure from their past practices—they will need to have their questions answered. Often, these questions are personal—“How will this impact me?” Large-group presentations provide little opportunity to ensure these questions are asked and answered. Kouzes and Posner (2006) contend it is impossible for a leader to create a compelling image of the future unless he or she knows what people within the organization want and need. That knowledge can only be acquired through small-group dialogues, through first seeking to understand before seeking to be understood (Covey, 1989).

Mistake 3: Leaders Pool Opinions Rather Than Build Shared Knowledge

Members of a PLC make important decisions by learning together, by building shared knowledge, rather than by merely pooling opinions. Effective leaders realize that if they ask uninformed people to make decisions, the end result will be uninformed decisions. Therefore, they are vigilant about ensuring people have ready access to the most relevant information and that the group has collectively studied the information before it is called on to make a decision. The assumption is that when people of good faith have access to the same information, the likelihood of their arriving at similar conclusions increases exponentially. Access to information is the lifeblood of empowered groups.

The two areas most essential for a group to review in a discussion of the future of the school or district are (1) the current reality and (2) evidence of best practice. It is a commonsense conclusion that people find it much easier to move from point A to point B if they know where point B is and how to recognize it when they arrive (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1985). We contend, however, that in many schools and

districts there is confusion regarding point A—the starting point or current reality. Therefore, a key step in the process of clarifying the future is an honest assessment of the present, a diligent effort to confront the brutal facts (Collins, 2001).

One important point about data that we will return to in later chapters is that without a basis of comparison, data do not inform. Therefore, if a school or district hopes its staff members will make *informed* decisions, leaders must present data in ways that provide meaningful bases of comparison in a very user-friendly way. The objective is not to train teachers and principals to become statisticians who can explain the nuances of a z-score. The objective is to give people the information they need in a clear and concise format to help them develop the shared knowledge and understanding that lead to good decisions.

Data analysis can become even more revealing when achievement data are disaggregated by gender, race, socioeconomic status, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency. When it comes to painting a data picture of a school or district, the precision of pointillism is preferable to the broad-brush strokes of impressionism. The goal in assessing the current reality is collective clarity rather than a general impression. Finally, all staff members should be invited to identify other sources of data they feel may be relevant to clarifying the current conditions in their schools.

There is also a rich literature describing the practices and characteristics of high-performing organizations, effective schools, and quality school districts. Educators who are being called upon to determine the future direction of their schools and districts should build shared knowledge regarding this research and become students of its findings. Once again, the distribution of this research should be accompanied by guiding questions and an invitation to all staff members to identify and submit additional pertinent research. Staff members should also be cautioned that different researchers often use slightly different terminology to describe the same practice or principle, and that understanding common principles is more important than identifying consistent vocabulary.

So, at the risk of redundancy, let us stress that those who lead the improvement process must do more than pool opinions. They must help to create a PLC; they must build shared knowledge and ensure that people are learning together by providing access to the same relevant and user-friendly information before asking them to make important decisions. They must demonstrate “an unrelenting commitment to gather the facts and information necessary to make more informed and intelligent decisions, and to keep pace with new evidence and use the new facts to update practices” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 14).

Mistake 4: Leaders Allow for Ambiguity Regarding the Standard for Moving Forward

Leaders can do everything right in the process to create a shared vision—create a guiding coalition, engage in meaningful dialogue, gather and disseminate the information people need in order to make a good decision—only to encounter difficulty because of confusion about the level of support needed to move forward. In our work with schools, we frequently ask a straightforward question: “How do you define *consensus* when your staff consider a proposal?” Individual responses from members of the same staff vary greatly. Responses range from, “We all must agree to support the proposal,” to “We all must agree not to sabotage the proposal,” to “Majority rules.” One candid superintendent told us that in his district they have arrived at consensus “when everyone agrees with my position.”

It is extremely difficult for an organization to make a decision by consensus if members do not have a common understanding of the meaning of the term *consensus*; nevertheless, most of the schools and districts in which we have worked have no working definition of the term. As a result, people who have participated in the same decision-making process can come to very different conclusions about whether the group has agreed to move forward. This lack of clarity can create confusion, mistrust, and cynicism regarding both the process and those who lead it, all which constitute major barriers to building shared vision.

Mistake 5: Leaders Set an Unrealistic Standard for Moving Forward

When leaders assume the school or district cannot move forward with an initiative until “all of us agree to support it” or “all of us agree we can live with it,” or set any standard that begins with “all of us . . . ,” they mistake unanimity for consensus. In the real world of schools, if all of us must agree before we can act, we will be subjected to constant inaction, a state of perpetual status quo. If the school-improvement “train” must wait until every member of the staff is on board, it will never leave the station. Any organization that hopes to develop the action orientation and the *learning by doing* philosophy of a PLC must avoid establishing a standard for action that makes moving forward almost impossible.

The definition of consensus we prefer establishes two simple standards that must be met to move forward if a decision is made by consensus:

We have achieved consensus when . . .

1. All points of view have been heard.
2. The will of the group is evident even to those who most oppose it. (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 32)

This definition not only can help eliminate ambiguity by establishing a specific standard for action, but also the standard it sets allows for action despite reservations, or even opposition, on the part of some staff members.

The A Story of Shared Vision section (page 102) illustrates an effective process for avoiding these five common mistakes when building consensus.

The Struggle of Consensus

Creating a shared vision is a constant challenge of building consensus and unity without paying the price of compromises that diminish either the substance or the clarity of the vision statement. Disagreements should not be glossed over, nor opposing perspectives

squelched. Participants should be encouraged to honor all perspectives, to articulate the reasoning behind their positions, to explore strategies to resolve differences, and to find common ground. But differences of opinion should not be used as an excuse for inaction. Once again, consensus does not mean unanimity, and schools that believe every staff member must be an enthusiastic proponent of a new vision statement may be setting a standard impossible to meet. When everyone has had the opportunity to express his or her ideas, and the will of the group has become evident to all (even to those who might oppose it), the faculty has reached a consensus and should be prepared to move forward with everyone's support. If the vision results in recognizable improvements, even those who were initially skeptical will be inclined to support it in time.

If the will of the group is not easily evident, and the decision was to be made by consensus, the school or district should not move forward. Instead, the effort to build shared knowledge should continue through more shared research, site visits to other schools, or hearing from educators who are already engaged in the initiative. Another powerful way of building shared knowledge is conducting a pilot of the initiative before attempting to implement it across the school or district. A few schools may be willing to test the impact of an improvement initiative within a district. A department, grade-level team, or several course-specific teams may engage in this action research within their school. A well-conducted pilot can help identify unforeseen problems with implementation, build shared knowledge about benefits, create more advocates, and increase the likelihood of successful implementation across the larger organization (Blanchard, 2007). It is important, however, that the pilot be viewed as a short-term action-research project for the benefit of the entire school or district, rather than as an ongoing experiment that separates it from the rest of the organization. Schools and districts are adept at first isolating and then killing alternative programs considered outside the mainstream of the organization.

A Story of Shared Vision

In the summer of 2012, Brian Butler and Diane Kerr became coprincipals at Mason Crest Elementary, a new school that had just opened in Virginia due to overcrowding at four other neighborhood schools. Mason Crest faced the challenge of educating students who were accustomed to the cultures of their former schools. The student population was very linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse, with students from thirty-six different countries. The new staff had transferred from fifteen different schools, and there were several new teachers.

Opening a new school can be a mix of challenges and opportunities. Butler and Kerr were very intentional about the process of finding people with a similar vision for the future of the school. Like true professionals, Butler and Kerr started their new leadership journey by building shared professional knowledge. They chose the book *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010) as their tool to build shared knowledge. In reviewing and analyzing the tools in this book, they chose to focus their initial efforts on an assessment tool for the four pillars of a PLC at Work (shared mission, vision, values, and goals): “The Professional Learning Communities at Work Continuum: Laying the Foundation.” (Visit go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks to download a reproducible version of this tool.) Because Mason Crest was a new school, Butler and Kerr chose to focus heavily on the *vision pillar*, developing a shared understanding of and commitment to the school they were attempting to create.

In *Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2010, 2016), the authors use a five-point continuum to help schools assess their current reality regarding implementation of the vision indicator.

1. Preinitiating
2. Initiating
3. Implementing

4. Developing

5. Sustaining

The goal for Mason Crest was to create an environment to meet the standard of sustaining:

Staff members can and do routinely articulate the major principles of the school's shared vision and use those principles to guide their day-to-day efforts and decisions. They honestly assess the current reality in their school and continually seek more effective strategies for reducing the discrepancy between that reality and the school they are working to create. (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 48)

As a means to produce this new oasis of student excellence, Butler and Kerr started the process by creating a moral connection to their simple but powerful new mission, which answers the question, Why do we exist? The mission of Mason Crest is to ensure high levels of learning for all—students and adults.

The initial activities focused on unpacking the mission, and the staff were asked specific questions regarding key terms including *ensure, high levels of learning, all, students, and adults*.

Then, the process transitioned to what Butler and Kerr felt was the most important question regarding the future of Mason Crest—the question centered squarely on a shared vision. The school administration asked the staff:

Imagine that we are about to begin the school year four years from now, and we have become the school that you hoped we would become. Describe it as vividly as possible; what is going on in the school?

As the staff processed this question, a window opened, and they could briefly see whether their beliefs and hopes for students and adults aligned with the school Butler and Kerr wanted to create. The answers staff members gave helped Butler and Kerr determine the staff's readiness to embrace the PLC process and truly be able to commit to their mission of high levels of learning for all students. After

long, dynamic, and interactive conversations, the staff at Mason Crest committed to a compelling and optimistic vision for their school.

Mason Crest went on to be the first recipient of the DuFour Award in 2016, the highest distinction available for schools involved with the PLC at Work process. Butler and Kerr credit the diligent focus on vision as the primary driver of their school's success. Principal Butler was known by his faculty to consistently repeat this statement: "The answers are in the room." By creating a shared destination with the entire faculty, everyone became clear about their role in finding the answers to any obstacle that hindered their march toward their mission—learning for all. Taking the time to align intentions, actions, and beliefs helped Mason Crest create what coauthors Robert D. Barr and Emily L. Gibson (2013) call a *Culture of Hope*, a learning environment characterized by the following four critical characteristics.

1. A sense of optimism
2. A sense of belonging
3. A sense of pride
4. A sense of purpose

The power of collaboration happens at multiple levels in a PLC, and a staff focused and committed to a common vision for their future is one of the most powerful manifestations of collaboration.

A District- or School-Level Vision?

Should the vision be written at the district or school level? This question relates to an issue we addressed earlier—the dilemma of too-tight versus too-loose leadership. A vision crafted at the district level and presented to the schools with an expectation of compliance neither allows leaders to hear and connect with the hopes and dreams of people throughout the organization nor provides the necessary level of engagement and learning for all staff to feel a sense of ownership and commitment to the stipulated direction. If, on the other hand, staff members at each school are merely encouraged to create their own unique vision of the school they seek to create without

any overarching sense of shared purpose, priorities, or guiding principles, the district has reinforced the notion that each school is its own kingdom.

We would, once again, urge schools and districts to reject the Tyranny of Or and embrace the Genius of And. District leaders have an obligation to create and clarify shared purpose, priorities, and guiding principles that should be evident in every school in the district. A vision statement for the district can contribute to that clarity. In creating that statement, district leaders should engage staff to the greatest degree possible. We recommend, however, that the staff members of each school should then study that district statement and use it as part of the process we have described for creating a shared understanding of the school they are working together to create. Staff members of each school should engage in the process of creating and clarifying a vision for their school that aligns with the district vision for all its schools. We will return to this issue in chapter 9 (page 259) in our discussion of the role of the central office in creating PLCs.

The following questions will help guide the development of a shared vision (Senge et al., 1994):

1. What would you like to see our school or district become?
2. What reputation would it have?
3. What contribution would it make to our students and community?
4. What values would it embody?
5. How would people work together? (p. 208)

Shared Values: What Commitments Must We Make to Create the School or District That Will Improve Our Ability to Fulfill Our Purpose?

Once educators have clarified the fundamental purpose or mission of their school or district and described the future they are trying

to create through developing a shared vision statement, they should turn their attention to the third building block of a PLC: shared values, or collective commitments. Whereas the mission building block addresses the issue of *why* our organization exists, and the vision building block establishes *what* we hope it will become, values address *how* we will fulfill our purpose and make our desired future a reality. When educators clarify and commit to certain shared values, they are engaged in the essential ABCs of school improvement—identifying the actions, behaviors, and commitments necessary to bring mission and vision to life.

The literature on organizational effectiveness typically refers to this concept as *values*, but we believe the term *collective commitments* is a more accurate description of what transpires in effective schools and districts. People make a conscious and deliberate effort to identify the specific ways they will act to improve their organizations, and then they commit to one another to act accordingly.

After committing to the concept of shared vision, staff should examine the statement's various components and ask, "What must we commit to do to create such a school?" Commitments would then flow from dialogue generating a series of *if-then statements* such as the following.

- *If* we are to be a school where teachers and students are clear on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students must acquire in each course, grade level, and unit of instruction, *then* we must agree to develop a guaranteed curriculum and commit to implement that curriculum in our classrooms.
- *If* we are to be a school that ensures high levels of learning for all students, *then* we must monitor each student's learning on a very timely basis using a variety of assessment strategies and create systems to ensure they receive additional time and support as soon as they experience difficulty learning.

- *If we are to create a collaborative culture, then we must be positive, contributing members to our collaborative teams and accept collective responsibility for the success of our colleagues and students.*

An administrative team looking at the same vision statement might identify commitments such as these.

- *If we are to be a school that provides a guaranteed curriculum and frequently monitors student learning through a wide variety of assessments, then we must provide each collaborative team with the resources, time, and training to create the curriculum and assessments.*
- *If we are to become a school that supports the ongoing, job-embedded learning of staff to promote continuous improvement, then we must provide staff with time to learn with and from one another, and develop the parameters and processes to ensure their shared learning is in areas that impact student achievement.*
- *If we are to be a school with widely dispersed leadership, then we must create structures to promote multiple leadership opportunities and define our job, in part, as developing the leadership potential in others.*

Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, has been described as the most recognized and celebrated school in the United States. It is one of the few schools in the United States to receive the U.S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Award on five occasions, an accomplishment that required the school to reach a high standard of excellence, and it has continued to improve each year for the next twenty-seven years under the direction of several different principals and superintendents. It was one of the first comprehensive high schools in the country designated as a New American School, a model of successful school reform. It continues to attract almost 3,000 visitors each year to its campus as educators from around the world come to observe its practices. The school maintains a student enrollment of over 4,000 students who earn an average SAT score

of 1260, and an average ACT score of 28.6. The school offers 31 Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and 96 percent of its graduates attend a four-year university upon graduation (Adlai E. Stevenson High School, 2020).

One of the many factors that has contributed to Stevenson's success is the willingness of its various constituencies to articulate their collective commitments to create the extraordinary school its vision statement describes. Board members, administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and students—all have convened to study the vision statement and clarify their commitments. (See page 345 in appendix B for Stevenson's complete vision statement.)

These statements of collective commitments are not just words on paper—they drive the day-to-day work of the school. Every candidate for a teaching or administrative position is asked to review them before applying, and the statements are referenced repeatedly as part of the interview process. The commitments are studied and discussed during new staff orientation as veteran representatives of the group review each commitment and stress its significance. Experienced teachers tell new staff members, “This is what it means to join this faculty. These are the promises we make to each other and to our students. These are the promises that have made us who we are, and we ask you to honor them.” Upperclassmen mentors review the student commitments with incoming freshmen during the first week of school and stress, “These are the commitments the students who have gone before you have made to make Stevenson the school it is today. If you honor these commitments, you can be assured you will be successful here, and you will make an important contribution to our school’s tradition of excellence.”

Stevenson begins each school year by sharing the collective commitments of each group—not only with every student, but with every parent as well. Parents receive a letter clarifying that “these are the promises we, the administrators and teachers, make to you and our students. We take these promises very seriously, and if ever you feel we are not living up to them, please contact us.” The letter also explains

what is asked of parents by reviewing the collective commitments created by a parent task force. The message is very explicit: “We have made promises to you, and these are the promises we ask you to honor so together we can create the school that will best meet the needs of your sons and daughters.” Lillian Radford Professor of Education at Trinity University Thomas J. Sergiovanni (2005) writes about this aspect of Stevenson:

The commitment of each of the constituent groups represents promises, and public promises at that. Teachers for example are telling students, administrators, and everyone else what they intend to do to implement the school’s vision. Since promises made must be promises kept, Stevenson is not only developing an accountability system that is public, but a covenant of obligations that unites its various groups as a community of responsibility. (p. 60)

These commitments are still true at Adlai Stevenson today; the school staff are proud that their commitments are timeless. Current superintendent Eric Twadell shares that the commitments have been enhanced to include the “Portrait of a Stevenson Graduate” (E. Twadell, personal communication, August 5, 2020). Our students will commit to the following.

- **Self:** Pursue a balanced high school experience.
 - › Foster responsible, healthy, and ethical decision-making skills.
 - › Develop a sense of resilience and self-awareness.
 - › Demonstrate self-empowered and life-ready skills.
- **Others:** Celebrate, honor, and respect diverse people and perspectives.
 - › Develop a sense of empathy for those around them.
 - › Serve local, national, and global communities.
 - › Engage in civic duties and responsibilities.

- **Learning:** Strive for continuous improvement.
 - › Foster a curious, creative, and innovative mind.
 - › Sustain a growth mindset when facing new challenges.
 - › Develop problem-solving and reflective skills.
 - › Collaborate and learn from and with others.

According to Superintendent Twadell, adding students to the commitment promotes self-efficacy and expands the reach of the professional learning community (E. Twadell, personal communication, August 5, 2020).

In our work with schools, we have found it is commonplace for schools and districts to present written mission statements. Vision statements are not as ubiquitous, but they are also the norm. Most schools and districts, however, have not clarified the specific commitments people are prepared to make to fulfill the mission (why we exist) and achieve the vision (what we hope to become). Yet we contend that attention to and articulation of the commitments the adults in a school are willing to make to students and to one another can represent an important step on the journey to becoming a PLC for five powerful reasons.

1. **Contributes to the action orientation of a PLC:**

Articulating specific collective commitments helps people move from aspirations to actions. When they clarify collective commitments, they make promises about what they are prepared to do *now* to create the school or district that represents their shared hopes for themselves and their students.

2. **Contributes to the common vision:** When teachers and administrators are guided by collective commitments that are widely understood and honored, each member of the organization recognizes he or she can play an important role in shaping a new future for the school or district.

This awareness can be very empowering.

3. **Creates an internal focus:** When educators shift their dialogue from common complaints to collective commitments, they move from a focus on *them* to a focus on *we*, from a focus on what others must do to improve their situation to a focus on what we can do to make the school or district a better place.
4. **Provides a more effective system of accountability:** When educators clarify and commit to the specific responsibilities they will assume in the collective improvement effort, they are more likely to fulfill those responsibilities than colleagues whose behavior is shaped by administrative rewards and sanctions.
5. **Helps change the culture of the organization:** People are more likely to change the culture of their organizations—the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm—after acting in new ways, and the very purpose of articulating collective commitments is to clarify the new behaviors and to solicit support for them.

The Importance of Being Explicit and Direct Rather Than Vague and Ethereal

Remember that statements of collective commitments are intended to clarify the very specific actions we have pledged to take on behalf of others. It is also important to note that the commitments must be about the *right* work; and in a PLC, the *right* work is a clear commitment to improving student learning (Reeves & Eaker, 2019a). (In chapter 2 [page 54], we discuss the five outcomes that are non-negotiable in the PLC at Work process.) A commitment to the wrong work is akin to no commitment at all.

Ambiguity is the antithesis of meaningful collective commitments. Avoid vague statements that allow for a wide range of actions. For example, “We will make our decisions based on the best interests of the student” offers no direction to a high school algebra teacher with

a student who is struggling academically. One teacher may decide it is in the student's best interests to remove him from the course and place him in a class better suited to his ability so the student will not become frustrated. Another may conclude the student's difficulty is caused by lack of effort, and in the student's best interests, the teacher may decide to let him suffer the consequences of failure as an important life lesson. Another teacher allows the student to earn sufficient extra credit for projects unrelated to the essential skills of the class so that, in the student's best interests, he will not fall behind in credits. Another insists the student come in after school for individualized help so that, in the student's best interests, he can master the content. Another opposes requiring the student to seek help after school because he is on an athletic team, and, in his best interests, he needs this venue where he can experience success. Yet another teacher suggests that, in the student's best interests, he should be transferred to another instructor who might be a better fit for his learning style. A "student's best interests" is likely to lie in the eye of the beholder, and thus it makes for an ineffective commitment statement.

Schools should also avoid writing statements as beliefs. Once again, collective commitments are intended to clarify what we intend to *do*, not what we believe. For example, staff could heartily endorse the premise, "We believe in a safe and orderly environment," and assume it is exclusively the job of the administration to ensure such an environment. Furthermore, beliefs are much more difficult to monitor. A teacher who consistently fails half of her class could continue to say she "believes in the potential" of her students and assign blame to the students themselves for failing to strive to achieve that potential. The action orientation that collective commitments are intended to promote is more likely to occur when those commitments are described as behaviors instead of beliefs (Senge et al., 1994).

Even the most morally impeccable statements are ineffective as collective commitments if they do not establish clear expectations about what each person is expected to *do* to fulfill the commitments. "We promise to help our students become lifelong learners" is a wonderful

sentiment, but staff will have difficulty assessing its effectiveness in fulfilling that promise. When educators articulate collective commitments, they should get down to the nitty-gritty details: What do we promise to do, today, to support our colleagues and our students?

Finally, once collective commitments are made, members must hold each other accountable to these outcomes. We often ask educators, “What happens if a teacher has clearly defined classroom student expectations, but then fails to hold students accountable to these outcomes?” The most common answer is, “Chaos!” The only commitments that truly matter are the ones that are monitored and enforced. When individuals are allowed to consistently disregard and violate collective commitments, it creates a culture in which the school’s mission, vision, values, and goals are merely a suggestion, and full participation is optional.

Shared Goals: What Goals Will We Use to Monitor Our Progress?

The final essential pillar in the foundation of a PLC requires clear *goals* that guide the ongoing work of educators on a day-to-day basis. While vision establishes what the school or district is working to become and collective commitments specify what educators will start doing today to move their organization in the intended direction, goals establish clear benchmarks of progress and milestones on the improvement journey. As organizational theorist James Champy (1995) notes, “Vision is the rhetoric of inspiration . . . while goals are the rhetoric of accountancy” (p. 54).

Effective goals also contribute to the action orientation of a PLC. Clearly understood goals motivate and energize people to take purposeful action, particularly when they are accompanied by ongoing feedback regarding progress (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Kouzes & Posner, 1999). When people understand the goals of their organization and how their jobs can contribute to the achievement of those goals, they enjoy not only more positive feelings regarding their work but also a stronger sense of self-worth and self-efficacy (Amabile &

Kramer, 2007). In fact, Blanchard (2007) contends, “Goal setting is the single most powerful motivational tool in a leader’s toolkit” (p. 150).

Exposure to data alone does not always lead to widespread substantive growth. For example, policies like NCLB and ESSA provided schools with large amounts of data on student academic performance, but that exposure did not produce the substantive improvement in student learning (Guisbond, Neill, et al., 2012). An effective leader understands how to use data to create a commitment to goals bigger than the individual and stimulate lasting and powerful intrinsic commitment. Coauthors Lorna M. Earl and Steven Katz (2006) write about the challenge of using data to motivate change:

The challenge is to follow this engagement exposure to data with intentional opportunities to develop intrinsic practices in order to build the necessary capacities in such a way that they become habitual aspects of school work and do not remain at the mercy of a policy-bound extrinsic benefactor. (p. 7)

Leaders must use data to drive commitment, not to extend an agenda of coercive compliance. For example, if a school leader can demonstrate to educators that their measurable achievement evidence (data) does not align with the school or district’s stated egalitarian commitment to learning for all, he or she could generate a powerful motivating force for change.

But for goals to have a positive impact on any organization, they must be specific enough to help people in the organization gauge their progress and remain focused on the right priorities. Since the priority in schools should be higher levels of student learning, goals should have a direct and observable impact on student achievement. The SMART goal acronym (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2014) serves as a useful tool in the goal-setting process, calling for goals that are the following.

- **Strategic and specific:** The goal is linked to the organization’s purpose and vision and sufficiently specific to avoid ambiguity or confusion.

- **Measurable:** The organization has established baseline measures from which to assess progress.
- **Attainable:** People in the organization believe that with collective effort they can accomplish the goal.
- **Results-oriented:** The goal focuses on outcomes rather than inputs and results rather than intentions. Once again, because the purpose and priority in schools and districts should be higher levels of student learning, a SMART goal will call for evidence of improved student achievement, and it will be student centered rather than project centered or teacher centered.
- **Time bound:** The goal should include a timeframe for when specific action will be taken and when it is anticipated that the goal will be accomplished.

Westmont High School in Westmont, Illinois, is a good example of a schoolwide approach to setting meaningful and attainable goals. This school is led by Jack Baldermann, the 2017 Illinois High School Principal of the Year. The school is also the 2020 DuFour Award winner for excellence in PLC practice. Westmont established three goals in 2013 to guide the collective focus of the faculty (J. Baldermann, personal communication, March 23, 2020).

1. The graduation rate for every class (every year) will be 97 percent or higher.
2. We will increase the number of passed Advanced Placement (AP) exams, the number of AP Scholars, and the number of exams passed by underrepresented students (i.e. ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty) by 10 percent or more each year.
3. We will have 56 percent or more of our students meeting standards for the 2019–2020 state-mandated SAT exam, and the students who do not meet the proficiency rate

will realize at least one year or more of growth during the 2019–2020 school year (60 points or more on the SAT).

Each of these goals focuses on the priority of the school—student learning—and provides measurable indicators to monitor progress. This razor-sharp focus on specific, measurable targets helped galvanize the staff to not only meet these goals but also to far exceed them, as follows.

1. The graduation rate increased from 88 percent (before setting SMART goals in 2013) to an average of 99 percent from 2017 to 2020 with a perfect 100 percent graduation rate in 2018. One hundred percent of African American and Latino students in the classes of 2018 and 2019 graduated on time.
2. The school improved AP performance from 29 passed exams and 3 AP Scholars (2013) to 303 passed exams and 65 AP Scholars (2019). The school also experienced a growth from 2 exams passed by underrepresented students (2013) to 71 passed exams (2019).
3. State report card data reveal Westmont exceeds state academic testing averages and targets for improvement on the SAT. In fact, collectively, Westmont has made more progress on the SAT exam than any other high school in the state of Illinois with a proficiency rate of 57 percent compared to the state average of 37 percent.

Compare the Westmont approach to the following goals other schools established that are less focused and data driven.

1. We will train all K–6 teachers in cooperative learning during the first semester.
2. Principals will conduct at least two classroom walkthroughs each day throughout the school year.
3. Our school will move to a block schedule by the fall of 2021.

4. We will prepare our students to be lifelong learners who are equipped with the skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century.

The first three goals are certainly measurable, attainable, and time bound, but they focus on training, tactics, and projects rather than on results. Each of these goals could be achieved, and student learning could actually decline. They focus on means rather than ends. The fourth goal is the kind of politically correct bromide that often passes for a district goal but has the comforting advantage of holding no one accountable for anything.

Other Keys to Effective Goals

Reeves (2006) finds a negative correlation between the number of pages in a district's strategic plan and its gains in student achievement—the thicker the plan, the less likely students are learning. One of the most consistent recommendations of organizational theorists and educational researchers alike is that leaders should limit the number of goals the people in their organizations are asked to pursue (Blanchard, 2007; Drucker, 1992; Lencioni, 2005; Schmoker, 2003; Senge et al., 1994). Districts would be far better served if they resisted the temptation to develop a litany of goals and instead heeded Fullan's (2007) advice to begin each year with a single overriding priority of helping more students learn at higher levels and eliminating gaps in achievement based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Fullan's (2007) proposal for an ongoing goal of *raising the bar and closing the gap* reinforces and reiterates the fundamental purpose of the district and asks people to assess their efforts on the basis of improving their collective capacity to fulfill that purpose. When it comes to district goals, the adage "less is more" should prevail.

A district's sustained commitment to a few key goals over an extended period of time can also help foster a culture of continuous improvement. The students, teachers, and administrators at Westmont are far better served by an ongoing, focused concentration on their three SMART goals than by annual pronouncements of new goals. Ongoing

organizational commitment to a few focused goals, even as key players come and go, can provide the continuity of purpose and direction educators are craving.

Finally, school leaders must remember that districts and schools do not have goals, people do—or they do not. District goals will impact what happens in schools only if steps are taken to ensure each school aligns its SMART goals with those of the district and understands how it must contribute to the larger organization. School goals will impact what happens in courses and grade levels only if the collaborative teams of teachers within the school align their SMART goals with those of the school and understand how they can contribute to the success of the school. Team goals will impact what happens in an individual teacher's classroom only if teachers commit to one another that they will work together interdependently to achieve goals for which they have agreed to be mutually accountable. In later chapters, we will have much more to say about the vital importance of SMART goals in building the capacity of teachers to work together as members of collaborative teams, but for now we will simply reiterate the significance of goals in establishing the foundation of a strong PLC.

The Pursuit of Nonmeasurable Goals

William Bruce Cameron (1963), in his text *Informal Sociology: A Casual Introduction to Sociological Thinking*, observed, “Everything that is measurable is not important, and everything that is important is not measurable” (p. 13). There are certainly many *important* goals educators hope to achieve on behalf of their students that are not readily conducive to measurement—issues of character, citizenship, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and resilience, to name just a few. These issues are indeed difficult to measure and typically will not be addressed on high-stakes assessments, but that does not diminish their importance, and we believe educators should be vigilant in seeking more effective ways to instill these important characteristics in the students they serve.

We contend, however, that educators are prone to making two errors when it comes to these issues. First, they fall victim to the Tyranny of Or and suggest that schools can either educate for intellect or character. Second, they fail to make any effort to assess their impact as teachers on matters they contend are important to them. Education is not a zero-sum game where success in one area inevitably diminishes the possibility of success in others. Researchers Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson (2005) find the best schools do not fall victim to the Tyranny of Or, but instead are “committed to helping students become *smart* (in the multi-dimensional sense of intelligence) *and* to helping them become *good* (in the multi-dimensional sense of moral maturity). They foster excellence and ethics” (p. v). We have seen no evidence that schools with high expectations for student achievement produce students who are less ethical, less responsible, or less civic minded than low-performing schools.

Furthermore, schools and districts have typically made little effort to gather evidence of their effectiveness in instilling the virtues they often claim are so important to them. As Peter Senge and his coauthors (1994) observe, “Many of the most important results may not be quantifiable, but that doesn’t mean they are unknowable” (p. 46). It is incongruous for any organization to proclaim the vital importance of a particular outcome and then make no effort to monitor the attainment of that outcome. Ongoing monitoring is one of the most powerful ways organizations communicate what is truly important and valued. Schools may not be able to measure the specific degree to which a student has learned emotional intelligence any more than a spouse can measure the extent to which his or her partner’s love has increased or decreased over the course of the year, but in both instances, certain indicators could be identified to clarify expectations and assess improvement. When educators claim traditional assessments offer no insights into the most important goals for their students, and then do nothing to create their own strategies for monitoring what they claim is important, they absolve themselves of all responsibility and hold themselves accountable for nothing.

A Solid Foundation Is Just the Start

In *Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2016), we note that when teachers and administrators have worked together to consider the questions the four pillars pose, and reach consensus regarding their collective positions on each question:

They have built a solid foundation for a PLC. Much work remains to be done, for these are just a few of the steps in the thousands of steps that must be taken in the never-ending process of continuous improvement. But addressing these questions increases the likelihood that all subsequent work will have the benefit of firm underpinnings. If staff members have not considered these questions, have done so only superficially, or are unable to establish common ground regarding their positions on the questions, any and all future efforts to improve the school will stand on shaky ground. (p. 23)

Put another way, the most effective leaders continually refer not only to the *how* of school improvement—this is how we will assign teachers to teams, how we will provide them with time to collaborate, how we will assess student learning, how we will respond when students do not learn—but also to the *why* people are engaged in these important actions. Consistent and clear references to the foundation return people throughout the organization to the question of Why? and therefore help educators assign much-needed purpose and meaning to their day-to-day actions.

More commonly, however, educators fail to build on the foundation. They mistake writing a mission statement for living a mission, substitute crafting a vision statement for taking purposeful steps to create a more powerful school or district, settle for identifying collective commitments rather than honoring them, or confuse the announcement of joint projects with the collective pursuit of results-oriented goals that foster interdependence and mutual accountability. Written documents will never improve an organization unless they serve as a catalyst for action.

One area of our deepest learning over the years regarding what it takes to improve schools is the importance of an action orientation.

Even educators who *know* the schools they hope to create, the commitments they agree to honor, and the goals that they will pursue face the continuing challenge of turning their knowledge into action consistent with that knowledge. They must close the gap between knowing and doing (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Talking is not doing. Writing statements is not doing. Developing improvement plans is not doing. Only doing is doing, and in the next chapters we will attempt to provide a detailed explanation of what educators *do* when they are members of a PLC.



CHAPTER 5

Teaching in a Collaborative Culture

Productivity, performance, and innovation result from joint action, not just individual efforts and behavior.

—JEFFERY PFEFFER AND ROBERT I. SUTTON

Traditional schools often view teaching as their fundamental purpose. It's not unusual to hear, "Schools are a place where students go to be *taught*" or "Schools are a place where teachers *teach*." In a school that functions as a high-performing PLC, the primary focus is on *learning*—learning for both students and adults. The assumption is that schools are a place where students go to *learn*. Excellent teaching is not the end; rather, teaching is the primary means to an end—the end being enhanced student learning. Hence, teachers in a PLC are asked to focus on the learning of each student, skill by skill. The key question that drives teachers in a high-performing PLC is this: Are the students learning, and how do we know?

This shift from a primary focus on teaching to a sharp focus on learning is often misunderstood. This shift does not diminish, in any way, the importance of teaching. Teaching is the primary way in which students learn. It is difficult to overstate the importance of effective teachers in a PLC. Teachers, and what they do, are the essential factor for an effective school in which all students learn at high levels.

The focus on learning in a PLC is more than mere semantics. If pursued with a high degree of fidelity, it will drive how teachers think, and more importantly, how they act. Teachers in an effective PLC think and act differently than their more traditional counterparts.

Collective Efficacy

There are many characteristics that distinguish teaching in a high-performing PLC from a more traditional school. Perhaps the most important is that being a teacher in a PLC means being a contributing member of a collaborative team composed of teachers who share essential curricula and who develop a razor-sharp focus on the learning of each student, skill by skill. Educators in a PLC are not alone in recognizing the power of collaborative teaming.

In a 2019 global study, the ADP Research Institute reports, “Workers who say they are on a team are 2.3 times more likely to be Fully Engaged [sic] than those who are not. This finding holds true within all countries in the study and in many countries the disparity between non-team and team workers is even greater” (Hayes, Chumney, Wright, & Buckingham, 2019, p. 3). The ADP research findings echo the findings of Amy C. Edmondson (2013), Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, who points out that in the most innovative organizations, teaming *is* the culture.

Collaborative teaming can be an especially powerful structural and cultural tool for schools. Being an effective teacher has always been a complex endeavor. Each generation of teachers faces its own unique challenges. The challenges facing teachers are seemingly overwhelming; teachers are expected to teach more content than ever before and at increasingly higher levels of rigor. The culture of accountability is more intense, even though students come from a wide range of backgrounds never before seen in American public schools. Increasingly, teachers must work with students who do not speak English as their primary language. In the fall of 2017, 10.1 percent, or 5.0 million students, were identified as English learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). In addition, teachers do not enjoy

the level of public support that teachers from previous generations experienced—especially from elected officials. The political environment represents a seemingly endless assault on America's public education system.

Given the complex challenges facing schools, it is virtually impossible for an individual teacher, working alone, to successfully teach *all* his or her students. Coauthors Steve Farkas, Jean Johnson, and Tony Foleno's (2000) research indicates that within a short period of time, 75 percent of new teachers doubt whether the efforts of a staff could transform a low-performing school. These new teachers feel the problems are beyond their control and doubt their ability to make things better. Half of those who chose to be teachers would leave the profession within six years (Tucker, 2014).

The concepts and practices of a PLC, when taken together and implemented with fidelity, create the conditions that allow teachers to be successful. While individual teachers might view their situation as overwhelming and perhaps even impossible, the structures and culture of a PLC provide the conditions that *collectively* enable teachers to succeed. DuFour and coauthors (2006) write that in a PLC, "There is a constant emphasis that the staff must work collectively, as a community, if they are to meet the needs of students because they cannot adequately respond to students if they work in isolation" (p. 264). One of the chief benefits of a PLC is the collective self-efficacy teachers feel as contributing members of an effective team.

Collective Efficacy and a Culture of Hope

During one of our workshops, a panel of teachers from highly effective PLCs was fielding questions from the audience. When asked how teaching in a PLC is different from teaching in a traditional school, one of the panelists answered, "Working in a PLC means you never again have to face the challenges of teaching alone." We think that concise answer captures the most significant distinction between working in a PLC and in a more traditional school. The collaborative

culture and systematic supports embedded in a PLC have the following significant benefits for teachers.

- Everyone has someone to turn to and talk to when confronted with the difficulties of teaching.
- Everyone has colleagues with whom and from whom they can learn.
- Everyone has teammates who are helping him or her achieve his or her goals.
- Everyone benefits from processes specifically aligned to promote student learning.
- Very importantly, everyone operates within a built-in system of accountability because they are expected to contribute to the continuous improvement of their team and their school.

It is this shift—from a culture of isolation to a culture of collaboration, from working independently to working interdependently, from the pursuit of individual goals and interests to mutual accountability for fulfilling collective purpose and achieving common goals—that generates the strongest appeal for some teachers and, to be candid, elicits the greatest opposition from others.

Most teachers work in isolation. Overcoming this traditional norm of teacher isolation is one of the most formidable barriers to creating a PLC. Educators themselves support the conclusions of the research; yet they acknowledge that they work alone. We have asked more than a thousand different groups of educators, “Do you believe that researchers are correct when they report that teachers typically work in isolation?” We cannot recall a single instance when a group—or even individuals within the group—challenged the conclusion. We regularly ask the question, “How many of you can complete this sentence because you have said it or heard it: ‘I wish they would just give me my kids, give me my books, give me my room, and . . .’” We never fail to get a booming response of, “Leave me alone!”

Elmore (2003) argues that the existing structure of schools not only allows for, but actually fosters, teacher isolation and serves to buffer teachers from accountability from what takes place in their classrooms. Educator evaluations are almost invariably perfunctory, and teachers are rarely called upon to provide concrete evidence of what they are teaching, how they are assessing, the criteria they use in determining the quality of student work, the instructional strategies and materials they utilize in the classroom, the factors they consider in determining a student's grade, and most importantly, the degree to which their students are acquiring the intended knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Even worse, educators can spend an entire career in the profession and never know how well they teach a particular concept in comparison to their colleague teaching the same concept in the classroom across the hall. The scant indicators of learning that do exist are often dismissed as irrelevant. For example, anyone who has been in this profession for any length of time has witnessed teachers justify a significantly higher failure rate than their peers in the same school with the explanation that they have "higher standards." Those same teachers routinely either expect the administration to resist the pleading of students and their parents for transfers to another classroom, or they are indifferent to the exodus that occurs on an annual basis. They are indeed protected or buffered from inspection of or interference in their classrooms. As a result, classroom teachers are far too often immersed in a "culture of privacy and non-interference [that] is the best friend of the status quo" (Schmoker, 2006, p. 14).

The Knowing-Doing Gap at Work

Those seeking evidence of a classic case of the knowing-doing gap need look no further than this issue of teacher isolation versus teacher collaboration. Research repeatedly concludes that teacher isolation has adverse consequences for students, for teachers, and for any effort to improve schools. In 1971, psychologist Seymour B. Sarason reported that because teachers rarely have contact with one another, they "are

psychologically alone even though they are in a densely populated setting" (Sarason, 1996, p. 133). Sarason (1996) suggested teachers adapt to being alone by creating a culture of *individuals* concerned about him- or herself rather than a culture of a *group* concerned with the pursuit of the profession's best practices. In 1975, author Dan C. Lortie described how the isolation of classroom teachers prevents them from developing and sharing knowledge of their craft. The 1980s brought educational researcher and theorist John I. Goodlad's (1984) analysis of the work of teachers, which led to his conclusion that teacher autonomy and isolation cause them to make decisions on curriculum, assessment, and instruction without the benefit of input from colleagues. In their research, Susan J. Rosenholtz, Otto Bassler, and Kathy Hoover-Dempsey (1986) discovered two distinctly different school cultures: one in which collaboration, continuous improvement, and shared learning were the norm, and the other in which autonomy and privatization left the question of quality teaching up to individual teachers to pursue according to their very different perspectives of quality. In the 1990s came Judith Warren Little's (1990) critique of school cultures titled *The Persistence of Privacy*, Ann Lieberman's (1995) finding that the most powerful impediment to school improvement is teacher isolation, and the work of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996), which concluded that the norm of teachers working in isolation prevents the teacher collaboration and shared learning essential to improving student achievement.

The turn of the century brought Elmore's critiques (2002, 2003, 2006) of perverse teacher isolation. Little and colleagues (2003) re-emerged with the lament that the culture of isolation, privacy, and noninterference and the unwillingness of teachers to work together to examine evidence of student learning continue to prevent teachers from getting around to the hard work of improving instruction. Yet another study concluded, "The most persistent norm that stands in the way of 21st-century learning is isolated teaching in stand-alone classrooms" (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005). Elmore (2006) is merely repeated more than thirty years of consistent findings when he wrote:

The design of work in schools is fundamentally incompatible with the practice of improvement. Teachers spend most of their time working in isolation from each other in self-contained classrooms. The problem with this design is that it provides almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the setting in which they actually work. This disconnect between the requirements of learning to teach well and the structure of teachers' work life is fatal to any sustained process of instructional improvement. (p. 127)

DuFour (2015) concurred, writing, "Until teachers and administrators acknowledge their responsibility for perpetuating isolation and commit to creating a new culture of schooling, little is likely to change" (p. 124).

Educators have also known for quite some time that building a collaborative culture in which people work together interdependently to fulfill their shared purpose and achieve their common goals is an essential strategy for sustained school improvement. Consider the following findings.

- "The key to ensuring that every child has a quality teacher is finding a way for school systems to organize the work of qualified teachers so they can collaborate with their colleagues in developing strong learning communities that will sustain them as they become more accomplished teachers." (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003, p. 7)
- "Collaboration and the ability to engage in collaborative action are becoming increasingly important to the survival of the public schools. Indeed, without the ability to collaborate with others the prospect of truly repositioning schools in the constellation of community forces is not likely." (Schlechty, 2005, p. 22)
- "A precondition for doing anything to strengthen our practice and improve a school is the existence of a collegial culture in which professionals talk about

practice, share their craft knowledge, and observe and root for the success of one another. Without these in place, no meaningful improvement—no staff or curriculum development, no teacher leadership, no student appraisal, no team teaching, no parent involvement, and no sustained change—is possible.” (Barth, 2006, p. 13)

- “When teachers work together on collaborative teams, they improve their practice in two important ways. First, they sharpen their pedagogy by sharing specific instructional strategies for teaching more effectively. Second, they deepen their content knowledge by identifying the specific standards students must master. In other words, when teachers work together they become better teachers.” (Many & Sparks-Many, 2015, p. 83)
- “We must stop allowing teachers to work alone, behind closed doors and in isolation in the staffrooms and instead shift to a professional ethic that emphasizes collaboration.” (Hattie, 2015, p. 23)
- Teachers who are primed to act collaboratively stick to their task 64 percent longer than their solitary peers and also show higher engagement levels, lower fatigue levels, and high success rates. (Carr & Walton, 2018)
- “In collaborative teams, members share ownership of student learning. In formative assessments, team members collectively identify the needs of students and work together to share a plan of action to meet those needs. The focus is not on *my students*; rather teams work to serve *our students*.” (Spiller & Power, 2019, p. 66)
- “In the real world, everything we accomplish is done with and through other people. As leaders, we are only as good as our teams. That may be a cliché, but it’s no less true because of it.” (Mackey, McIntosh, & Phipps, 2020, p. 155)

Professional organizations for educators certainly endorse the premise that educators should work together collaboratively. Consider the conclusions of the following organizations.

- “Some of the most important forms of professional learning and problem solving occur in group settings within schools and school districts. Organized groups provide the social interaction that often deepens learning and the interpersonal support and synergy necessary for creatively solving the complex problems of teaching and learning. And because many of the recommendations contained in these standards advocate for increased teamwork among teachers and administrators in designing lessons, critiquing student work, and analyzing various types of data, among other tasks, it is imperative that professional learning be directed at improving the quality of collaborative work.” (National Staff Development Council, 2001)
- “High performing schools tend to promote collaborative cultures, support professional communities and exchanges among all staff and cultivate strong ties among the school, parents, and community. . . . Teachers and staff collaborate to remove barriers to student learning. . . . Teachers communicate regularly with each other about effective teaching and learning strategies.” (National Education Association, 2007)
- “It is time to end the practice of solo teaching in isolated classrooms. Teacher induction and professional development in 21st century schools must move beyond honing one’s craft and personal repertoire of skills. Today’s teachers must transform their personal knowledge into a collectively built, widely shared, and cohesive professional knowledge base.” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2005, p. 4)

- “Accomplished teachers collaborate with others to improve student learning. They work with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development and staff development.” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2007a)
- “Successful middle level teacher preparation programs place a high premium on teaching prospective and practicing middle level teachers about the importance of collaboration with colleagues and other stakeholders. One of the unique characteristics of middle level schools for teachers is the heavy emphasis on collaboration. . . . Teachers are not operating in isolation. This permits insights and understandings about young adolescent students to be shared with others and therefore maximized.” (National Middle School Association, 2006)
- “Isolation is the enemy of learning. Principals who support the learning of adults in their school organize teachers’ schedules to provide opportunities for teachers to work, plan, and think together. For instance, teams of teachers who share responsibility for the learning of all students meet regularly to plan lessons, critique student work and the assignments that led to it, and solve common instructional or classroom management problems.” (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001, p. 45)
- “A high school will regard itself as a community in which members of the staff collaborate to develop and implement the school’s learning goals. Teachers will provide the leadership essential to the success of reform, collaborating with others in the educational community to redefine the role of the teacher and to identify sources of support for that redefined role.” (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, p. 4)

At some point, those of us in education must acknowledge we cannot claim confusion regarding this issue. The research is clear and consistent, professional organizations for teachers and administrators at all grade levels advise us, and our direct observations in our schools and districts confirm it: isolation is the enemy of school improvement. In fact, it is difficult to find either supporting research or advocates for the position that educators best serve their children, themselves, or the profession by working in isolation. We know this. Yet, we have been reluctant to do anything to correct the situation.

In fact, educators have been willing accomplices in fostering this professional isolation. Renowned educator and author Roland S. Barth (1991) challenges teachers and principals to admit they have contributed to the problems of public schooling and that the solution to those problems requires them to change some of their assumptions and practices. He writes:

God didn't create self-contained classrooms, 50 minute periods, subjects taught in isolation. *We did—because we find working alone safer than and preferable to working together. We can work to change the embedded structures so that our schools become more hospitable places for student and adult learning. But little will really change unless we change ourselves.* (p. 125)

Fifteen years later, Barth (2006) bemoans the fact that the structure and culture of most schools continue to foster “parallel play” rather than meaningful collaboration when he writes:

Parallel play, a wonderful concept from the preschool literature, is thought to be a primitive stage of human development through which 2- and 3-year-olds soon pass on their way to more sophisticated forms of interaction. To illustrate, imagine two 3-year-olds busily engaged in opposite corners of a sandbox. One has a shovel and a bucket; the other has a rake and a hoe. At no time do they share their tools, let alone collaborate to build a sandcastle. They may inadvertently throw sand in each other's face from time to time, but they seldom interact intentionally. Although in close proximity for a long period of time, each is so self-absorbed, so totally engrossed in what he or she is doing, that the

two of them will go on for hours working in isolation. Parallel play offers, of course, a perfect description of how teachers interact at many elementary, middle, and high schools. (p. 10)

Sadly, in 2020, a culture of high-quality teacher collaboration remains the exception, rather than the norm. For years, educators were advised that this tradition of teacher isolation is one of the most formidable barriers to school improvement, and that professional collaboration is essential to building the capacity to meet the needs of students; nevertheless, they have proven reluctant to acknowledge and address this detrimental tradition. Unless educators confront this challenge directly, the critique of public education (or what is left of it) in 2050 will begin with the lament that educators still work in isolation.

A New Image for the Profession

The main obstacle in closing this knowing-doing gap is the continuing image of the school organized into a series of independent classrooms, each led by a virtually autonomous teacher who bears only partial responsibility for the learning of his or her students and none for students assigned to other classrooms. School structures have reinforced this image at every turn. The layout of the buildings, the incentives for professional development, and the teacher supervision and evaluation process all contribute to the notion that the school is nothing more than a series of individual classroom kingdoms overseen by independent subcontractors.

We believe that the first step in breaking free of the traditional norm of educators working in isolation is to establish a new image of the fundamental structure of the school, one based on a communal gathering of high-performing collaborative teams that share collective responsibility for the learning of their students.

The collaborative team has been described as follows:

- “The basic building block of any intelligent organization”
(Pinchot & Pinchot, 1993, p. 66)

- “A critical component of every enterprise—the predominant unit for decision making and getting things done. . . . Working in teams is the norm in a learning organization.” (Senge et al., 1994, p. 51)
- “The best way to achieve challenging goals. . . . Teams nurture, support, and inspire each other.” (Tichy, 1997, p. 143)
- “Far more productive than any other form of organizing. There is a clear correlation between participation and productivity.” (Wheatley, 1999, p. 152)
- “The strategic vehicle for getting work accomplished . . . the vehicle for moving organizations into the future. . . . They make better decisions, solve more complex problems, and do more to enhance creativity and build skills than individuals working alone.” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 172)
- “We now have compelling evidence that when teachers team up with their colleagues they are able to create a culture of success in schools, leading to teaching improvements and student learning gains. The clear policy and practice implication is that teaching is a team sport.” (Fulton & Britton, 2011, p. 4)
- “The fundamental structure of a school or district embracing the PLC process will be the collaborative team of educators rather than isolated classrooms or schools. . . . A team, by definition, operates differently from a group. Members of a team work *interdependently* to achieve *common* goals for which members are *mutually accountable*.” (DuFour, 2015, p. 125)
- “The collective beliefs of a team whose members understand their behavior is the difference between student success and failure must be a student-centered mindset. The successful collaborative team understands members are on a mission much bigger than themselves.” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 66)

If the team structure is so essential to creating the collaborative culture of a PLC, it is important that educators come to a common understanding of the meaning of the word *team*. Bringing a group of teachers together on a regular basis does not make them a team. Asking them to work on the same task does not make them a team. Even working toward the same goal may not make them a team.

When we call upon educators to embrace the image of collaborative teams to drive the new structure and culture of their schools and districts, we ask them to envision *a group of people working together interdependently to achieve a common goal for which they are mutually accountable*. It is only when educators need one another, rely on one another, and depend on one another to achieve the shared goal of helping more students learn at higher levels that they are operating as a team. At that point, the success of every member of the team, and equally important, the success of every student the team serves, become the concern of the entire team.

Consider this analogy: every fall, 40,000 runners participate in the Chicago marathon. They are a group of people working together in close proximity, all striving to achieve a common goal—completing the race in a good personal time. Even though they share the same goal and are working very hard in close proximity to one another, they are not a team. An individual runner can achieve his or her goal regardless of what happens to the rest of the participants. The same is true of most educators. Teachers can be working together in close proximity in rooms adjacent to one another. They can be working very hard in pursuit of the same goals—helping all students learn their mathematics facts in third grade or write a persuasive essay in ninth grade. Nevertheless, they are not a team. In both instances the missing element is *interdependence*. The success or failure of a teacher in one classroom has no impact on the others. If a school's mission is to teach, educators can achieve this outcome with or without the assistance of their peers. But when a PLC commits to ensuring all students learn, it can only be achieved by working interdependently.

Thus, a critical element in establishing effective collaborative teams in a PLC is creating *interdependent* relationships. As Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) note, “Interdependence is what organizations are about. The willingness of individuals to cooperate with other members of an organization is one of the major determinants of organizational effectiveness and efficiency” (p. 197). It is only when schools and districts create interdependent relationships among educators that they can expect to create the collective capacity to impact student achievement in a profoundly positive way (Elmore, 2006; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Newmann & Wehlage, 1996; Sergiovanni, 2005).

Time for a New Story

All organizations and the people within them create stories about themselves that help make sense of their world. The process of changing an organization is the process of changing its story (Gardner, 1996). For too long the story that has guided the work of educators is the story of the individual teacher responsible only for his or her students. This image has been perpetuated in contemporary society as well. Think of the messages of the films *Dead Poets Society*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Freedom Writers*, *Dangerous Minds*, or *Mr. Holland's Opus*. A heroic teacher, working in isolation, fights the entrenched bureaucracy of the system and the low expectations of colleagues to make a difference in the lives of his or her students. The key to improving schools, according to this mythology, is finding more of these heroic individuals to lead their isolated classrooms.

It is time to embrace a new story, a new image of teaching, one that celebrates professionals who work together interdependently to accomplish collectively what they could never accomplish alone.

Converting a Hard Fact Into Dangerous Half-Truths

Gradually, educators throughout North America, and increasingly throughout the world, have come to acknowledge that working

collaboratively offers a better hope of helping all students learn than working in isolation. Equally important, they are beginning to acknowledge they can play a role in tearing down the walls of isolation and building a collaborative culture. Once again, however, a hard fact regarding the importance of a collaborative culture has often been diluted into dangerous half-truths. First, educators often substitute congeniality for collaboration (Barth, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2005). If the members of a group get along with one another or perhaps read and discuss the same book, they are satisfied they are a collaborative team. They are not—just as good friends or the members of Oprah’s Book Club—collaborative teams.

Collaboration—or co-laboring—in a PLC entails working together interdependently in systematic processes to analyze and impact professional practice to improve individual and collective results.

The second half-truth asserts that “collaboration is good.” But there is nothing inherently good about collaboration (Fullan, 2007; Little, 1990). It represents a means to an end rather than the end itself. Collaboration can serve to perpetuate the status quo rather than improve it, to reinforce the negative aspects of the culture rather than resolve them, to reiterate faulty assumptions rather than subject them to collective inquiry. Collaboration can, and sometimes does, dissolve into grouping by griping, a forum for petty grievances, and a reaffirmation of resignation and helplessness. A collaborative culture can be powerful, but as Fullan (2001) warns, unless people “are focusing on the right things they may end up being powerfully wrong” (p. 67).

W. Edwards Deming (2000), an American engineer, statistician, professor, author, lecturer, and management consultant, observes, “It is not enough to do your best; you must know what to do and then do your best” (p. 19). We are convinced that teachers typically do their best; however, they have not always known what to do. If the key to improving schools is “*learning to do the right things* in the setting where you work” (Elmore, 2006, p. 73), then the key to effective collaboration is to ensure educators collaborate, or co-labor, on the “right” things—the things that actually impact student learning.

Therefore, we argue that effective collaborative teams will engage in collective inquiry into the four critical questions of a PLC (DuFour et al., 2016):

1. What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course, or this grade level?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient? (p. 36)

Building Shared Knowledge Rather Than Pooling Opinions

As the *professionals* within a PLC, teachers must constantly seek the best strategies for helping students learn at the highest possible levels. Their search must move beyond pooling opinions—“This is how I like to teach this concept,” “I have always done it this way,” or “This seems to work for me.” Professionals will seek to discover and implement the best practices in teaching. They will become students of the research base on teaching. Although it is beyond the scope of this book to provide a detailed analysis of effective teaching strategies, powerful resources are available to teachers and teams committed to the study of their craft. For example, researcher and author Robert J. Marzano’s (2017) synthesis of the research identifies thirty-four specific teaching behaviors under nine different instructional strategies proven to be effective in helping students learn at higher levels. Jonathon Saphier, Mary Ann Haley-Speca, and Robert Gower (2008) synthesize the knowledge base on teaching to focus on seventeen critical areas of classroom performance. More importantly, they offer powerful insights as to how specific strategies can be matched to student needs. The third edition of the *Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement* offers insights into effective strategies for teaching specific subject areas as well as the most powerful

general instructional practices (Calwalti, 2004). Author John Hattie's (2009) book *Visible Learning* is quite literally the encyclopedia of best practices—a meta-analysis of the impact of hundreds of factors that impact student learning, and their likelihood of increasing student achievement.

It is imperative to stress, however, that members of a collaborative team in a PLC will not limit their study of effective practices to the research of others, but will also conduct their own action research with each unit they teach. After the team has reached agreement on what students must learn and on the strategies for assessing their learning, each member of the team has the autonomy to select and implement the instructional strategies he or she believes will yield the best results. *How* skills and concepts are taught is left to the discretion of individual teachers, and variability of strategies is valued as an important tool in the team's action research. This is because effective teaching is both a science and an art (Marzano, 2017). While we can study elements of learning through the neuroscience of the brain, what constitutes good teaching is more than a cognitive experience—it also is rooted in an instructor's heart and soul (Gregory, Kaufeldt, & Mattos, 2015). Once they administer a common assessment, the team members examine the results together to identify the strategies that led to the highest levels of learning. Members then teach one another, using their individual strengths to enhance the overall effectiveness of the team.

Effective teaching requires considerable autonomy and discretion in the day-to-day, moment-to-moment decisions teachers make in their individual classrooms. Classroom instructional strategies should be based on sound science and research, but knowing when to use them and with whom is more of an art (Marzano, 2017). Members of PLCs support that autonomy because they recognize scripted lessons and lockstep pacing will not develop the capacity of teachers to improve either their instruction or their schools. When, however, teachers are presented with clear evidence that particular instructional strategies consistently yield better results for students, they are expected to develop their ability to use those strategies in

their classrooms. This typically is not a problem, since we have found that evidence of student learning is the most powerful motivator for teachers to change their practice.

Some of our colleagues have suggested that we should include the question, “What are the most effective strategies for teaching these skills?” among the critical questions a team would discuss *prior* to initiating instruction or creating and administering a common assessment. We certainly are not opposed to teachers having this conversation early in the process; we caution, however, that until they have concrete evidence of the effectiveness of different strategies, they are engaged in conjecture. The more powerful conversations regarding best practice occur when people have shared access to the evidence of effectiveness of various instructional strategies. Those conversations become the kind of professional dialogue that contributes to teacher growth; they are concrete, specific, precise, and grounded in evidence.

We cannot stress emphatically enough that the only reason the members of a collaborative team of teachers explore these four critical questions together is to improve student achievement by identifying students who need intervention and enrichment and by using their collective analysis of evidence to inform and improve their professional practice. If teams merely generate data from assessments and then continue with business as usual, there will be no gains in student achievement. In other words, *teams engage in the process of addressing the four critical questions in order to address the ultimate issue: How can we use this evidence of student learning to respond to our students and improve our individual and collective teaching?*

A Collaborative Team at Work

The following story of the second-grade team at Westlawn Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia, offers insight into the workings of a collaborative team within a PLC.

Diana, Se, Marie, and Amy, the second-grade team at Westlawn, began their collaborative process for improving mathematics proficiency for their students by engaging in collective inquiry regarding

the current results and practices in second-grade mathematics. Their mathematics achievement data from the previous year's summative district assessment indicated 78 percent of second graders met or exceeded the district's proficiency target in mathematics. They agreed to establish a team SMART goal to improve last year's results by at least 10 percent on that same summative district assessment. The goal was strategic in that it aligned with the school's goal to increase the percentage of students meeting or exceeding proficiency in mathematics as measured on local, county, state, and national indicators. The team goal was measurable because it asked for a 10 percent increase over the previous year. The team believed the goal was attainable—that is, they felt they could accomplish it. It was results oriented because improved results (higher levels of student learning) were required to achieve the goal. It was time bound because the goal was to be accomplished within the school year.

Prior to developing strategies to achieve their goal, Diana, Se, Marie, and Amy had a candid conversation about how they had approached the mathematics curriculum the previous year. They acknowledged they had followed the same four-step pattern for each unit.

- **Step 1.** Administer the preassessment from the textbook.
- **Step 2.** Teach the unit.
- **Step 3.** Administer the postassessment from the textbook.
- **Step 4.** Move on to the next unit, repeating steps 1 through 3.

They recognized they would only improve student performance in mathematics across second grade by seeking out and implementing new and better practices. They committed to one another to use the team learning process to guide their teamwork throughout that year.

What Did They Do?

1. They identified and clarified the most essential student learning outcomes (skills, concepts, and dispositions) in mathematics for each semester by doing the following.

- a. Talking with the third-grade team to determine the skills and concepts most essential to student success in mathematics for entering third graders
 - b. Analyzing and clarifying their state and division second-grade mathematics standards
 - c. Consulting with school and division mathematics specialists to clarify multiple interpretations of the same standards
 - d. Analyzing the district assessment, and identifying where their students had struggled in the previous year
 - e. Developing a mathematics curriculum map and common pacing guide they all agreed to follow
2. They created a series of common formative assessments aligned to the essential mathematics outcomes by doing the following.
 - a. Studying the language and format of the district's summative assessment of second-grade mathematics
 - b. Selecting appropriate items aligned to the essential mathematics skills from textbooks, individual teacher assessments, and state and national websites providing released mathematics items
 - c. Creating new items team members deemed to be valid ways of assessing the essential skills
 - d. Including at least five items per skill on each common assessment to provide students adequate opportunities to demonstrate their proficiency
 - e. Increasing the number and frequency of assessments so only two or three skills were considered on each assessment
 3. They established a proficiency target of 80 percent for each skill on each assessment. For example, if they

used five items to assess a particular skill, students needed to solve four of the five problems correctly to be deemed proficient.

4. They collectively analyzed the results from each common formative assessment, identifying, skill by skill, the individual students throughout second grade whose scores exceeded, met, or fell below the team's proficiency target.

Through this collaborative analysis of common formative assessment data, the team was quickly able to do the following.

- Identify individual students who were experiencing difficulty on any skill.
- Identify individual students who were already highly proficient.
- Create flexible groups of students across the grade level for the intervention and enrichment period each day based on skill-by-skill proficiency.
- Establish a protected block of time each day for the team, resource specialists, and instructional assistants to provide students with coordinated and precise intervention or enrichment based on students' personal needs.
- Identify the teachers whose students were experiencing the greatest success on each skill.
- Assign students who were struggling with a particular skill to work with the teachers experiencing the best results on that skill on the common assessments during their intervention or enrichment period.
- Explore and discuss the strategies being used in individual classrooms.

The team also engaged students in the process of monitoring their own learning by requiring each student to maintain simple bar graphs indicating his or her proficiency on each essential mathematics skill. Items on the assessment were arranged by skill, and each item was assigned its own box on the graph. After every common assessment,

students would color in the box for each item they answered correctly. As individual students discovered they had not met the proficiency target on a particular essential mathematics skill or concept, they knew to report to the corresponding small-group tutorial during the intervention or enrichment period to receive additional support.

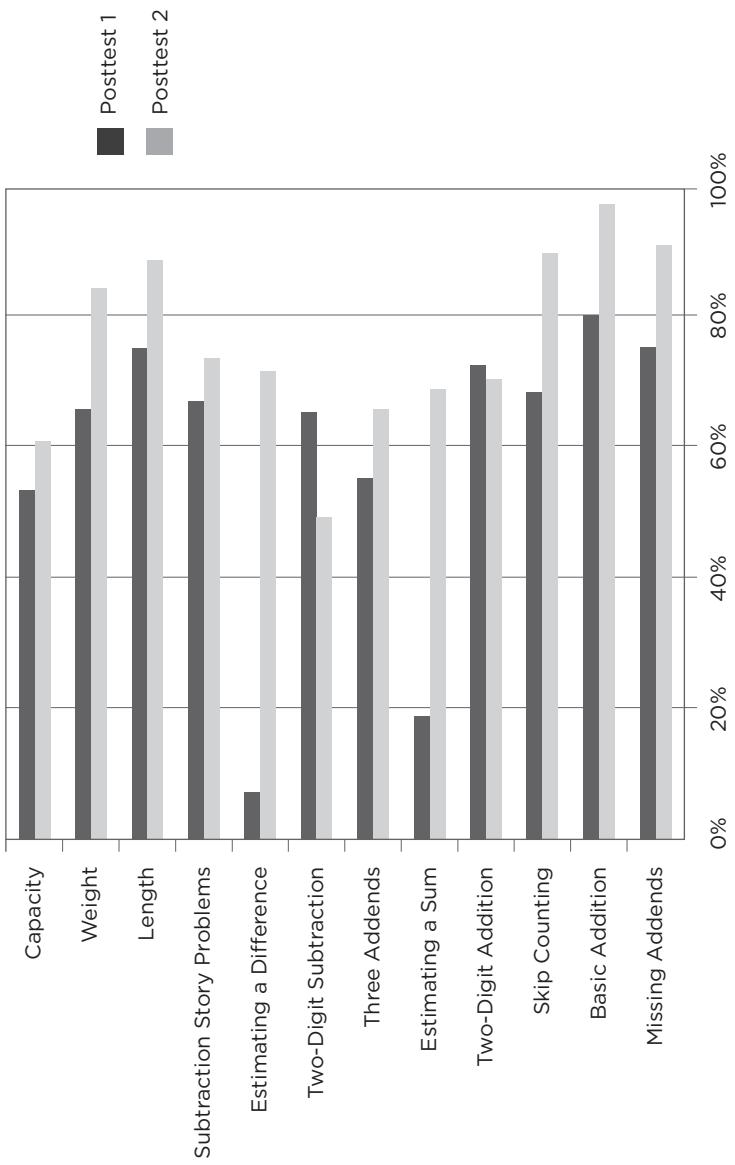
At the completion of this skill-driven intervention cycle, the team administered another form of the common assessment to students who had experienced difficulty on any of the essential skills. At that point, new student learning groups were formed. Students who demonstrated proficiency were moved to enrichment groups, while students who continued to struggle were moved to smaller, more intensive group interventions.

This intervention and enrichment process ensured any student in second grade who was having difficulty understanding a skill would receive intensive, small-group instruction from the most effective teacher on the team for that particular skill. The process allowed the team to continue with new direct instruction during the regular mathematics period each day, so the difficulties of a few did not adversely impact the opportunity for all students to learn new material. Meanwhile, the team continued to build shared knowledge of the best way to help young students acquire mathematics skills through a collective study of the research on the topic. At the same time, however, members were conducting their own action research on effective mathematics instruction and learning from one another.

What Did They Learn?

As the members of the second-grade team and the school-based support team collectively responded to the individual and small-group learning needs of their students, skill by skill throughout the first semester, they discovered dramatic gains in the number of students achieving or exceeding proficiency—*except* in two skill areas: two-digit addition and two-digit subtraction (see figure 5.1, page 146).

Of course, they celebrated both the growth of individual students and the team's progress toward achieving its mathematics SMART

Final Data: Results of Posttest 1 and Posttest 2 for Second-Grade Mathematics**FIGURE 5.1:** Final data results of posttest 1 and posttest 2 for second-grade mathematics.

goal, but they were puzzled as to why students continued to struggle with the two skills, even after intervention. As they probed deeper, the team members learned the two distinct skills had something in common—both required the students to regroup numbers to solve two-digit addition and subtraction problems. They also discovered each member of the team had utilized all the various strategies and tricks for teaching regrouping to students, and no member had been able to help students overcome their difficulties with the skill. At that point, Diana, Se, Marie, and Amy recognized *they* needed to learn new ways of teaching regrouping before they could help all students learn to apply the skill. The teachers were working hard and doing their best, but now they needed some time and support from an external source to strengthen their own capacity to meet the needs of their students. Doing their best was not enough. They had to heed Deming's (2000) advice and first learn what to do, and then do their best.

The team shared its concern with the principal, Kim Dockery, who made arrangements for a mathematics professor from a local university to help them develop additional strategies for helping young “concrete” learners understand the abstract concept of regrouping numbers. Team members then engaged in learning by doing—applying the new practices in their classrooms, reflecting on what worked and what did not, and supporting one another as they strengthened and stretched their own learning and developed new skills.

This team learning process had several positive consequences. First, the team achieved its goal: more second-grade students achieved proficiency in mathematics than ever before. Second, the teachers enhanced their professional expertise and became more skillful in teaching mathematics. Third, the teachers felt a greater sense of self-efficacy, more confident that their collective efforts have a powerful effect on student learning. Fourth, students who in the past might have concluded at age seven that “I’m not good in math” were spared the attendant short- and long-term implications of that perception, and instead entered third grade confident of their ability. Fifth, parent

requests for teacher changes were diminished because parents recognized that the entire team was working together to ensure all students became proficient on the same essential skills.

This success story is not an aberration. In fact, it has been replicated not only by other teams at Westlawn but also by teams around the world in schools at all grade levels, serving students across all socioeconomic levels. The same common elements appear in those success stories.

- A shared commitment to helping all students learn at high levels
- Clarity among teachers regarding the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions students must acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction
- Clarity and consistency among teachers regarding the criteria to use in assessing the quality of student work
- Frequent common formative assessments to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis
- Systematic interventions to provide additional time and support for students who experience difficulty, and additional opportunities for them to demonstrate they have learned
- Teachers working interdependently in collaborative teams to achieve results-oriented goals for which they are mutually accountable, and taking collective responsibility for the learning of all students
- Individual teachers as well as teams using results from a variety of assessments to respond to the learning needs of individual students and to inform and improve their professional practice
- Teams engaged in collective inquiry and building shared knowledge of effective practices by examining both internal and external sources of information

- Ongoing, job-embedded learning for teachers as part of their routine work practice in recognition of the power of learning by doing
- Clear parameters regarding what is tight about the school's culture and where individuals and teams can exercise professional autonomy

The New Professionalism

Creating these conditions is difficult but doable, more a question of will than skill, of *want to* than *know how*. We *know* how to improve student achievement, but the question remains, “Will we break from the constraints of traditional school cultures and begin the process of closing the knowing-doing gap?” If educators are to help more students learn at higher levels, they must break free from the restraints of their traditional structures and cultures and embrace what Fullan (2007) has called “the new professionalism,” which is “collaborative, not autonomous; open rather than closed; outward looking rather than insular. . . . The teaching profession must become a better learning profession” (p. 297).

Simply collaborating, or even organizing teachers into collaborative teams, will do little to improve student learning. Effective collaboration begins with a purpose—a sharp focus on enhancing the learning of *each student*, subject by subject, course by course, unit by unit, lesson by lesson, and skill by skill, and doing so requires teams to address two fundamental questions: (1) What is essential that every student learn and be able to do? and (2) How will we know if students are learning?



CHAPTER 6

Essential Learning and Assessment in a PLC

Professional learning communities are characterized by an academic focus that begins with a set of practices that bring clarity, coherence, and precision to every teacher’s classroom work. Teachers work collaboratively to provide a rigorous curriculum that is crystal clear and includes a compact list of learning expectations for each grade or course and tangible exemplars of student proficiency for each learning expectation.

—JONATHON SAPHIER

Formative assessment works. That’s right: Ample research evidence is now at hand to indicate emphatically that when the formative-assessment process is used, students learn better—lots better.

—JAMES POPHAM

Traditionally, teachers have been given a great deal of latitude regarding what to teach. Textbooks drove what students should know or be able to do, with individual teachers deciding what to emphasize or omit. It is no exaggeration to say that historically in many—if not most—traditional schools, the question of what students were taught depended on luck—the luck of which individual teacher the students were assigned.

Beginning in the last half of the 1990s, the *standards movement* began a transition toward state and national agreement regarding

what students should know or be able to do. Even though virtually every state adopted standards for most subjects or courses, such standards are often too vague, too broad, and too numerous. A priority for every team in a PLC is to clarify what students must learn. In doing so, teams will be called upon to identify and clearly articulate the *most essential* skills and concepts students must acquire. Teams will also be required to agree on the curriculum content that should be eliminated, providing more instructional time for the concepts and skills deemed essential.

Too Many Standards, Too Little Time

Have you ever heard a teacher complain about not having enough content to teach or having too much time? The fact is, there are simply too many standards to teach and too little time to teach them. As Lawrence W. Lezotte, one of the original Effective Schools researchers, notes, the American public school curriculum is a mile wide and an inch deep (L. Lezotte, personal communication, 1996). W. James Popham (2005), professor emeritus in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, contends that the typical process used to create state standards—convening subject-matter experts to ask them what is important and significant about their subjects—inevitably results in the conclusion that *everything* is important. As Popham (2005) writes, “These committees seem bent on identifying skills they fervently wish students would possess. Regrettably, the resultant litanies of committee-chosen content standards tend to resemble curricular wish lists rather than realistic targets.”

Marzano (2003) estimates if schools attempted to teach all the standards states have adopted, as well as the standards national organizations recommend, it would require twenty-three years of schooling. While the introduction of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) reduced the number of standards, DuFour and Marzano (2011) conclude, “the Common Core standards have not solved the problem for the classroom teacher of developing standards that truly represent a viable curriculum—one that can be adequately addressed in the

current time available to classroom teachers” (p. 93). The conclusion, not surprisingly, is that the American curriculum is not viable; that is, it cannot be taught in the amount of time available for schooling. We are unaware of any movement to convert the American educational system from K–12 to K–22, and therefore, teachers will continue to grapple with the endemic curriculum overload of public education in the United States.

This overload has resulted in two significant barriers to student achievement. First, too many teachers make *coverage* of the curriculum a priority. The ability to say, “I taught it” becomes the primary objective, and student learning becomes a secondary consideration. Given the number of standards teachers are expected to teach, coupled with the state testing each spring, means teachers have less time to teach all the standards. It is little wonder teachers feel successful if they get everything “covered.”

Second, too many standards require teachers to make decisions about what they will teach and what they will exclude. Since individual teachers typically made this decision, the result is that students often lack a common curriculum experience. A sixth-grade teacher who is assigned students from four different fifth-grade classrooms cannot be certain what those students were taught, much less what they learned. Frequently, there is no guaranteed curriculum to ensure all students have access to the same knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Marzano, 2003).

Reeves (2002) offers the most insightful recommendations as to how educators should respond to the plethora of standards they are called upon to teach. Reeves (2002) makes the commonsense argument (one which he then supports with research) that not all standards are created equal; some are simply more important, or powerful, than others. For example, a state may include “identifying the main idea of a reading passage” and “naming the capital of each of the fifty states in the United States” among its standards for fifth-grade students. Few people, however, would argue that the ability to recall state capitals is as significant to a student’s success as his or her ability

to read a passage and understand its meaning. A school committed to helping all students learn at high levels must have a process in place to ensure every teacher is clear on the question, “Learn what?” for each course, grade level, and unit of instruction. Reeves (2015a) may refer to “power standards,” Marzano (2017) to a “guaranteed and viable curriculum,” and Lezotte and Snyder (2010) to “clear and focused academic goals,” but, regardless of the language, they all are advocating for the same principle: schools are more effective when the teams composed of teachers who teach the same or similar content work together to establish a clear and consistent understanding of what is essential for students to learn.

Determining What Is Essential

If having groups of educators develop state standards results in the problem of too many standards, the same danger exists for teacher teams. If teacher teams simply add what each individual teacher thinks is essential, the result will be too much of a curriculum to teach in too little time. This tendency to average opinions must be avoided at all costs. For teacher teams in a high-performing PLC, the first step is to *learn together*. Teacher teams must become students of the standards.

For team members to learn together in a PLC, they must have a common understanding of key vocabulary. While members of a team might use the same terminology, leaders should not assume every member of a team has the same understanding of what each term means. Team members engaged in the work of determining what is essential for every student to learn frequently use the following terms, and, therefore, must have a consistent and clear understanding of what each term means.

- **Collective inquiry:** The process of building shared knowledge by clarifying the questions a group will explore together. In PLCs, collaborative teams engage in collective inquiry into both best practices regarding teaching and learning as well as the reality of the current practices and conditions in their schools or districts.

- ***Consensus:*** Consensus is achieved when (1) all points of view have been heard and (2) the will of the group is evident even to those who most oppose it.
- ***Essential learning:*** The critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions each student must acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction. Essential learning may also be referred to as *essential outcomes* or *power standards*.
- ***Guaranteed and viable curriculum:*** A curriculum that (1) gives students access to the same essential learning regardless of who is teaching the class and (2) can be taught in the time allotted (Marzano, 2003).

(For a comprehensive glossary of key terms and concepts frequently used in the PLC at Work process, visit go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks to download a free reproducible.)

As teams engage in the work of creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum, leaders must provide teams with useful resources. DuFour and authors (2016) recommend at least the following resources.

- Current state or provincial standards
- Recommended standards from professional organizations
- District curriculum guides
- A list of prerequisite skills that colleagues at the next course or grade level have established as essential for success at the level (Hence, leaders must develop a plan for ensuring meaningful and useful vertical alignment.)
- Assessment frameworks (how students will be assessed on state, provincial, and other district and national assessments, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress)
- Data on student performance on past assessments
- Examples of student work and specific criteria that could be tested in judging the quality of student work

- Recommendations and standards for workplace skills (for example, industry standards for career and technical education programs)
- Recommendations on standards and curriculum design from authors such as Douglas Reeves, Heidi Hayes Jacobs, Robert J. Marzano, Grant Wiggins, and Jay McTighe

Again, the goal is not to average opinions or pool what each teacher is already teaching, but rather, teams should learn together regarding what is essential—what all students need to learn or be able to do at each grade, subject, course, and unit of instruction.

Prioritizing the Standards

Teachers will frequently ask, “But, aren’t we responsible for teaching all the standards?” The short answer is *yes*. However, all standards are not equally important. Some things students must know or be able to do are more important than others; they are absolutely essential. This means teacher teams must prioritize what students must learn. These priority standards are a *carefully selected subset* of the total list of the grade-specific and course-specific standards within each content area that students must know and be able to do by the end of each school year in order to be prepared for the standards at the next grade level or course (Ainsworth & Donovan, 2019). This is why studying a variety of recommendations and assessments is so important. Teams work to align what students will be taught (and learn) with the outcomes students will ultimately be held accountable for or will need for success in units of instruction or courses.

While there is no one best way for prioritizing standards and learning outcomes, Reeves (2002) offers a useful three-part test for teachers to identify the most significant or powerful standards—endurance, leverage, and readiness for the next level of learning. As Reeves (2002) explains:

1. **Does the standard have endurance?** These are standards that provide students with “skills or knowledge that

remains with them long after a test is completed . . . [such as] research skills, reading comprehension, writing, map reading, and hypotheses testing” (pp. 49–50).

2. **Does the standard have leverage?** This means that the standard is applicable to many academic disciplines. For example, does the standard include nonfiction writing and interpretation of tables, charts, and graphs? “The evidence is quite clear that if students engage in more frequent nonfiction writing, their performance in other academic disciplines improves” (p. 50).
3. **Does the standard provide readiness for the next level of learning?** To address this criterion, a collaborative team of teachers would ask the team of colleagues in the grade level or course above them to identify the essential knowledge and skills students must acquire to be successful in their class next year.

In short, identifying and clarifying essential curricula for all students is a team learning process that involves deep collaboration and fidelity. Simply going through the motions—doing enough to get by—is not the same as the required deep, rigorous, serious work. If collaborative teacher teams approach the work of developing and articulating a clear, guaranteed, and viable curriculum, they lay the foundation for drilling deeper into the work of ensuring high levels of student learning for all by collaboratively identifying specific learning targets for each unit of instruction.

Identifying What Proficiency Looks Like

It is not unusual for teams to identify the most essential concepts and skills all students must learn, but omit the critical step of asking, “What would this concept or skill look like in proficient student work?” Once teams collaboratively answer this question, members can then make a number of important instructional decisions that will enhance student learning.

For example, virtually all teachers understand the importance of student practice; however, students shouldn't practice just anything. Appropriate, informed, and focused practice is required. If teachers know what proficient student work looks like, they can engage students in practicing the same kind of work. This can enhance the effectiveness of homework, since homework is, in most cases, simply extended practice beyond the classroom. This in turn enables teachers to provide students with high-quality examples of student work, along with specific feedback for each student.

As with determining essential concepts and skills, members of a collaborative team do not simply average opinions regarding what student work would look like if students are successful. Again, the process begins with the team first *learning together*. Teams gather evidence of what students must do on a variety of summative assessments—state assessments, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, SAT or ACT assessments, AP assessments, district benchmark assessments, and so on. Namely, teacher teams study the *formats* of external summative assessments their students are likely to take. The formats of external summative assessments are key pieces of information for guiding teams in collaboratively determining student learning proficiency, student practice, examples, and feedback, as well as the formats of common formative assessments. Highly effective collaborative teams work relentlessly to align instructional practices with what student work looks like if students demonstrate proficiency.

There is an added benefit of addressing the question of proficiency. When teams have collaboratively articulated what essential concepts and skills should look like in student work, they are able to more clearly report to parents the progress their children are making in relation to a common standard. Parents prefer to know how well their children are learning in relation to a *consistent standard*, as opposed to their child's *average learning over a set period of time*, say every six or nine weeks.

Collaboratively Developing a Common Pacing Calendar

Teachers have traditionally been afforded great latitude in deciding what to teach, or at least what to emphasize. Teachers have also been given a great deal of autonomy in deciding how much time to spend on an individual topic or unit of instruction. In a PLC, collaborative teams develop *common* unit plans, and they begin by creating a common yearly instructional calendar.

Developing such a calendar begins with teams first addressing the following questions.

1. What order should we teach the essential concepts and skills?
2. How much time should we allot to each essential concept or skill so that each is taught and learned in a reasonable amount of time?

Particularly, teacher teams not only address the issue of the essential learning outcomes being guaranteed but also that they are viable.

A few words of caution are in order. First, effective teams develop a rough, rather loose pacing guide. Teachers should not be expected to be teaching the exact same thing on the same day. The teams are simply chunking out the year by roughly allotting time, first to the most essential concepts and skills, and then sprinkling in the less-important standards in the remaining time.

Second, this implies teams will have to consider the question, “What content do we currently teach that we can eliminate?” As we discussed earlier, most teachers would agree that students are expected to learn more than ever before, and, consequently, teachers suffer from curriculum overload. Thus, some content must be excluded, or at least given only limited attention. The question, then, is: Should deciding what to leave out or de-emphasize be left to the discretion of individual teachers, or is it a collaborative team decision? In a PLC, teams address the issue of what not to teach—what to eliminate from the curriculum—as well as what to teach.

A simple, commonsense way of thinking about this step is: in a PLC, collaborative teacher teams make informed decisions regarding first *what is essential*. Then they determine *what else will be taught* in addition to the most essential concepts and skills. Finally, they determine *what will not be included* in the curriculum. Such a process enables teams of teachers to develop more realistic and viable pacing calendars.

Third, collaborative teams should be careful not to make the pacing calendar too tight. In a school or classroom, things are bound to happen that impact pacing. Someone will be sick. The weather causes delays. Remember, the common pacing calendar is just a rough estimate of how much time teachers will need to viably teach each unit of instruction. Experienced teams have learned to build in extra days here and there throughout the year. For example, a high school might devote fifteen weeks in an eighteen-week semester to a common calendar, leaving three weeks in the semester for individual teacher curricular decisions.

This leads to our fourth and final point: since the pacing guide is simply a rough estimate, each academic year the calendar can, and probably will, need to be adjusted, both as the year unfolds and as each new year begins. Effective teams keep notes at the end of each unit to use when the time comes for planning the next year's pacing calendar.

Of course, collaboratively developing a guaranteed and viable curriculum will have little value unless each member of a team actually uses it. Collectively agreeing on the essential concepts and practices necessary for every student in every subject, course, and unit of instruction is different from every member of the team *actually teaching* each concept and skill. Collaboratively developing common unit plans, along with collaboratively sharing examples of student work, can be powerful tools for monitoring the degree to which teachers are implementing the guaranteed curriculum.

Equally important, the school's master schedule must ensure that all students have access to the curriculum deemed essential for future

success. When a PLC commits to ensuring *all* students will learn at high levels, they are not suggesting that every student will master every standard covered in the required curriculum; that is not realistic. Instead, the school is ensuring that every student—regular education, special education, and students at risk—will master the learning outcomes that the faculty has identified as absolutely essential for success in the next grade or course. Obviously, a student cannot learn this critical curriculum if he or she is pulled from class while these outcomes are being taught, or placed in remedial coursework that tracks him or her below grade level. Some students will undoubtedly need targeted supports and accommodations in rigorous grade-level standards, but denying access will ensure these students will fall further behind.

Engaging in a Continuous Process

It is important to again note that being a PLC is a never-ending journey of improvement. This means that creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum is not a singular act, but rather an ongoing process. It is unlikely that a teacher team, faculty, or district will select the perfect list of essential standards or create the ideal pacing guide on their first attempt. Likewise, when teams are new to the process, what is viable for them will differ from what teams that have honed their collaborative skills will deem viable. The key is getting better and better at the right work—continuous improvement!

We also caution against the temptation of creating a district committee of teachers or curriculum experts to identify the essential curriculum. While such a committee might be *part* of the process, it is critical that those asked to actually teach the curriculum have a voice in the process. Marzano and DuFour (2011) note in *Leaders of Learning* that a guaranteed and viable curriculum *only* happens when teachers—*who are called on to deliver the curriculum*—work collaboratively to do the following.

- Study the intended curriculum and agree on priorities within the curriculum.

- Clarify how the curriculum translates into specific student knowledge and skills.
- Establish pacing guidelines for delivering the curriculum.
- Commit to one another that they will actually teach the curriculum.

This is a critical point—if classroom teachers are not actively involved and empowered in answering the critical questions of the PLC at Work process, then they are not involved in the *learning*. Which of the following options will most significantly improve daily classroom instruction and increase student achievement?

1. A select handful of educators, already extremely knowledgeable in a specific curriculum, digs deeply into the standards and identifies what is essential for all students to learn, the levels of proficiency for the essential learning, and when it should be taught. This list is then sent to all the teachers assigned to teach this curriculum, with the expectation that they will accurately interpret, fully support, and effectively teach this curriculum.
2. *All* the teachers assigned to teach a specific grade, subject, or course are engaged in an ongoing process to study the assigned curriculum, define key terminology, identify essential learning standards, determine how students will demonstrate proficiency, and commit to a preferred sequence and pacing to teach it.

If the goal is efficiency, a district committee would be the easier path. But if the goal is increased adult and student learning, the latter is a superior process.

Assessment in a PLC

Consider, once again, the origins of public education in the United States. If elementary schools were created to sort and select students according to their aptitude, to sift the “boys of best genius” from

the rubble each year, and if high schools were created to classify and then educate students according to “differences among children as to aptitudes, interests, economic resources, and prospective careers” (National Education Association, as cited in Lazerson & Grubb, 1974), then educators needed tools to assist them in the sorting and classifying process. Assessments of various forms became the instruments for addressing that need.

Sorting and Selecting in America’s Schools

One of the first formal assessments specifically designed for this rating and ranking was the intelligence quotient, or IQ test, which was based on the premise that intelligence is a function of innate ability, something a person is born with, not something he or she acquires. When IQ tests were administered to hundreds of thousands of American soldiers as the United States entered World War I, the results suggested that the average mental age of Americans was fourteen. Based on this finding, many concluded that most Americans were uneducable beyond high school. This led concerned university presidents to seek an assessment instrument to establish which students had the aptitude for higher education.

James Conant of Harvard University was one of those presidents, and he assigned one of his deans, Henry Chauncey, to find a test to identify students who had the natural ability to meet the academic challenges of college. Chauncey turned to Carl Brigham, a Princeton University psychologist, who had tweaked the intelligence test administered to army recruits to create a test purporting to determine the academic potential of students—the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

Chauncey began using the test to select scholarship recipients for Harvard. Soon other universities began administering the test as well, and by the 1940s, it had become the basic admission test for hundreds of colleges. In 1948, Educational Testing Service was chartered, and Chauncey became its president (Frontline, n.d.).

Chauncey was very explicit in his goal: he hoped to create a new meritocracy by using SAT scores to categorize, sort, and route students to their roles in society (Lemann, 2000). Ironically, Brigham,

the author of the SAT, came to debunk the entire concept of an “aptitude test.” He concludes the movement to test for intelligence or aptitude was based on:

One of the most glorious fallacies in the history of science, namely that the tests measured native intelligence purely and simply without regard to training or schooling. The test scores very definitely are a composite including schooling, family background, familiarity with English and everything else. (as cited in Pacenza, 2007)

Educators have not, however, relied solely on commercial assessments to facilitate the sorting and selecting process. They have been willing accomplices in and contributors to the process of ranking and labeling students and have used their own varied classroom assessments to help achieve that objective. Elementary schools might create groups of bluebirds, redbirds, robins, sparrows, and crows, while high schools might create honors, accelerated, regular, modified, and remedial groups; but, both have operated under the assumption that high achievement is limited to a select number of students who have won the genetic lottery and therefore possess the innate aptitude to learn at high levels.

A student entering a school system in kindergarten and remaining in the system for thirteen years would graduate with a number certifying his or her rank—for example, number 112 in a class of 181. A hundredth of a percentage point often determines the placement of one student above another. This very precise ranking is, of course, based on the disjointed and dissimilar criteria dozens of teachers use, but who are not required, expected, or even encouraged to come to a common understanding of how to assess students, the rigor of their classroom assessments, the criteria to use in determining the quality of student work, or the factors to use in deciding student grades. Disconnected teachers contribute hundreds of subjective judgments to the establishment of a final class rank that is then presented under the pretext of objectivity.

Ranking and sorting students have also been the goals of most traditional grading practices. The very concept of “grading on a curve”

ensures that students who score in the top 10 percent on an assessment will receive a grade of A, with subsequent grades determined from the highest score. Such practices do not expect, or even allow, all students to reach the highest levels of learning.

If the fundamental purpose of schooling is to sort and select students, using assessments and grading practices in this way makes sense because they align with the purpose of the enterprise—sorting and selecting. If, however, a school or district hopes to operate as a PLC, it embraces a very different purpose of schooling—high levels of learning for *all* students—and it *must* use assessments in a very different way to align with that purpose.

Summative Versus Formative Assessment

One of the most promising developments in contemporary education is a new and deeper understanding of the potential of assessment to be a powerful tool for informing and improving the teaching and learning process. Educators are more attuned to the distinction between summative and formative assessment. They understand a summative assessment is an assessment *of* learning (Stiggins, 2007), a tool to answer the question, “Did the student learn by the deadline?” with a “yes” or “no,” “pass” or “fail,” “proficient” or “not proficient.”

They have learned a formative assessment is an assessment *for* learning, a tool used to inform both the teacher and the student about the student’s current level of achievement, to guide the teacher’s instructional practice, to help the student understand what steps must be taken to further his or her learning, and to motivate the student to take those steps (Stiggins, 2007; Wiliam & Thompson, 2008). While a summative assessment is designed for accountability, a formative assessment supports learning (Stiggins, 2007) because teachers use the evidence from the assessment to adapt teaching strategies to meet student needs (Black & Wiliam, 2004). Reeves’s (2000) vivid analogy—a formative test is to a summative test as a physical examination is to an autopsy—has helped educators sharpen the distinction between these two very different types of assessment. A person’s health cannot

improve after an autopsy, while the very purpose of a medical checkup is to determine the current state of one's health and appropriate measures to improve it if needed.

Most educators understand that the high-stakes state and provincial tests their students take are *summative* assessments, and while these tests may attempt to hold schools (and sometimes students) accountable for learning, they do very little to inform or improve professional practice. Invariably, state and provincial tests assess too many skills and concepts infrequently, rather than a few essential skills and concepts often. Teachers typically wait months to get the results instead of receiving timely feedback regarding student learning, and the results are often reported in general terms rather than with precise information about the strengths and weaknesses of individual students.

There is evidence that an emphasis on such summative or end-of-process measures without formative or in-process feedback on what is working and what is not creates stress and frustration for people throughout an organization but does little to build capacity to positively impact results (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Dimich (2018) notes the following:

Summative assessments, which are used to communicate proficiency and progress at a moment in time, are roughly synonymous with *evaluation*. It is a situation in which one is making a judgment. Assigning a mark, grade, or percentage is common practice in summative assessment. This, in itself, is not negative, but problems do occur when schools send mixed or confusing messages to students, parents, and families about what that mark, grade, or percentage means and how it will be used, often resulting in a culture focused on marks or gathering points, rather than improving, learning and growing. (p. 2)

When we share this research finding with educators, they nod knowingly and chant, "Amen!" They recognize from experience that the high-stakes summative tests their states and provinces administer

are not very helpful for improving their classroom instruction or the subsequent learning of their students.

Educators are less likely to recognize, however, that the assessments they create for their individual classrooms are almost always summative assessments as well, assessments *of* learning rather than assessments *for* learning—autopsies rather than physical examinations. How have teachers at all levels typically created and used their classroom assessments? An individual teacher works in isolation to create the test for his or her students, administers the test, grades the results for each student, records the score in the gradebook, returns the test to the students, and reviews the answers with them. The class then moves on to the new content of the next unit, despite the fact that some students were unable to demonstrate proficiency on the skills and concepts just assessed.

This failure to learn is irrelevant for teachers and students alike because the test has signaled the unit is *over*, regardless of whether all students learned. Analysis of the test results may help a teacher understand why the students failed on an assessment in the same way the results of an autopsy can shed light on the cause of death. If, however, the results from the test have merely been certified and recorded without any effort to diagnose the problem and prescribe an antidote to help students who are struggling, the test is as beneficial to the teaching and learning process as the results of an autopsy are to the cadaver.

The Power of Formative Assessment

Continuing to use assessments for the sole or primary purpose of rating student learning at the end of a unit or course fails to take advantage of one of the most powerful tools available for promoting the learning of both students and adults: formative assessment. Formative assessment has tremendous potential to improve rather than merely rate and record student learning, and it is imperative that educators begin to tap into that potential. Consider the following.

- “There is strong and rigorous evidence that improving formative assessment can raise standards of pupils’ performance. There have been few initiatives in education with such a strong body of evidence to support a claim to raise standards.” (Black & Wiliam, 2004, p. 20)
- “[Assessment for learning] when done well, . . . is one of the most powerful, high-leverage strategies for improving student learning that we know of. Educators *collectively* at the school and district levels become more skilled and focused at assessing, disaggregating, and using student achievement as a tool for ongoing improvement.” (Fullan, 2005a, p. 71)
- “Assessment for learning rivals one-on-one tutoring in its effectiveness and . . . particularly benefits low-achieving students.” (Stiggins, 2004, p. 27)
- “Formative assessments are one of the most powerful weapons in a teacher’s arsenal. An effective standards-based, formative assessment program can help to dramatically enhance student achievement throughout the K–12 system.” (Marzano, 2006, back cover)
- “Formative assessment works. That’s right. Ample research evidence is now at hand to indicate emphatically that when the formative-assessment process is used, students learn better—lots better.” (Popham, 2013, p. 29)
- “Common formative assessments improve student learning, but we must also recognize their power to improve teacher learning and impact instructional practice.” (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012, p. 92)
- “Since the late 1990s education has seen an acceleration of research on formative assessments (Black, 2013) and the near unanimous conclusion that formative assessment and feedback are an essential part of improving student achievement (Ruiz-Primo & Li, 2013).

While teachers have always used assessment to judge student performance, classroom assessment in the 2000s and beyond has seen an infusion of assessment for learning—assessment not used to judge, grade, or score, but assessment to identify what comes next.” (Erkens, Schimmer, & Dimich, 2018, p. 3)

- “A team requires common formative assessments to discover and address areas needing improvements before the summative assessment is given. It is far better to intervene during the unit of instruction than it is to re-engage students in learning after the summative has been given.” (Erkens, 2019, p. 7)

But if educators are to realize the potential of this powerful tool for learning, they must come to a clearer understanding of formative assessment and the different forms it might take.

Formative Assessment in the Classroom

One of the most consistent findings from the research on effective schools and effective teaching is the power of frequent monitoring of student learning. Good teachers are assessing *all* the time, using a variety of strategies to check for student understanding during every class period. They then use the information to provide specific and precise feedback to students and to adjust their teaching. In this sense, the ongoing, minute-by-minute assessments teachers use in their classrooms each day represent an important example of assessment *for* learning.

The work of Richard J. Stiggins is particularly powerful in helping teachers understand the significance of ongoing classroom assessment and the importance of engaging the individual student in the process of monitoring his or her own learning. Stiggins (2002) contends teachers can use assessment to “advance and not merely check on student learning” by doing the following:

- Understanding and articulating *in advance of teaching* the achievement targets that their students are to hit
- Informing their students about those learning goals, *in terms that students understand*, from the very beginning of the teaching and learning process
- Becoming assessment literate and thus able to transform their expectations into assessment exercises and scoring procedures that *accurately reflect student achievement*
- Using classroom assessments to *build students' confidence* in themselves as learners and help them take responsibility for their own learning, so as to lay a foundation for lifelong learning
- Translating classroom assessment results into frequent *descriptive feedback* (versus judgmental feedback) for students, providing them with specific insights on how to improve
- Continuously *adjusting instruction* based on the results of classroom assessments
- Engaging students in *regular self-assessment*, with standards held constant so that students can watch themselves grow over time and feel in charge of their own success
- Actively involving students in *communicating* with their teachers and their families about their achievement status and improvement (pp. 761–762)

Coauthors Dylan Wiliam and Marnie Thompson (2008) also examined the power of formative classroom assessment. They offer their own five key strategies teachers should use to support formative assessment in their classrooms.

1. Clarify and share learning intentions and criteria for success. Make clear to students what they should know and be able to do and the criteria they should use to assess the quality of their work until it meets the intended standard.
2. Engineer effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks.

3. Provide specific feedback that moves learners forward.
4. Activate students as instructional resources for one another. Train students to help each other assess and improve their work according to the criteria for success.
5. Activate students as the owners of their own learning.
Ensure students have a clear understanding of what they are to learn and what good work looks like, so they will be able to monitor their own progress and identify the steps they must take to move forward, rather than relying solely on the judgment of the teacher.

Of course, at some point, every teacher goes beyond daily checks for understanding and makes use of a more formal assessment of student learning. Educators can use the results from these assessments in a variety of ways. Traditionally, these assessments have not been used formatively, but are given to monitor the learning of students and to assign a grade. Conscientious teachers may analyze the results of their formal assessments in an effort to identify areas where students may be experiencing difficulty; however, even this analysis does not ensure the assessment is formative. Wiliam and Thompson (2008) offer the following helpful distinctions:

An assessment *monitors* learning to the extent that it provides information about whether the student, class, school or system is learning or not; it is diagnostic to the extent that it provides information about what is going wrong; and it is *formative* to the extent that it provides information about what to do about it. (p. 62)

Individual teachers regularly create assessments to monitor student learning. Often, they merely record the results and move on to new content, making it a summative assessment. Sometimes, however, they use the assessment to *diagnose* the problem, to identify where students are experiencing difficulty. If, however, they have already used all their available instructional strategies to teach the concept or skill, and they do not know what else to try, the assessment will not be formative. To be formative, the teacher, the student, or both must take specific actions to resolve the problem that is impeding the

student's learning. If, however, teachers work together to create *common* assessments to administer to all students, those assessments are more likely to be formative because a team of teachers is in a better position to identify strategies to resolve difficulties in student learning than a teacher who is working alone.

Common Formative Assessments

Like virtually all practices in the culture of a PLC, the effectiveness of assessments, both formative and summative, is enhanced when team members develop and use them together. Imagine an approach to assessments that brings teams of teachers together to create and use formative assessment across their classrooms. As Erkens (2019) states:

The goal of using formative assessments is to provide information that improves a learner's ability to be successful, whereas the goal of using summative assessments is to prove a learner's level of proficiency at the conclusion of the learning journey. Because both are necessary to support learning, common assessments should be both formative and summative in nature. (p. 7)

Instead of an individual teacher developing and administering a summative test at the end of a unit, a collaborative team of teachers responsible for the same course or grade level collaboratively creates a *common* formative assessment before teaching a unit. Members of the team agree on the standard students must achieve to be deemed proficient and establish when they will give the assessment. They discuss different ways to help students understand what they must learn; different ways to teach the essential skills, concepts, and strategies; and different ways to check for student understanding in their individual classrooms throughout the unit.

On each day of instruction, teachers benefit from having complete clarity regarding what students must learn and an understanding of how students will be called upon to demonstrate their learning. Immediately after administering the assessment, the team analyzes the results. If those results indicate an individual teacher's students are having difficulty with a concept, other members of the team can offer

alternative strategies to teach the concept, thereby helping one another expand their repertoire of teaching techniques and skills.

This team dialogue and sharing of ideas mean the assessment is far more likely to be formative (“This is how we can solve the problem”) rather than merely diagnostic (“This is the problem students are experiencing”). If the team discovers none of its members are able to help students learn an important concept, the team can then turn its attention to the very specific professional development and adult learning that will help resolve the difficulty.

Once again, while effective, ongoing, minute-by-minute assessment by individual classroom teachers is essential to good teaching, *frequent common formative assessments created by teams of teachers* also play a vital role in monitoring student learning.

After studying schools most effective in helping all students learn, Reeves (2006) concludes, “Common formative assessments are essential for all schools” (p. ix). He is not alone in reaching that conclusion. Once again, educators are hearing very consistent advice.

- “Collaborative assessment holds high promise for promoting genuine change in how teachers regard student work and use that assessment for learning. When teachers work together to establish criteria for judging their students’ work, set standards, and make group decisions, the collaboration has many spin-offs. . . . They tend to enhance one another’s understanding of instruction and curriculum, develop agreement about the nature and quality of the instruments and approaches for assessing their students’ work, challenge and question their own expectations for students, and develop more confidence in their decisions and in their accountability to the outside community.” (Earl & LeMahieu, 1997, p. 166)
- “Evidence from numerous schools, as well as broad concurrence of the research community, point to proven structures and practices that make an immediate difference in achievement. They begin when a group of

teachers meets regularly as a team to identify essential and valued learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals, and then share and create lessons and strategies to improve upon those results.” (Schmoker, 2004b, pp. 48–49)

- “To the extent that we [teachers work together in a] team to (1) analyze, understand, and deconstruct standards; (2) transform them [standards] into high-quality classroom assessments; and (3) share and interpret the results together, we benefit from the union of our wisdom about how to help our students continue to grow as learners.” (Stiggins, 2005, p. 82)
- “Common formative assessments [provide] regular and timely feedback regarding student attainment of the most critical standards . . . [and] also foster consistent expectations and priorities within a grade level, course, and department regarding standards, instruction, and assessment. . . . Most importantly, common formative assessment results enable educators to diagnose student learning needs accurately *in time to make instructional modifications*. In addition, common formative assessments provide students with timely feedback regarding their current level of understanding so that they can identify for themselves what they already know and what they have yet to learn.” (Ainsworth, 2007, pp. 95–96)
- “This team effort [to develop common formative assessments] does more than produce great assessments. It provides teachers with interdependent support for one another. . . . The group process—organized properly—provides a safe and restorative place for the sharing of best practices, for requesting professional help or advice, and for creating a sense of community that cannot help but

carry over into the classroom to positively impact student learning.” (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006, p. 39)

- “One of the most effective ways educators can use formative assessments is by collaboratively creating common formative assessments with grade-level or course-level colleagues. . . . Common formative assessments afford teacher teams a clear lens through which to see their instructional impact on student learning.” (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2015, p. 2)
- “PLC teams focus on common formative assessments for their work together because of the compelling research that these are the assessments that can truly improve student achievement.” (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012, p. 18)
- “The entire team must either write the assessment together or co-review and endorse the assessment that it has selected for use. This detail matters greatly. . . . The entire team must take an active role in determining the assessments that it will use to monitor instruction.” (Erkens, 2019, p. 7)

William and Thompson (2008) offer several reasons to support their contention that formative assessments that collaborative teams (or *teacher learning communities*, the term they use) create offer the largest gains in student learning.

1. It takes strong subject matter expertise to create powerful assessments, to identify the specific problems students are experiencing based on the results, and to generate solutions to those problems. Teachers working collectively are more likely to possess that expertise than teachers working in isolation.
2. The fact that evidence of student learning is gathered by a team from the school eliminates the familiar lament, “That may work in those schools, but it won’t work for our kids.” The real-life stories and testimonials of

peers typically carry more weight with teachers than a researcher's findings. So, when teachers see compelling evidence of students taught by their colleagues who are achieving at higher levels, they are more motivated to investigate alternative instructional strategies.

3. There is discomfort involved in implementing new strategies, and teachers are more likely to assume those risks if they have the support of their collaborative team. Teachers repeatedly reported the commitments they had made to teammates kept them moving forward with implementation of new strategies.
4. When teachers develop common formative assessments, they are engaged in the most powerful form of professional development—learning that is job-embedded and sustained over time, rather than episodic and fleeting.
5. Common formative assessments help educators make the transition from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. They begin to think in terms of “What learning should result from this unit?” and “How will students demonstrate their learning?” rather than focusing on the series of activities they will orchestrate as part of the instructional process.

The fourth and fifth points are particularly important in promoting PLCs. We have argued that the biggest big idea of a PLC is a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning, and that when collaborative teams of teachers work together to clarify what students must learn and how they will demonstrate their learning, they are engaged in powerful professional development that facilitates that shift. Effective teachers know exactly what their students should know and be able to do as a result of the learning experience. They also know exactly how their students will be called upon to demonstrate their learning (Brophy, 2004; Marzano, 2007; Popham, 2002; Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower, 2008). This clarity benefits teachers and students alike. Schools that create systems to ensure teachers

work together, prior to teaching a unit, to clarify essential outcomes and to identify the specific strategies and instruments to be used in monitoring student learning, increase the likelihood of more effective teaching in more classrooms.

We offer our own arguments as to why teams of teachers should create and include assessments in every school's process for monitoring student learning. Consider the following.

- **Team-developed common assessments are more efficient:** If five teachers teaching the same course or grade level are responsible for ensuring all students acquire the same knowledge and skills, it makes sense those teachers would work together to determine the best methods to assess student learning. A team of teachers could divide responsibilities for creating a unit and developing assessments. Teachers working in isolation replicate and duplicate effort. They work hard, but they do not work smart.
- **Team-developed common assessments promote equity:** The use of common assessments increases the likelihood that students will have access to the same curriculum, acquire the same essential knowledge and skills, take assessments of the same rigor, and have their work judged according to the same criteria. We have witnessed repeated examples of teachers who were *emphatic* about the need for consistency, equity, and fairness in terms of how they are dealt with as adults, but were completely unconcerned about the inconsistency, inequity, and lack of fairness that characterized the assessment of student learning in their school. If every teacher has license to assess whatever and however he or she wishes, according to criteria unique to and often known only by that teacher, schools will never be institutions that truly model a commitment to equity.

- **Team-developed common formative assessments help monitor and improve student learning:** Importantly, common formative assessments allow teams to monitor the learning of every student, skill by essential skill during the instructional process. We have cited several researchers who have concluded that team-developed common formative assessments are one of the most powerful strategies available to educators for improving student achievement.
- **Team-developed common formative assessments can inform and improve the practice of both individual teachers and teams of teachers:** Teachers do not suffer from a lack of data. Virtually every time a teacher gives an assessment of any kind, the teacher is able to generate data—mean, mode, median, standard deviation, percentage failing, percentage passing, and so on. As author Robert H. Waterman Jr. (1987) advises, however, data alone do not inform practice. Data cannot help educators identify the strengths and weaknesses of their strategies. Data inform only when they are presented in context, which almost always requires *a basis of comparison*.

Most educators can teach for their entire careers and not know if they teach a particular concept more or less effectively than the teacher next door because the assessments they generate for their isolated classrooms never provide them with a basis of comparison. Most educators can assess their students year after year, get consistently low results in a particular area, and not be certain if those results reflect their teaching strategies, a weakness in the curriculum, a failure on the part of teachers in earlier grades to ensure students develop prerequisite skills, or any other cause.

In short, most educators operate within the confines of data, which means they operate in the dark. But in a PLC, collaborative teams create a series of *common* assessments, and therefore every teacher receives ongoing feedback regarding the proficiency of his or her students in achieving a standard the team has agreed is essential, on an assessment the team has agreed represents a valid way to assess what members intend for all students to learn, *in comparison to other students attempting to achieve the same standard*. That basis of comparison transforms data into information.

Furthermore, as Elmore (2006) notes, “Teachers have to feel that there is some compelling reason for them to practice differently, with the best direct evidence being that students learn better” (p. 38). When teachers are presented with clear evidence their students are not becoming proficient in skills they agreed are essential, as measured on an assessment they helped to create, and that similar students taught by their colleagues have demonstrated proficiency on the same assessment, they are open to exploring new practices. When the performance of their students consistently prevents their team from achieving its goals, they are typically willing to address the problem. In fact, we consider team-developed common formative assessments one of the most powerful motivators for stimulating teachers to consider changes in their practice. As Fullan (2008) concludes, this openness or *transparency*, when correctly implemented, is a powerful tool for change because it creates the positive pressure essential to improvement efforts.

If every teacher in North America received this information on a regular and timely basis *and* had the ongoing support of his or her colleagues through the collaborative team process, our schools would experience

gains in student achievement. It has been said that gathering data is the beginning of wisdom, but sharing data is the beginning of community. When data are easily accessible and openly shared among members of a collaborative team, schools foster a professional learning *community*.

- **Team-developed common formative assessments can build the capacity of the team to achieve at higher levels:** As Wiliam and Thompson (2008) find, the conversations surrounding the creation of formative assessments are a powerful tool for professional development. When schools ensure every teacher has been engaged in a process to clarify what students are to learn and how their learning will be assessed, they promote the clarity essential to effective teaching. When teachers have access to each other's ideas, methods, and materials, they can expand their repertoire of skills.

When a team discovers the current curriculum and their existing instructional strategies are ineffective in helping students acquire essential skills, its members are able to pursue the most powerful professional development because it is specific, job-embedded, and relevant to the context of their content, their strategies, their team, and their students.

Importantly, when a team works together to create assessments to answer the question, “How will we know our students are learning?” members are developing their own assessment literacy. Schools can raise student achievement if teachers become more skillful in the use of both formative and summative assessment, and teachers’ ability to use assessments is enhanced by being a member of a high-performing collaborative team.

- **Team-developed common formative assessments are essential to systematic interventions when students struggle with learning:** We argue that if educators truly commit to high levels of learning for all students, they would not leave the question, “What happens when some students do not learn?” to chance. They would instead work together to create systems of interventions to ensure any student who struggles receives additional time and support for learning in a timely and directive way. Team-developed common formative assessments are a critical element of that system of interventions.

Not every assessment should be a common assessment. There is still a place for individual teachers to create their own formal assessments. Team-developed common assessments will never eliminate the need for individual teachers to monitor student learning each day through a wide variety of strategies that check for understanding. However, if schools are ever to take full advantage of the power of assessment to impact student learning in a positive way, they must include common formative assessments in their arsenal. Highly effective PLCs make team-developed common formative assessments a cornerstone of their work.

Creating and Using Common Formative Assessments

Schools must be certain the assessments teams create are assessments *for* learning rather than assessments *of* learning. The fact that a collaborative team creates an assessment certainly does not make it formative. Teams regularly create series of summative assessments. The frequency of these assessments will not make them formative. Weekly assessments are summative if all teachers do is record the grades and move on. The questions that appear on a test or when the test is administered do not determine if it is formative. It is what happens *after* students are assessed that makes a test or project formative. We contend that three things must happen to make an assessment formative.

1. Teams use the assessment to identify students who are experiencing difficulty learning.
2. A system of interventions is in place to ensure students experiencing difficulty devote additional time to and receive additional support for learning.
3. Those struggling students receive another opportunity to demonstrate learning and are not penalized for their earlier difficulty.

Teachers might apply these criteria differently depending on the nature of the assignment. For example, a seventh-grade teacher team is helping students learn to write a persuasive essay. The team agrees on the elements of an effective essay, creates a rubric for evaluating the writing, and gathers anchor papers to illustrate the progression of an essay from unsatisfactory to exemplary. Teachers share this information with their students and help them learn to apply the rubric to several writing examples. The team then assigns students to write a draft of a persuasive essay. Teachers ask students to review one another's writing according to the criteria and then offer feedback to a classmate. Teachers then collect the revised drafts, but do not assign a grade. Instead, each teacher reviews the writing of his or her students and offers specific and precise written advice on each paper regarding what the author can do to improve the writing. One teacher discovers her students consistently struggle with writing an effective thesis statement and solicits ideas from her colleagues on effective ways to help students learn the skill. She focuses on that skill while teaching the next few lessons and implements the suggestions of her colleagues. All students are directed to create another revised draft that incorporates the feedback they received on their first attempt. This process of feedback and revision for individual students continues until each student demonstrates proficiency. Ultimately, students come to understand the adage "There is no such thing as good writing, only good rewriting," and they become confident in their ability to write.

In another scenario, a freshman algebra team creates a common formative assessment to be administered at the conclusion of the

three-week unit they are about to teach. When the team analyzes the results from that assessment, they discover students are having difficulty with one skill, and they explore new strategies for teaching that skill in the next unit. They also discover, however, that twelve of their one hundred students are floundering in algebra and have failed the test. The students remain in the algebra class each day and continue with new direct instruction, but they are also required to receive additional, focused instruction on the specific skills they have not yet mastered in the tutorial center during each school day. They work with adult and student tutors in small groups, complete additional problems, and get ongoing and precise feedback. After two weeks of this intensive tutoring, they are required to take another version of the earlier assessment to demonstrate they have become proficient. Some earn Cs and Bs on this assessment, and these new grades replace their earlier failing grades. Those who are still not proficient are required to continue with the tutorial sessions.

We contend both these scenarios represent formative assessment. Paul Black, Christine Harrison, Clare Lee, Bethan Marshall, and Dylan Wiliam (2004) advise an assessment activity can be an assessment for learning and thereby enhance student achievement if it does the following:

Provides information that teachers and their students can use as feedback in assessing themselves and one another and in modifying the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes “formative assessment” when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs. (p. 10)

In each of the scenarios we describe, the assessment helps to identify students experiencing difficulty. These students are given specific feedback, and they are encouraged and, in fact, required to keep working until they achieve the standard. They are not penalized because of their initial difficulty. The message their school sends them is, “All of you can and will acquire this essential skill, and we will continue to support your learning until you are successful.” This is very different from the message attached to assessments in traditional schools:

“This unit is over regardless of how you performed.” Teachers in both scenarios also use the information from the assessments to give direction to their next instructional topics and strategies. The assessments inform and shape their practice and therefore, we contend, are formative.

This may all seem like common sense; however, our position has been challenged in several ways. Some have argued students should not be given a second opportunity to learn, or, at the very least, their initial failure should be included in calculating the grade. They claim it would be unfair to allow low-performing students the opportunity to earn a grade similar to those of students who were proficient on the initial assessment. Our response is that every school mission statement we have read asserts the school is committed to helping *all students learn*. We have yet to find a mission statement that says, “They must all learn fast or the first time we teach it.” If some students must work longer and harder to succeed, but they become proficient, their grade should reflect their ultimate proficiency, not their early difficulty.

We are then often challenged to clarify how we would respond to students who demonstrate proficiency, and then ask to keep working and striving so they can be given another opportunity to demonstrate they have learned at higher levels and thus improve their grade. We find the question puzzling. Any school committed to high levels of learning for all students would encourage rather than impede students who are determined to continue learning, and grading practices should promote that extra effort by supporting students who hope to move from proficient to advanced learning.

There are those who argue that an assessment can neither be formative nor an assessment for learning if any grade is given. We do not subscribe to that position. We have found in the real world of schools, some assessments in some subject areas are, in fact, tests rather than projects or papers. If educators give those tests to monitor student learning, and then advise students that performance on the test has no impact or bearing, those educators often will get less than the best effort of many students. This, in turn, calls the validity of the results

into question. We contend common formative assessments are used for important reasons—to inform teacher practice and respond to students who are not learning—and, therefore, educators have a legitimate reason to create conditions that promote the best efforts of their students on those assessments. If, however, the assessments are truly *for* learning, students who struggle should receive additional time and support *and* should be provided another opportunity to demonstrate learning without an adverse effect on their grade.

Building Shared Knowledge of Quality Assessments

We worked with one state department of education to encourage it to promote collaborative teacher team-developed frequent common formative assessments as a key element of its initiative to improve student learning. A senior member of the state department responded that teachers are incapable of writing quality assessments. Therefore, he suggested, if the state commits to the use of common formative assessments, the department of education would need to contract with a private company to write the assessments. We were stunned by this comment that teachers cannot be trusted to create valid assessments, and we immediately asked, “If teachers cannot be trusted to work together to create assessments, then why are they trusted to create their own in their individual classrooms?”

Here is the hard fact: if teachers do not work together to create assessments, then individual teachers create their own. Which assessment is likely to be of higher quality—one written by a teacher working in isolation or one developed by a team working together to clarify what students must know and be able to do, studying and discussing the best strategies for gathering evidence of student learning, developing common criteria for judging the quality of student work, and critiquing, challenging, and expanding on one another’s suggestions for assessing their students? We are convinced that the first attempt at a common formal assessment by a collaborative team of teachers who make a collective effort to gather evidence of their students’ learning will be superior to the formal assessments those same teachers have developed working in isolation. We are also convinced this process of

building common assessments is far more likely to enhance the assessment literacy of teachers over time than the process of each teacher developing his or her own formal assessments.

Alignment and Formatting of Common Formative Assessments

The effectiveness of collaboratively developed common formative assessments is enhanced when teams pay particular attention to aligning and formatting their assessments. The most basic alignment begins with aligning common assessments with the essential concepts and skills the team has identified as part of the guaranteed curriculum. Effective teams do not use common formative assessments to check on everything students should learn; they focus on student learning of the *essential* concepts and practices.

Earlier in this chapter we wrote of the importance of teams clearly articulating what the essential concepts and skills look like in student work if students demonstrate proficiency. This step has important implications for the formatting of the common formative assessments. The formats of team-developed common formative assessments should align with what successful student work should look like, as well as the formats of examples students have been given, the formats of student practice, and the formats of assessments students will encounter on summative assessments. In short, when students take a summative assessment, it should not be the first time students have been engaged in learning in that particular format. The formats of both formative and summative assessments should be the same as what students have been taught, the things they have practiced, and the examples they have been given.

Building Shared Knowledge

Learning in a PLC is not limited to student learning. Almost always, the first step for adults in a PLC is to gain shared knowledge. Teachers in a PLC should attempt to build shared knowledge about effective assessment strategies. They would seek the advice and insights

of some of the nation's leading experts in the field. For example, *Ahead of the Curve: The Power of Assessment to Transform Teaching and Learning* (Reeves, 2007) offers excellent information from leaders in the field of assessment. W. James Popham's (2002) third edition of *Classroom Assessment: What Teachers Need to Know* is helpful as well. Richard J. Stiggins's (2001) third edition of *Student-Involved Classroom Assessment* is also an excellent resource as are Kim Bailey and Chris Jakicic's (2017) *Simplifying Common Assessment*, and Cassandra Erkens's (2016) *Collaborative Common Assessments*. And to help teachers better use formative assessment information to guide instructional decisions, we recommend the book *Instructional Agility: Responding to Assessment With Real-Time Decisions* (Erkens et al., 2018).

All of these are examples of helpful texts that provide teachers with the knowledge and insights they need to develop better assessments.

There are certainly general principles regarding good assessments teachers should consider when they seek evidence of student learning. These principles include the following.

1. It is better to assess a few essential skills of undisputed importance frequently than many skills infrequently (Popham, 2002; Reeves, 2002).
2. Teachers must have a clear, concise picture of what students must know and be able to do to write a good assessment, and they must explain the intended learning to students in terms the students can understand (Stiggins, 2007; Wiliam & Thompson, 2008).
3. Assessments should be balanced, providing a wide variety of opportunities for students to demonstrate learning in different ways (National Education Association, 2005). Any single assessment tool is inherently flawed, and therefore different strategies should be used to gather evidence of students' acquisition of essential knowledge and skills. Popham (2002) makes the point succinctly: "Assessment diversity is dandy; one-type testing is troubling" (p. 117).

4. Assessments should be authentic when possible.

According to research professor David Perkins (1992), authentic assessments have the following characteristics.

- a. They are open-ended rather than one-right-answer problems.
 - b. They are not solvable by applying a routine method.
 - c. They require substantive understanding of meaning.
 - d. They demand more time than conventional problems.
 - e. They call for pulling together a number of different ideas from the subject matter and often involve written or oral explanation as well as formal manipulations such as computation.
5. Assessments, especially formative assessments, should have the following characteristics:
 - a. Clarify and share success criteria
 - b. Elicit evidence of student learning
 - c. Provide students with feedback that advances their learning
 - d. Create conditions in which students become resources to each other
 - e. Create a classroom culture in which students become owners of their own learning
 6. Classroom assessments can become the primary data with which to make high-stakes decisions about individual students, and if classroom assessments employ student-directed assessments, students will have more control over their academic futures (Marzano, Norford, & Ruyle, 2019).
 7. Teams should use other assessments as external validators of the rigor and relevance of their own assessments.

They should align their classroom assessments with state standards and establish a strong correlation between success on their assessments and other high-stakes tests their students will be required to take (National Education Association, 2007).

8. Assessments should be useful to both teachers and students (Black et al., 2004; Popham, 2002; Stiggins, 2007).
9. Assessments should help students clarify the discrepancy between their level of achievement and the intended standard of learning, and offer direction and encouragement as to what steps students can take to close the gap (Stiggins, 2007). There is abundant evidence that monitoring learning and providing feedback to students can either encourage or discourage continued student effort. Black and colleagues (2004) report the following:
 - A comprehensive review of research studies of feedback found that feedback improved performance in 60% of the studies. In the cases where feedback was not helpful, the feedback turned out to be merely a judgment or grade with no indication of how to improve.
 - Students who are told that feedback “will help you learn” learn more than those who are told that “how you do tells us how smart you are and what grades you’ll get.” The difference is greatest for low achievers. . . .
 - In a competitive system, low achievers attribute their performance to lack of ability; high achievers, to their effort. In a task-oriented system, all attribute performance to effort, and learning is improved, particularly among low achievers. (p. 18)

Jere Brophy (2004), an educational psychologist and University Distinguished Professor of Teacher Education at Michigan State University, who has examined the issue of student motivation as much as anyone in North America, advises teachers to:

Emphasize the role of assessment in providing informative feedback about progress. . . Portray tests as opportunities to find out how “we” are doing. . . Express confidence that students will succeed if they apply themselves to lessons and learning activities. Portray yourself as a helper and resource person who assists your students in preparing for assessments, not as a remote evaluator. (p. 79)

Teachers should examine, review, discuss, and apply these indicators of effectiveness when creating their common formative assessments. In the final analysis, however, we agree with Popham (2002), who concludes that classroom assessment is not rocket science, that what educators need to know about assessment is quite straightforward rather than mysterious or esoteric, and that reading a good introductory text on assessment for a night or two will provide an educator with everything he or she really needs to know about the topic. We also concur with Reeves (2007), who argues the goal is not to turn teachers into psychometricians and statisticians, but rather to help them gather useful information regarding student learning so they can adjust their instruction and ensure individual students benefit from systematic interventions. As Reeves (2007) writes, “Practical utility takes precedence over psychometric perfection” (p. 235).

Finally, we agree with Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) who find that the deepest and most meaningful learning occurs when people *do* the work rather than train to do the work or plan to do the work. This learning by doing is enhanced when it occurs within the collective and social interaction of a team as opposed to when it occurs in isolation (Fullan, 2001). Stiggins (1999) got it right when he concluded the best strategy for enhancing the assessment literacy of teachers is to have a team of colleagues study the topic together, immediately apply their new knowledge in their classrooms, and then share their experience with colleagues. As he notes, “This strategy is affordable, effective, and essential if we seek to create more effective schools. . . . The result will be greater academic success” (Stiggins, 1999, p. 198).

So, the state official who claimed that teachers could not be trusted to create common formative assessments was exactly wrong. Assessment,

when done well, represents one of the most powerful weapons in an educator's arsenal for enhancing professional practice and improving student learning. Leaving the issue of assessment to commercial testing companies, the central office, or textbook publishers deprives classroom teachers of this powerful weapon and is akin to sending a soldier into battle unarmed.

Common formative assessments created by collaborative teams represent the "best practice in assessment" (Reeves, 2004, p. 71) and the "gold standard in educational accountability" (p. 114). No district or school should allow educators to abdicate their responsibility to utilize this important resource for student and adult learning. A district serious about developing its collective capacity to improve student achievement would be tight on ensuring common formative assessments created by collaborative teams are in place in all its schools. The creation and analysis of those assessments are crucial to the collective inquiry, commitment to continuous improvement, and results orientation of a PLC.

While there are many benefits gained by the use of common formative assessments, perhaps the most important is the ability to track the learning of each student, skill by skill. The fact is, regardless of how well teachers plan and teach lessons, students will learn at different rates and in differing ways. The identification of what students are learning, and the concepts and skills with which they are struggling, form the basis for a collaboratively developed, research-based, schoolwide plan for additional time, support, or extension of student learning. The effectiveness of such a plan is dependent on the specificity and validity of student learning data that are best gained from the collaborative analysis of the results of common formative assessments.



CHAPTER 7

Interventions and Extensions in a PLC

As long as interventions are viewed as an appendage to a school's traditional instructional program, instead of an integral part of a school's collaborative efforts to ensure all students succeed, interventions will continue to be ineffective.

—RICHARD DUFOUR

There are some universal truths—undeniable facts—that impact every student and educator, in every classroom, at every school. One of these absolutes is that all students do not learn the same way. We can assume that by the end of every daily lesson, unit of study, grading term, and school year, some students will not have mastered all of the essential curriculum they have been taught. The specific reasons why some students fail to equally benefit from initial instruction vary greatly. For some, the instructional practices teachers utilize in class don't match students' learning strengths. Other students might lack critical prerequisite skills and knowledge needed for success with new learning. Still others need the gift of time, as they might not yet be developmentally ready to learn a specific skill. Undoubtedly, some students lack proficiency in essential behaviors, which in turn will impact their learning. Some students are not fluent in the primary language of the school. Some students have home environments

counterproductive to success in the classroom. While the causes vary from student to student, the ramifications for educators are the same: there will *always* be students who need additional time and support to succeed in school.

Another universal truth in education is that it is virtually impossible for individual teachers to possess all the expertise and resources needed to address the variety of student needs in their classrooms. For any school truly committed to a mission of ensuring all students learn at high levels, responding when students don't learn requires a schoolwide, systematic process. Only by leveraging the collaborative efforts of the entire staff—including administrators, classroom teachers, certificated specialists, and classified staff—can a school best meet the academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and environmental needs of their students. This is the primary reason why in the PLC at Work process, the entire school (or district) is considered the PLC—because the entire staff accepts collective responsibility for every student's success and readily contributes their specific expertise, experience, and efforts to achieve this outcome.

Because providing effective, systematic interventions requires a schoolwide effort, the staff must work together to answer critical questions 3 and 4 of the PLC at Work process.

3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient? (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 36)

Certainly, collaborative teacher teams will be highly involved in this process, as these teams have led the efforts to:

- Identify the essential academic standards all students must master in each subject, course, and grade-level (answering critical question 1)
- Provide the initial instruction on these learning outcomes
- Administer common assessments to measure student progress on team-identified essential standards (answering critical question 2)

Nevertheless, it is unlikely a grade-level or departmental team of teachers alone can meet the diverse needs of their shared students, as their collective knowledge and skills are also insufficient. Equally important, teacher teams cannot unilaterally change the master schedule to create intervention time during the school day or independently determine the use of schoolwide support staff, such as special education teachers, instructional aides, counselors, school psychologists, speech therapists, subject specialists, and classified support staff. Instead, the school's leadership team—also commonly referred to as the *guiding coalition*—should take primary responsibility to coordinate, monitor, and revise the school's plans to intervene and extend student learning.

Like every element in the PLC at Work process, the first step to answer critical questions 3 and 4 is to build shared knowledge—to learn together. Are the school's current efforts to intervene and extend student learning working well? If not, is there compelling research and evidence to support more effective ways to respond when students need additional time and support?

Traditional Responses When Students Struggle

One would assume that those in a profession with a core purpose of educating children spend considerable time and attention planning and responding effectively when students don't learn. Yet in most schools, what happens when students struggle will almost invariably depend on the teacher to whom they are assigned. This troubling fact does not come as a shock to those familiar with the workings of schools. Educators generally acknowledge there is no uniform or consistent strategy for responding to students who do not learn, and so the issue is left to each teacher to resolve on his or her own.

Some teachers challenge a student's placement in their classroom and recommend the student be assigned to a less rigorous curriculum or tested for special education. Other teachers contend it is their job to teach, and it is the students' job to learn. These teachers argue

school should prepare students for life, and since in life those who do not do their jobs well are likely to suffer consequences, students who do not do what is necessary to learn should suffer consequences. Irresponsible students should be allowed to fail so they learn an important life lesson.

Some teachers will dramatically lower their expectations in the classroom. They look for ways to help move students along to the next class or grade level even though the students have not become proficient in the most essential skills. They provide extra credit for work unrelated to the curriculum, allow students to substitute disconnected activities for essential learning, or assign grades on the basis of cooperation, participation, or perceived effort instead of demonstrated proficiency. And then there are the teachers who monitor each student's learning on an individual basis and will devote additional time and support to those students, working with them before school, after school, and during recess or their lunch periods. They make personal sacrifices and insist students continue to put in the extra time until they are proficient.

Parents recognize this, and the more involved they are, the more they will do to ensure their child is assigned to the "right" teacher. Older students recognize this, and they will invent very creative stories to justify a schedule change from one teacher's class to another. Worst of all, educators recognize this randomness in response to students who do not learn. Principals continue to place students in classrooms with teachers whose failure rate is three times higher than their colleagues, or teachers who are twice as likely to refer students for special education, or those who are consistently unable to help students demonstrate proficiency on high-stakes tests. School mission statements continue to pledge to help all students learn and staff continue to urge students to embrace fairness and equity as core values of a just society, and then those same schools resort to educational roulette when students experience difficulty.

Attributing this disjointed response can be, in part, to the tradition of teacher isolation and the deeply ingrained image of individual

teachers assuming sole responsibility for their own classrooms. If each classroom represents its own individual kingdom, and each teacher serves as sovereign ruler, what happens when students do not learn is just one more of the many issues left to the discretion of each teacher. We believe, however, the bigger reason the question of what happens when students do not learn is left to each teacher is because schools have abdicated their responsibility to create a systematic response that ensures students receive additional time and support for learning in a rational and equitable way. Hardworking, dedicated teachers make the same discovery every year: some students are not learning despite their very best instructional strategies and effort. If those teachers turn to their school leaders to ask, “What do I do now? I have done all I know how to do, and some students continue to struggle,” they will be told, in effect, “It’s up to you because we have no plan for dealing with students who do not learn, unless a student has a diagnosed disability or drops far enough behind to qualify for special education.”

The Success and Failure of Special Education

While most schools have generally left it up to individual teachers to respond when students struggle, federal law does mandate systematic supports for students with confirmed disabilities. Since 1975, with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), schools are required to provide special-needs students with a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. This legislation has produced a critical outcome of moral and educational significance. Prior to passage, only one in five students with disabilities was served by public schools, as most schools denied enrollment to students with special needs (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, n.d.). Instead, most handicapped children were being homeschooled or institutionalized. The passage of the EAHCA ended this practice and ensured all students—regardless of the severity of their disability—are guaranteed the right to an education.

Because the goal of the EAHCA is equality of access, special education should be viewed as civil rights legislation. In 1964, Title IV and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act targeted school segregation, curbing practices that denied students access to an equal education based on a child's ethnicity. In 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act outlawed practices that denied participation in school due to sex. And in 1975, the EAHCA ended the common practice of denying students access to school due to a handicapping condition. To that end, special education has been one of the most successful educational reform laws in U.S. history, as it would be extremely difficult today to find special-needs children denied the right to attend their local public school.

While we should celebrate this significant success, we must also acknowledge that special education has failed at actually closing the individual achievement gaps of special-needs students or properly preparing these students for success after high school. Most students in special education are classified with a mild or moderate disability (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019) and expected to meet the same academic expectations as students in regular education. Yet in spite of the mandated supports that special education students receive, the graduation rate for students with special needs was 71 percent in 2019—14 percent lower than the national graduation rate in the United States (NCES, 2019). For those who do graduate, students with special needs are historically underrepresented in postsecondary education (Samuels, 2010) and overrepresented in prison. It is estimated that at least one-third and up to 70 percent of those incarcerated received special education services in school (Mader & Butrymowicz, 2014). This negative impact has disproportionately affected specific subgroups of students. While there is no biological research to suggest that students' gender or ethnicity increases the chances they will have a learning disability, male students are almost twice as likely as female students to be identified for special education (Salem, 2018). Likewise, African American students make up 15 percent of public school enrollment but make up the highest percentage of students in special education. This trend is similar for Hispanic and Native American students (NCES, 2019).

Traditional special education policies have also negatively impacted the ability of schools to develop more effective, schoolwide intervention processes. Because special education is the only schoolwide intervention process, this has caused many regular teachers to incorrectly assume that failure to succeed in a general education program means the student must, therefore, have a disability (Prasse, 2009). After teachers have individually tried their best to meet the needs of struggling students, the only option is to refer these students for special education. But to receive these supports, students must fall far enough behind to qualify—traditionally at least two standard deviations between their perceived ability and their current level of achievement. Unless a student has reached that depth of failure, he or she is referred back to the regular classroom. For students who meet the required threshold of failure, the academic gaps are so great it is extremely difficult for these students to catch up (Fuchs & Young, 2006). This “wait to fail” model has allowed students at risk to drop too far behind before receiving help, has disengaged general education teachers from the intervention process, and has overwhelmed site special education resources with far too many students to serve.

Traditional special education practices have also inhibited collaboration between regular education and special education staff. Special education regulations have often created a “school within a school,” designating that special education resources can only be used for qualified students, thus restricting the ability of general and special education teachers to share students. As intervention experts Austin Buffum, Mike Mattos, and Chris Weber (2012) state:

Such practices hurt both teachers and students. The specialized training the special education teachers receive can benefit many students, not just those officially identified for special education. General education teachers could improve their instructional practices through frequent collaboration with special education teachers. Likewise, special education teachers do not always have the same in-depth, subject-specific content knowledge as general education teachers. Special education students need access to this expertise, and

special education teachers could improve their content knowledge through frequent collaboration with these teachers. (p. 193)

These broad statistics paint a bleak picture of special education, but these facts are not an indictment of regular or special education teachers. Considering how far behind most students must fall before special education services commence, a 71 percent graduation rate for special-needs students is testimony to the Herculean efforts educators achieve *in spite* of the flaws in federal and state policies. Through our work in schools throughout the world, we have seen some exceptional special education programs. What educators must do is ask some difficult questions, and honestly confront the brutal facts. Who are the students currently receiving special education services in our school or district? Do these students represent the general demographics, or are specific subgroups significantly overrepresented? And, most important, are these students closing their achievement gaps, excelling in grade-level essential curricula, and on track to graduate with the academic skills needed to be college and career ready? If the data paint a similar bleak picture, then it would be ludicrous to think that perpetuating the current special education practices will produce better results.

The Unrealized Promise of Response to Intervention

Prior to the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002), there were limited state or national data on the academic progress of special-needs students. Most often, progress in special education was measured by each student meeting his or her individualized IEP goals, not by comparing the student's results to state grade-level standards. But NCLB required all students to be assessed yearly on grade-level curricula, and any significant subgroups of students not demonstrating significant growth could place the school in jeopardy. Since then, special education students have consistently scored significantly below their peers on state standardized assessments (Samuels, 2016).

This quantified achievement gap led lawmakers and educators to seek significant changes to federal and state special education regulations. Subsequently, the reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA] in 2004 allows schools to use response to intervention (RTI) as a systematic process to provide interventions and support services. Also referred to as a *multitiered system of supports* (MTSS), RTI's underlying premise is that schools should not delay providing help for struggling students until they fall far enough behind to qualify for special education, but instead should provide timely, targeted, systematic interventions to all students who demonstrate the need (Buffum et al., 2012).

RTI is traditionally represented in the shape of a pyramid. The pyramid is wide at the base to represent the core instruction all students receive. As students demonstrate the need, they receive additional layers—or tiers—of increasingly more targeted and intensive help. Fewer students should need the services offered at the upper levels, thus creating the tapered shape of a pyramid.

To support flexibility in the use of site resources, the reauthorization also allows early intervening services, in which a percentage of a district's special education resources can be used in preventive ways for students who demonstrate the need for these supports but do not have a disability (IDEIA, 2004). Finally, IDEIA recommends RTI as a process to identify students with learning disabilities. When all students have access to essential grade-level curricula, highly effective initial teaching, and targeted interventions when needed, a vast majority of them succeed. If a student does not respond to these proven practices, it could indicate a potential learning disability and would justify a comprehensive evaluation of the student's unique learning needs.

The research supporting the effectiveness of RTI, when implemented well, is compelling. Researcher John Hattie (2020) completed the most comprehensive meta-analysis on the prevailing research on RTI and finds an outstanding 1.29 standard deviation rate per school year—ranking fifth on his list of 252 factors related to student achievement.

To put this in perspective, Hattie (2009) equates a 1.0 impact rate to a two to three grade-level growth in a single school year.

Unfortunately, most schools haven't harnessed the proven benefits of RTI. While there are many reasons for this—some of which we address later in this chapter—the biggest reason why is because too many states and schools view RTI as a new process to qualify students for special education. They see the RTI tiers as the mandatory "hoops" that a school must "jump through" and properly document prior to testing students for special education services. Once qualified, students gain access to the failed traditional special education practices previously described—a new path to the same, ineffective destination.

The Essential Elements of Highly Effective, Systematic Interventions and Extensions

To broadly summarize the intervention efforts at most schools, educators are working very hard, doing the best they know how to help as many of their students as they can. While these individual efforts are assisting some children, school staff will never ensure high levels of learning for all students unless they intervene systematically and collectively. This is why PLC critical question 3 is *not*, How will *you* respond when some students do not learn? Rather, the question is, How will *we* respond when students don't learn?

Since the publication of *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), there is significantly more research and field study regarding effective systems of interventions. In the early 1980s, long before most educators knew about the RTI pyramid, Adlai E. Stevenson High School was creating its own pyramid of interventions. There is now greater consensus regarding the essential elements required to effectively intervene and extend student learning, and more evidence of how schools are successfully implementing these practices. Because school demographics, student needs, staff expertise, state guidelines, and school resources vary greatly, implementing the essential elements of effective intervention is bound to look different from school to school. The specific steps a school takes to intervene

will likely look different at an elementary school than at a high school, and different at a school that serves a large number of youth at risk in comparison to a school where a majority of entering students have already mastered prerequisite skills and knowledge. Nevertheless, in a PLC the educators are insistent—tight—that their actions are based on research and evidence of best practice, but also flexible—loose—on how these practices are implemented. To this end, let us be explicit on the essential elements and assumptions all schools must address to successfully answer critical questions 3 and 4.

1. The ultimate goal of K–12 education is to ensure every student acquires the essential skills, knowledge, and dispositions required to be college and career ready. To achieve this goal, all students must master essential grade-level curricula each year. This means the school must create a master schedule that ensures all students have access to grade-level essential curricula, and that tracks of core instruction focused exclusively on below-grade-level or remedial expectations be discontinued.
2. Some students will need extra support on meeting essential grade-level standards, others will require intensive remedial help in foundational skills, and some students will need both. The school will create a master schedule where students can have access to this support *without* missing new essential core instruction.
3. Because some students cannot come to school early or stay late, the school will embed extra time and support during the regular school day, when students are required to be at school and all staff members are available to assist.
4. Because individual teachers cannot meet the diverse needs of their students, the school will create a *systematic* intervention process that guarantees all students receive the additional time and support needed to master essential curricula. Achieving this goal will require staff

members to work collaboratively and take collective responsibility for each student's success.

5. The longer students struggle, the harder it will be to catch them up. So the school's intervention system must respond quickly and proactively when possible.
6. The school will target students for interventions by need and assign staff based on who is best trained to meet specific needs. Most important, the students most at risk must have access to the most highly trained staff for their area of need.
7. If given the choice, some students would prefer to opt out of additional support. Because success or failure in school is life altering, students will not be given the option of failing. Interventions, when necessary, will be required.
8. Some students will lack the essential behaviors and dispositions needed for success in school. If these behaviors were being taught effectively outside school, these students would not have these behavior needs. So the school staff will work together to identify and teach these essential behaviors as part of our core instructional program, and will expect some students will need additional time and support to master these behaviors.
9. In addition to interventions, the school is committed to significantly increasing the learning of all students. As students demonstrate mastery of essential curricula, the school will have a plan to extend student learning. To this end, the school will use the intervention system to provide additional time and support for students in extended curricula, including the most rigorous coursework offered.
10. Receiving additional time and support is not a punishment. Intervention and remediation will not deny students access to enrichment.

11. Because some students will need additional opportunities to demonstrate mastery of essential curricula, the faculty will ensure that schoolwide grading practices align to this outcome.
12. Some students will come from home environments in which academic help is unavailable. The school will work to develop productive home partnerships, but the intervention system will not depend on parent and guardian participation.

These dozen outcomes are the critical topics that a school must successfully address to effectively intervene and extend student learning. We consider what these elements look like in practice in the following sections.

Making Master Schedule Changes

A school's master schedule reflects its priorities. Instructional time, personnel, and fiscal resources in schools are limited and finite. The way these resources are allocated can support high levels of learning for all students or can impede and deny this outcome. When creating the school's master schedule, the leadership team must successfully plan for three levels of instructional time and support.

1. **Universal access to grade-level essential curricula:**

If the ultimate goal of a learning-focused school is to ensure every student ends each year having acquired the essential skills, knowledge, and behaviors required for future success, then all students must be taught grade-level essential curricula as part of their core instruction (DuFour et al., 2016). The key term is *essential* grade-level standards—the carefully selected subset of grade- and course-specific academic skills and behaviors all students must be able to do by the end of each school year to prepare for the next grade level or course (Ainsworth, 2011). While teacher teams take lead responsibility in determining the specific essential standards for their

grade or course, the leadership team must dedicate enough time in the school's master schedule to teach that curriculum effectively, and ensure all students learn this curriculum as part of their core instruction.

At the elementary level, this requires the leadership team designate specific times to teach essential curricula at each grade level. This time must be considered sacred, as students cannot miss new *essential* curricula to receive interventions. Because the school's master schedule impacts every grade level and program in the school, creating such a schedule requires schoolwide collaboration. Schools must consider coordination between classroom teachers, specialist staff, and special education services. This is why a school's leadership team, which includes representation across the school, is in the best position to take lead responsibility for this ongoing task.

At the secondary level, multiple pathways—or tracks—of learning can lead to postsecondary education, including AP classes, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, vocational programs, and career pathway academies. To give every student multiple options, we recommend all students successfully complete *at least* the minimum sequence of coursework required for a realistic opportunity to apply to a four-year university. This gives every student the option of deciding his or her own path after graduation—university, community college, trade school, or an internship process. This recommendation should not be seen as discouraging vocational coursework. Vocational classes can be an outstanding pathway to postsecondary education, but students should leave high school with the academic skills and behaviors necessary to succeed in university *and* vocational settings.

Once the leadership team determines each grade and department's required minimum coursework necessary

for students to be at grade level on a college-prep learning track, it must then allocate the classes (course sections) and staffing necessary to ensure all students can take these—or higher—level courses. Equally important, the school must discontinue any remedial tracks of learning that deny students access to grade-level essential curricula. A student cannot learn the grade-level curriculum if he or she is taught below grade level all day. Allowing remedial tracks of learning has a profoundly negative impact on student learning, which often disproportionately impacts minority students, English learners, and children who live in poverty (Hattie, 2009). These students have “less access to high-status knowledge, fewer opportunities to engage in stimulating learning activities, and classroom relationships less likely to foster engagement with teachers, peers, and learning” (Oakes, 2005, p. xi).

Finally, some students may have unique learning needs that might require a more specialized classroom setting. When this is the case, these students must still master the same essential curriculum. (The only exception when a modified curriculum *could* be appropriate is for students who have profound disabilities, such that they will be incapable of living independently as an adult.) Therefore, it is critical that regular education teachers, special education staff, and other specialist staff collaborate when identifying, teaching, and assessing essential standards.

2. **Dedicated time for additional support to master the grade-level essential curriculum:** Some students will not master the essential curriculum by the end of a unit of study. Because essential learning outcomes have been deemed indispensable for future success, the school must dedicate time in the master schedule to reteach this essential curriculum while ensuring these students do not miss new essential instruction.

While scheduled intervention time will look different from school to school, four common guiding principles should exist (Buffum et al., 2018).

- a. *Frequency*—This intervention time should be scheduled at least twice a week, and more often if needed.
- b. *Duration of each session*—Generally speaking, about thirty minutes is sufficient time to provide direct instruction on a specific learning target. This block of time could be slightly shorter in the primary grades.
- c. *Available to all students*—This time must be embedded into the school’s instructional day. Many schools try to find this time by extending the school day for interventions, and offering extra help before school, at lunch, during recess, and after school. Unfortunately, these options have significant drawbacks. Most schools cannot require a student to come early or stay late, especially if the student depends on school transportation, must work to support the family, or is needed at home to tend to younger siblings. Also, before or after school and lunchtime interventions usually extend beyond teacher contracted student-contact time. This means that the staff best trained to reteach essential standards—teachers—are not available to help. When intervention time is embedded into the master schedule, teachers are available to help and all students can be required to attend.
- d. *Never introduce a new essential curriculum*—If new essential standards are introduced at the same time, the students receiving reteaching will fall behind. It is perfectly acceptable to introduce new content to

students who do not need interventions, as long as that content has not been identified as essential.

We have found that some schools feel they do not need to create dedicated intervention time in their master schedule because individual teachers provide extra help in their own classroom. These schools are basically advocating for a one-room schoolhouse model for interventions—an approach that has never produced high levels of learning for all students, and is the antithesis of being a PLC. It is inefficient to reteach the same essential standard to small groups of students in multiple classrooms, unlikely that every teacher will possess more effective ways to teach each standard, and impossible for individual teachers to differentiate instruction to meet all the needs in their classroom. Embedding time into the master schedule allows for the collective knowledge of teacher teams—and the staff as a whole—to respond when students don't learn. Later in this chapter, we will discuss how this time can also be used to extend student learning.

3. **Intensive remediation in foundational skills:** When a school provides students access to the essential grade-level curriculum and effective initial teaching during core instruction, and provides timely interventions on this curriculum when needed, most students will end each school year properly prepared for future success. However, some students will inevitably enter a school year lacking essential skills from prior years. These foundational skills include:
 - › Decoding and comprehending grade-level text
 - › Writing effectively
 - › Applying number sense

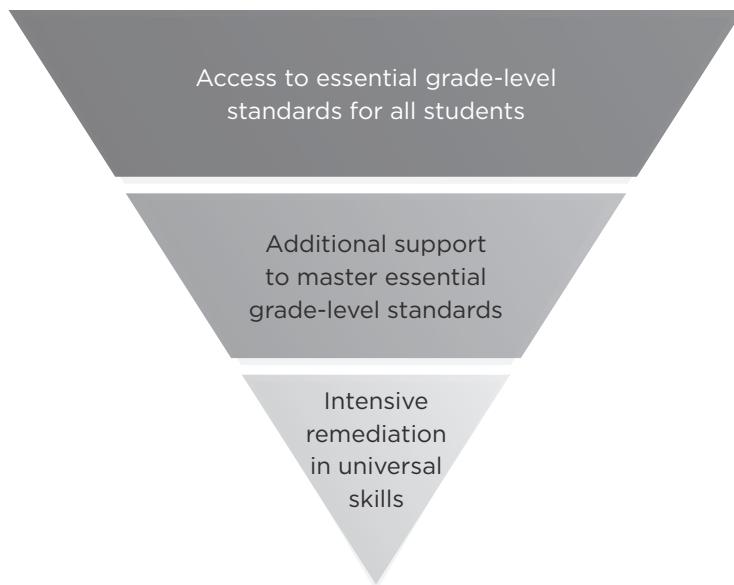
- › Comprehending the English language (or the school's primary language)
- › Demonstrating essential behaviors

Students who are significantly behind in just one of these foundational skills will struggle in virtually every grade level, course, and subject, and usually the students most at risk are behind in more than one area. For students who need intensive remediation in foundational skills, the school must have a plan to provide this level of assistance without denying these students access to essential grade-level curricula. To close their sizeable learning gaps, these students must improve multiple grade levels in a single school year. To achieve this level of growth, intensive remediation should be part of a student's instructional day and the best trained staff in a student's area or areas of need should provide it.

Figure 7.1 graphically captures these three outcomes as tiers of instructional time and support (Buffum et al., 2018).

At the top of the pyramid is Tier 1. It is the widest part of the graphic because it represents what *all* students receive as part of their core instructional program—access to grade-level essential curricula. Because not all students learn the same way, the school has embedded instructional time to reteach essential curricula—the primary purpose of Tier 2 of support. At Tier 3, some students will also need intensive remediation in prior-year essential curricula. If a school's efforts at the first two tiers are effective, fewer and fewer students should need the third tier of intensive remediation.

Some students will need all three tiers to learn at high levels—this is why it is called a *multitiered* system of supports. Students do not move from one tier to another—the tiers are value added. All students need effective initial teaching on essential grade-level standards. In addition, some students will need supplemental help to master these essential grade-level standards. The school has planned for this at the second tier. And in addition to Tier 1 and Tier 2, some students



Source: Buffum et al., 2018, p. 22.

FIGURE 7.1: RTI pyramid.

will need intensive help in learning essential outcomes from previous years. Students in need of intensive help in remedial skills often struggle with new essential grade-level curricula. These students need Tier 2 and Tier 3, all without missing new essential instruction.

Individual teachers cannot effectively provide all three levels of support in their own classrooms, nor can special education and intervention staff provide it all. Providing this level of support requires a schoolwide, collaborative, highly effective process singularly focused on every student's success. Therefore, structuring a school to function as a PLC is a critical prerequisite to effective RTI and MTSS implementation (Buffum et al., 2018).

A concern we often hear from educators is, "We would love to embed intervention time during the school day, but our schedule does not allow it." This pronouncement is the single most proffered explanation as to why a school has not created a systematic plan of intervention when students do not learn. It has the benefit of demonstrating

our good intentions—“We would love to intervene when kids do not learn”—but at the same time, it absolves us of responsibility—“Alas, it is simply impossible given our schedule.” Blame is assigned to an inanimate, abstract concept (the schedule) while people are exonerated for failure to act. We find this argument puzzling, and we offer these rhetorical questions in response.

- Did you mean it when you said the purpose of your school or district is to help all students learn? Was that a sincere declaration of intent and priority or politically correct hyperbole?
- Do you recognize that some students will require more time and support for their learning than others and that no research has concluded all students can learn if time and support are constants rather than variables in the learning process?
- Do you agree a school’s schedule should reflect its purpose and priorities?
- Do you currently have alternative schedules for addressing specific outcomes at your school?
- Have you created a schedule that ensures you have access to all students who experience difficulty to provide them with additional time and support for learning?

When we pose these questions one at a time to educators, it is disheartening to hear them say, “Yes, we are committed to helping all students learn. Yes, we recognize some will need more time and support if they are to learn. Yes, a school’s schedule should reflect its purpose and priorities. Yes, we revise our regular schedule for pep rallies, awards assemblies, ‘just say no to drugs’ week, district and state testing, final exams, snow days, grading days, and parent conferences, but no, we do not have a system of interventions in place because the schedule won’t let us.”

A school’s schedule should be regarded as a tool to further priorities, not as an impediment to change. Our advice to educators is simple:

if your current schedule does not allow you to provide students with something as essential to their academic success as extra time and support for learning, you should change it. Hundreds of schools throughout North America and beyond have successfully revised their master schedules to create intervention time without lengthening the school day, and within existing state guidelines, contractual agreements, and site resources. We recommend that a school create a task force, which includes teacher leaders and administrators, and study what similar schools are doing. For evidence and examples from a variety of model schools that have successfully created such master schedules, we recommend you visit the website AllThingsPLC (www.allthingsplc.info).

Providing Systematic and Timely Interventions

In addition to scheduling the time required to provide interventions and remediation, the leadership team must design a systematic process to guarantee students who need help will receive it, regardless of the teachers to whom they are assigned. This systematic response is composed of six steps.

1. Identify students who need intervention.
2. Target the right intervention to meet each need.
3. Determine which staff member or members are best trained to meet each need.
4. Monitor each student's progress to determine if the intervention is working.
5. Revise if a student is not responding to the intervention.
6. Extend learning once a student has mastered the essential curriculum.

Of these steps, there is one that a school must do perfectly: identifying students who need extensions and interventions. Once a school is aware that a specific student needs targeted help, the school can monitor and adjust these supports until the student is succeeding. But it is impossible to make revisions for students who are not on the

school's "intervention radar." Interventions and extensions are useless for any student who slips through the cracks.

When possible, the best way to identify students who need extra help is proactively—*before* they begin to fail. This goal is especially important for students who need intensive remediation in foundational skills (Tier 3). When students begin a new school year with extreme learning gaps in reading, writing, number sense, English language, and classroom behavior, the school should assume that they will not only require Tier 3 intensive remediation in their areas of need but also support mastering new grade-level essential curricula.

The process of identifying students proactively is the primary purpose of universal screening. Traditionally, universal screening has been achieved by giving all students short assessments at the start of the year on specific foundational skills. Students who score significantly below grade level are then identified for immediate assistance. The drawback to this approach is that schools create their master schedule before the school year begins. It is difficult to accurately allocate the time and resources needed to provide intensive remediation if the leadership team does not know which students need this level of support—and the specific needs of each student—prior to making the master schedule.

It would be timelier and more efficient to proactively identify these students at the end of each school year, using existing assessment data and current teacher recommendations. As it is unlikely that a student reading multiple years below grade level will close this gap over summer vacation, the end-of-year data should be an accurate predictor of a student's need when school resumes in the fall. A high school leadership team should be able to proactively identify next year's sophomores, juniors, and seniors most at risk; they are the freshmen, sophomores, and juniors most at risk at the end of the current year.

If a high school receives most of its incoming freshmen from specific middle schools, staff could work with those faculties to identify incoming freshmen who will need proactive help. The same thinking is equally applicable for middle and elementary schools. The only

students this process would not proactively identify would be students new to your district. Using screening assessments for these students, potentially as part of the school's registration process, would accurately identify them. In most schools, this would be a much smaller number of students.

Finally, it is important to remember that the goal of universal screening is to identify students who will likely require additional supports embedded as part of their daily schedule. This preliminary screening information will not be enough to determine the exact, individualized interventions for each of these students. Multiple students will likely be identified with significant gaps in foundational reading, but it is unlikely all these students will be lacking the same reading skills. Additional diagnostic testing is required to better determine and target the most effective interventions for each student.

By proactively identifying students with the greatest needs, the leadership team can accurately allocate the time and resources needed to have these supports in place on the first day of school. It is important to note that universal screening information, when gathered through prior-year data or baseline assessment tests to start the year, is an ineffective way to identify and target students who need help learning specific grade-level essential standards (Tier 2). Team common formative assessments are the key to these interventions—a topic that we will discuss in the next section.

Targeting Interventions

One of the most important guiding principles of effective interventions is this: *the more targeted the intervention, the more likely it will work* (Buffum et al., 2012). An intervention works best when the staff leading the intervention—and the students receiving the help—are exceedingly clear on the specific knowledge, skill, or behavior that students must learn. When the intended goal of an intervention is clear, the targeted outcomes become the criteria for identifying which students need specific help, determining which staff member is best able to provide the assistance, and monitoring if the intervention has

worked. A school must become possessed with the question, *What exactly do we want students to be able to know and do by the end of this intervention?*

When it comes to identifying students who need additional support mastering specific grade-level essential standards, team-created common formative assessments are the lynchpin to the process. For each essential standard that a team has identified (by answering the first critical question), the team must also determine how they will know if students have learned it (the second critical question). As discussed in the previous chapter, team-created common assessments:

- Align to grade or course essential curricula
- Measure specific learning targets
- Provide timely feedback because teacher teams administer them during the unit of study
- Allow teachers to compare results and determine the most effective ways to reteach

These outcomes are some of the reasons why assessment expert Reeves (2004) considers team common assessments to be best practice in assessment and the gold standard of educational accountability. The ultimate goal is to target interventions:

- By name, by need (DuFour et al., 2004)
- Kid by kid, skill by skill (Eaker & Keating, 2015)
- By student, by standard (Buffum et al., 2018)

Through our work with educators around the world, we have found that most schools have not successfully created clarity and consensus on what all students must learn. Without a guaranteed and viable curriculum, teacher teams struggle giving common assessments that measure student progress on specific, shared learning outcomes. Without this targeted information, they usually default to using broader measures to identify students for interventions, such as the following.

- Report card grades
- State assessment scores
- District benchmark assessments
- Universal screening assessments

There are inherent limitations—and some detrimental shortcomings—to these measures, when used to target Tier 2 interventions. Report card grades have traditionally been averaged scores. This is problematic because students can be failing the same course but be struggling for markedly different reasons. Equally important, students can have a passing grade in a class, but not have mastered specific essential standards; these students often slip through the cracks because their average grade is satisfactory. State assessment scores measure student achievement on the last year's curriculum—not this year's essential curriculum, which is the primary focus of Tier 2 interventions. District benchmark tests do measure progress on the current-year curriculum, but these assessments are not as timely, and they might not perfectly align to the site-specific essential curriculum. And universal screeners, as mentioned earlier, are designed to quickly assess large gaps in foundations skills—not specific needs in the current curriculum. This is why the frequent use of team-created common formative assessments is key to teacher-team collaboration in the PLC at Work process and the critical component of a highly effective system of interventions.

Assigning Staff by Expertise

A PLC leverages the collective expertise of the entire staff to ensure every student learns at high levels. This means administrators, classroom teachers, certificated specialists, and support staff must work interdependently to collectively respond when students don't learn. This approach might first seem daunting to teachers. Many might think, "I'm struggling to meet the needs of the students assigned to my class, and now I am responsible to every student in the school?" A better way to think about this would be, "I have expertise and talents that could really help more students succeed, including some students not currently assigned to my class. Likewise, I am not an expert in everything,

How can my colleagues share their expertise to help support the diverse needs of the students in my class?" When done well, such an approach will better support students and educators. By each staff member contributing his or her talents to the whole, the weight of ensuring students learn is shared by all, relieving the burden traditionally placed on individual educators. The key is identifying student needs, and clearly defining which staff members will take lead responsibility for specific interventions.

Because teacher teams in a PLC share essential learning outcomes, we recommend that each team take lead responsibility for providing interventions in essential content standards. Wouldn't it make sense that a third-grade team of teachers takes primary responsibility to assist students who need additional time and support in learning third-grade essential standards? And wouldn't it make sense that the high school biology team takes the lead supporting students who require additional assistance in learning essential biology learning outcomes? The key term is that the *team* takes responsibility—not each biology teacher in isolation, trying to meet the needs of his or her own students.

Additionally, it is likely that the students who need additional help on third-grade or biology standards will represent a spectrum of the school's demographics: regular education, special education, English learners, the economically disadvantaged, and students identified as gifted. But, regardless of student labels, the staff members most likely to be trained in these standards would be the classroom teachers in these subject areas.

Likewise, every school has additional staff to support students, such as the following.

- Administrators
- Counselors
- School psychologist
- Speech-language pathologist
- Special education teachers

- Librarian
- Health services staff
- Bilingual staff
- Subject specialists (reading specialist, mathematics specialist, and so on)
- Instructional aides

These personnel have specialized expertise that can help more students succeed. For example, a reading specialist or special education teacher often has a depth of expertise and experience in providing intensive remediation in foundational skills. A school counselor or school psychologist usually has training in leading social and academic behavior interventions, as well as identifying home environmental needs. Administrators could take the lead on interventions, targeting poor attendance and work completion.

These examples are not intended to be the only way to allocate staff to lead interventions. The specific staff members available, their training and experience, and potential contractual and regulatory requirements for each position will vary from school to school. Targeting students by need and assigning staff by expertise are hallmarks of effective and efficient interventions.

Teaching Essential Behaviors

Some students struggle in school for academic reasons—that is, they lack essential skills and knowledge needed to succeed in core curricula. For other students, their difficulties are due to an inability to consistently demonstrate the behaviors required for academic success. And a school’s students most at risk often demonstrate both needs, as there is a strong correlation between low academic skills and behavior needs (Fleming, Harachi, Cortes, Abbott, & Catalano, 2004; Morrison, Anthony, Storino, & Dillon, 2001; Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004). To ensure all students succeed, a school’s systematic interventions must provide effective behavior supports.

A PLC should use the four critical questions to guide their efforts, focusing each question on behavior outcomes.

1. What are the essential *behaviors* we expect all students to learn?
2. How do we know students are learning?
3. How do we respond when students have not learned?
4. How do we respond when they have already learned?

Because essential behaviors should be taught and demonstrated across the school in every grade and course, answering these four questions should not be left to each teacher team; instead, they should be answered collectively as a staff.

Essential behaviors can be placed into two categories: (1) social behaviors and (2) academic behaviors (Buffum, Mattos, Weber, & Hierck, 2015).

1. **Social behaviors:** Success in a school environment requires the ability to consistently demonstrate socially appropriate behaviors, including a student's ability to self-monitor, as well as the following.
 - › Responsible verbal and physical interactions with peers and adults
 - › Appropriate language
 - › Respect for property and materials
 - › Regular attendance
2. **Academic behaviors:** Academic behaviors are critical to developing a successful learner. They include the following.
 - › *Metacognition*—Knowledge and beliefs about thinking
 - › *Self-concept*—A student's belief in his or her abilities
 - › *Self-monitoring*—The ability to plan and prepare for learning

- › *Motivation*—The ability to initiate and maintain interest in tasks
- › *Strategy*—Techniques for organizing and memorizing knowledge
- › *Volition*—The efforts and techniques needed to stay motivated and engaged in learning (Many educators refer to this as demonstrating *grit*.)

Once a school determines its essential academic and social behaviors, the staff must agree on how students demonstrate these behaviors, considering differences in student ages and learning environments. For example, if a school determines that demonstrating respect is an essential social behavior, how should students demonstrate this behavior in the classroom during whole-group instruction? During cooperative learning time? On the playground? In the cafeteria? During a pep rally? Also, a student's ability to self-monitor this behavior varies between kindergarten students and fifth graders. Teachers must discuss these considerations before they can explicitly teach, monitor, and intervene on these behaviors.

A traditional test cannot accurately measure if students are learning essential behaviors. Instead, staff observation mostly commonly measures this information. This means the best way to identify students who need systematic behavior support is by developing a staff recommendation process. While specific identification procedures vary from school to school, we recommend the process meet the following criteria (Buffum et al., 2018).

- **Timely:** We recommend soliciting teacher input at least once every three weeks.
- **Mandatory:** Participation from all site educators must be mandatory.
- **Deliberate:** All staff members should start the year knowing when the identification process takes place, how they will gather the information, and what criteria to use for identifying students in need.

- **Efficient:** The process should not require an unreasonable amount of time for teachers to complete.

Finally, remember that in a PLC, actions are based on research and evidence of best practice. This applies to behavior interventions too. Schools should apply research-based interventions to effectively support students with behavior needs. Traditionally, schools have used punitive-based actions to respond when students misbehave. From detention to dunce caps, and swats to suspension, there is virtually no research or evidence that proves these actions actually develop better behavior.

The faculty can take a more effective approach by viewing interventions as what they do *for* their students, not *to* their students. What students are required to do in an intervention might not be what a student likes or wants to do. But the student must feel the adults' motivation is not to punish him or her for failure, but instead to demonstrate that the school cares so much about the student's success in school that it will not let the student fail. As coauthors John Hannigan, Jessica Djabrayan Hannigan, Mike Mattos, and Austin Buffum (2020) state in the comprehensive behavior intervention book *Behavior Solutions: Teaching Academic and Social Skills Through RTI at Work*:

If the adults on campus use their advantages of experience, positional power, and classroom authority to collaborate and then act punitively to demand compliance, they can expect to break their students' wills, destroy their love of learning, and deny them opportunities to develop the behaviors they will need for academic and social health. However, if your staff view behavior interventions through the lens of education, understanding, and compassion, your actions will result in learning and change. (p. 227)

Extending Student Learning

When a school schedules flexible time in the master schedule to provide students with interventions, there is no reason why teachers

cannot also use this time to extend the learning of those students who have already learned it.

It is important to remember that essential standards do not represent all the curricula taught in each grade and course. Instead, they represent the *minimum* all students must learn to be prepared for their next level of learning, and the *first priority* when teachers collaborate, assess, and intervene together. But schools will also teach additional important content and skills. These additional curricula can extend and deepen student learning.

Another way to extend student learning is when schools offer advanced coursework that exceeds the minimum requirements for college and career readiness. Examples include AP classes, IB classes, dual-credit classes, and dual-immersion classes. A school's intervention time can support students in these advanced curricula too. The mission of a PLC is to ensure all students are learning at higher and higher levels. Essential standards represent the floor, and the sky should be the limit.

Notice we keep using the word *extension*, not *enrichment*. *Extension* means to deepen students' knowledge and skills in their core instruction. We define *enrichment* as students having access to the subjects that specials or electives teachers traditionally teach, such as music, art, drama, applied technology, and physical education. We strongly believe these curricula are essential. These subjects often teach essential core curricula through different modalities. Also, students usually view these subjects as the fun part of school. When we pull students from enrichment to receive extra help in core curricula or offer enrichment opportunities only for students who have mastered essential curricula, interventions turn into a punishment. Subsequently, a student's motivation and attitude can suffer. Finally, there is an equity issue. Often, the students who need interventions come from economically disadvantaged homes. For many of these students, the only way they will learn a musical instrument or use advanced technology is at school. For these reasons, students should not be denied

access to enrichment because they need additional time and support in core subjects.

A commitment to helping all students learn at high levels is beneficial to all students. As DuFour and coauthors (2004) note in *Whatever It Takes*:

When teachers work together to become so skillful in teaching a particular concept that even students who typically have difficulty can understand that concept, all students benefit. When students of all abilities have a place to turn to for extra time and support if they experience initial difficulty in learning, all students benefit. The adage, “A rising tide lifts all boats” applies to the PLC concept. (pp. 159–160)

Making Interventions Directive

Intervention must be a directive, meaning students must be required to attend if they have the need. When interventions are optional, students who need the most help are usually the least likely to attend.

Regardless of these facts, many schools make interventions invitational. They claim students must take responsibility for their own learning, as this self-discipline is needed for future success. Elementary teachers will advise their students to be responsible for their own learning because “middle school teachers expect you to be independent learners.” Middle school teachers will warn their students they are responsible for their own learning because “high school teachers won’t cut you any slack.” And high school teachers will advise students they are responsible for their own learning because “no one will hold your hand in college or in the workplace.” Students who do not heed this advice will suffer the consequences of failure, and educators will justify that failure as a part of teaching students to “be responsible.” Students who heed this advice will probably be successful. But, inevitably, other students will choose not to do what is necessary to succeed, will fail, and, in some cases, will be perfectly willing to accept failure.

It is time for educators to acknowledge the obvious: allowing students to act irresponsibly does nothing to teach them responsibility, and it is disingenuous to pretend it does. A school truly committed to teaching responsibility will convey a consistent message that learning is required rather than optional, and it will create policies and procedures that direct rather than invite students to do what is necessary to learn.

Inherent in the term *responsible* is the assumption one is able to respond. Some students are not able to respond effectively when their teachers invite them to learn. Some do not have the study skills, dispositions, work ethic, capacity, or attitudes essential to academic success. So why not acknowledge this reality and intervene with strategies to provide students with these tools for success? When students fail to act in ways that lead to success, the school will best change this behavior by directing students to act in new ways. They will require students to attend tutoring sessions, insist students continue working on a project until it meets standards, and monitor the completion of their homework each day. When these new behaviors lead students to a new experience—academic success—and the success is acknowledged and celebrated, attitudes can begin to change. The behavior is more likely to be repeated until, eventually, it becomes habit and the need for monitoring is diminished as students develop a sense of self-efficacy. As educator Jamie Virga (2010) states:

Individuals build their self-efficacy beliefs by successfully carrying out a challenging task at a high level. After you have an experience of mastery, when you are faced with a similar experience in the future, you will be able to draw on the past experience and have a powerful expectation that you will be successful.

Adopting Grading Practices That Support and Encourage Improvement

If students never made mistakes, there would be no need for interventions. Making mistakes—and learning from them—should be expected, encouraged, and celebrated in a true learning community. As Albert Einstein famously said, “A person who never made

a mistake, never tried anything new” (BrainyQuote, n.d.a). Student failures trigger the need for interventions, signaling that additional guidance and practice are required.

If students are to learn from mistakes, then a school’s grading practices must align to this outcome. Unfortunately, many traditional grading practices were not designed to ensure student learning, but instead to rank student achievement. Grading policies—such as not allowing retests, not accepting work after a deadline, and grading on a curve—punish students for initial failure, deny students opportunities to fix mistakes, reward students who learn the fastest, value promptness over learning, demotivate struggling students, and undermine a school’s system of interventions.

Consider for a moment that you are a student who has failed an end-of-unit common assessment on a standard deemed essential. The school has used this information to identify you for extra help, created time during the school day to provide interventions, and assigned you to a specific session to reteach the failed standard. But after the intervention, your teacher informs you that you will not be allowed to reassess, because the teacher thinks “allowing retests is not fair to the students who scored higher the first time.” In another teacher’s class, retests are allowed, but you can only earn half the points possible, which is still a failing mark. Would these grading practices motivate you to try harder? Compel you to take the extra effort to learn? Encourage you to seek additional help in the future? Of course not—these practices do not promote learning and fairness.

Any school committed to a mission of ensuring all students learn at high levels can no longer tolerate these archaic grading practices. As defenders of the school’s mission, the leadership team must build shared knowledge, consensus, and commitment to grading practices that provide students the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, try again, and ultimately demonstrate what they have learned.

Creating a Highly Effective, Problem-Solving Team

Every school has students who have serious academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs—needs that often go beyond school

into students' homes. Because the obstacles facing these students are often systemic and profound, meeting their needs will usually require highly trained professionals to provide multiple interventions during the instructional day. It is unlikely an individual teacher or teacher team will have the diverse expertise and resources to best diagnose the needs of a student requiring this level of help, nor would a teacher team have the authority to assign the schoolwide resources (school psychologist, speech–language pathologist, counselor, specialists, and special education teacher) needed to provide intensive interventions.

To that end, we recommend every school creates a highly effective, problem-solving team—an *intervention team*—to focus intensely on the individual needs of a school's students most at risk. The following are the site intervention team's primary responsibilities.

- Determine the specific learning needs of each student in need of intensive support.
- Diagnose the cause or causes of the student's struggles.
- Determine the most appropriate interventions to address the student's needs.
- Frequently monitor the student's progress to see if interventions are achieving the desired outcomes.
- Revise the student's interventions when he or she is not achieving the desired outcomes.
- Determine when special education identification is appropriate.

Because students in need of intensive support usually have multiple needs, it is important for the intervention team to include site experts in the specific areas that cause students to struggle, including:

- Reading
- Writing
- Number sense
- The school's primary language differing from the student's native language

- Social and academic behaviors
- Health and home needs

Like any other team in a PLC, the school intervention team must meet frequently. Weekly is recommended, with every other week being the minimum.

Many schools have a similar team currently on site—the school's *student study team* (SST). The original concept of an SST was to ensure problem solving. However, the SST process at many schools is not focused on solving problems to help a student; instead, it is a mandatory step to qualify a student for special education testing. The team meets only as needed, so it often takes weeks to find a date when all the team members are available. The meeting is usually paperwork driven and focused on completing the appropriate forms to justify special education testing. When the SST "plan" is complete, minimal monitoring of the plan takes place, and revisions are made sporadically at best. When the plan ultimately fails, the student is then referred for special education testing, which is often the desired outcome in the first place.

Understanding Parents' Role in Interventions

Without question, parent and guardian support can benefit a school's intervention efforts, as well as build trust and support with the school's community. Including parents in the intervention process and providing specific actions that a parent or guardian can realistically do to support his or her child's success can be powerful. But even when a school has created such clarity of responsibility in the school-home partnership, there are factors that a learning-focused school must acknowledge and address, including the following.

- Most schools cannot require parents to actually meet these expectations.
- Often the students who need interventions the most come from home environments in which the parent or guardian is unable or unwilling to provide scholastic support at home.

- Even when parents have the time and desire to help their children learn essential standards—such as solving a linear equation—it is unlikely they will have more effective ways to teach the concept than the credentialed teachers at the school.

In the end, there is only one essential task that a school can expect of parents: make sure their children attend school. The law requires this minimal responsibility. A school should certainly make every effort to engage parents in their children's education and request their support when students need extra help, but the principle of diminishing returns applies here. There will come a point when the valuable time and effort that staff members use to repeatedly solicit parental support would be better spent directly helping the student at school.

The Moment of Truth for a PLC

In our experience, answering the third critical question is the moment of truth for a PLC. Up to this point, many schools can engage in the work of a PLC without making striking changes to their traditional practices. Revising school mission and vision statements or writing meeting norms and yearly goals are common practices at most schools. Holding regular grade-level or department team meetings is hardly revolutionary. Asking teachers to identify curricular priorities, determine common pacing, and write assessments is rarely viewed as controversial. Schools that do not function as PLCs engage in many of these tasks from time to time.

But there will come a point when students will be taught a learning outcome that the faculty has deemed essential. Students' future learning is dependent on knowing that standard. The state did not necessarily say that standard was essential, nor did a district committee—teachers at the school validated the standard as absolutely critical for every student to learn. After initial teaching, all students are then assessed on that essential standard. Not a state- or district-selected assessment, but one the school's teachers have written or vetted. The assessment results show most students can demonstrate mastery of the

essential standard, but some students cannot. Undoubtedly, some of these students will have an IEP, but some will not. Some students will come from homes of poverty, and others will not. For some students, English is not their primary language, while for others, English is their only language.

In a PLC, the fundamental purpose, and the reason for collaboration, is to ensure all students learn at high levels. Not most students. Not all the regular education students. Not all students who come to school ready to learn, or who show proper effort and self-responsibility. *All students*. The third critical question of a PLC asks, “How will *we* respond when some students do not learn?” This is when the noble ideal of *learning for all* becomes a reality and requires action. If a staff is truly committed to the success of every student, then responding when a student doesn’t learn cannot be left up to the individual efforts of each teacher. Likewise, struggling students would not be expected to fail long enough to qualify for special education. Creating processes to ensure all students succeed cannot be achieved by purchasing new intervention software, starting an after-school homework club, or hiring additional intervention staff. Instead, it will require dramatic changes to the school’s master schedule, teacher assignments, collaboration structures, grading practices, allocation of resources, and student expectations. Outdated, ineffective interventions must be abandoned and replaced with research-based practices that better support and extend student learning. And, most difficult of all, educators will need to honestly examine their assumptions and beliefs about the academic potential of every student—especially the ones most at risk. This level of change is extremely difficult.

Sadly, at this moment of truth, many schools struggle because too many adults are unwilling to accept the level of disequilibrium and discomfort required to achieve these outcomes. In the next chapter, we will discuss the essential role that effective leadership plays in leading, modeling, and successfully navigating this level of change.



CHAPTER 8

The Role of the Principal in a PLC

Sharing leadership is a fundamental principle and dynamic of learning communities. We encountered no instances to support the “great leader theory,” charismatic people who create extraordinary contexts for teaching by virtue of their unique vision. Strong principals empower and support teacher leadership to improve teaching practice.

—MILBREY McLAUGHLIN AND JOAN TALBERT

Researchers of the first studies of effective schools in the 1970s concluded the correlates of effective schools—high expectations, clear and focused academic goals, a safe and orderly environment, and frequent monitoring of student learning—could neither be brought together nor kept together without strong administrative leadership from the principal (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte, 1991). This finding regarding the critical role of the principal in creating the conditions for school improvement has been replicated repeatedly for forty years. Consider the following.

- Teachers’ relationship with the principal and their perceptions of the principal as a leader have a major impact on school climate and teacher satisfaction. Most schools lack the capacity for improvement and renewal because their principals lack the prerequisite skills of group leadership. Principals typically lack the

capacity to lead in the solution to schoolwide problems (Goodlad, 1984).

- “The role that principals play as they interact with teachers makes a profound impact on teacher behavior and student learning. . . . The leadership of the school principal is critical to improving the workplace for teachers.” (Smith & Andrews, 1989, p. viii)
- “It turns out that leadership not only matters: it is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning. . . . Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst.” (Leithwood et al., 2004, pp. 3, 5)
- “If you take the principal and other key building leaders out of the picture as a committed and skillful force for these qualities, then no successful professional learning community will form. The possibilities of all other forces combined (state education law and policy, standardized testing and accountability, central office, staff development, parent and community pressure) to raise student achievement are fatally weakened.” (Saphier, 2005, p. 38)
- “Research over the last 35 years provides strong guidance on specific leadership behaviors for school administrators and those behaviors have well-documented effects on student achievement. A highly effective school leader can have a dramatic influence on the overall academic achievement of students.” (Marzano et al., 2005, pp. 7, 10)
- “Because of their positional authority and control over school resources, principals are in a strategic position to promote or inhibit the development of a teacher learning community in their school. . . . School administrators

set the stage and conditions for starting and sustaining the community development process." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, p. 56)

- "Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal." (Wallace Foundation, 2011, p. 4)
- "As school leaders, principals can influence student achievement in a number of ways, such as hiring and firing of teachers, monitoring instruction and maintaining student discipline, among many others. We estimate that a one standard deviation improvement in principal quality can boost student performance by 0.289 to 0.408 standard deviations in reading and math, while the principal at the 75th percentile improves scores by 0.170 to 0.193 relative to the median principal." (Dhuey & Smith, 2014, p. 662)
- "Creating a collaborative culture is not easy; it requires excellent leadership on the part of the principal and a recognition that the difficult challenges in schools today require a new style of leadership." (Dagen & Bean, 2020, p. 14)

Given the vital importance of the principalship, it is not surprising that many authors and organizations have offered advice regarding the position and keys to fulfilling its responsibilities. Principals have been urged to be "instructional leaders" who function as "forceful and dynamic professionals through a variety of personal characteristics, including high energy, assertiveness, ability to assume the initiative, openness to new ideas, tolerance for ambiguity, a sense of humor, analytic ability, and a practical stance toward life" (Smith & Andrews, 1989, p. 8). The same study identifies ten different behavioral descriptors that call upon principals to assume four roles:

“principal as resource provider, principal as instructional resource, principal as communicator, and principal as visible presence” (Smith & Andrews, 1989, p. 9).

Philip Hallinger and Joseph F. Murphy’s (1985) conceptual model of the principalship offers three leadership dimensions for the role along with specific leadership practices for each dimension.

1. Defining the school’s mission
 - › Framing school goals
 - › Communicating school goals
2. Managing the instructional program
 - › Supervising and evaluating instruction
 - › Coordinating the curriculum
 - › Monitoring student progress
3. Promoting a positive learning climate
 - › Protecting instructional time
 - › Promoting professional development
 - › Maintaining high visibility
 - › Providing incentives for teachers
 - › Enforcing academic standards
 - › Providing incentives for students

Leithwood and colleagues (2004) offer these three keys to effectiveness for principals.

1. **Setting directions:** Charting a clear course that everyone understands, establishing high expectations, and using data to track progress and performance
2. **Developing people:** Providing teachers and others in the system with the necessary support and training to succeed
3. **Making the organization work:** Ensuring that the entire range of conditions and incentives in the school fully supports rather than inhibits teaching and learning

Yet another team of researchers (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2007) created a model for school leaders consisting of six core components and six key processes. *Core components*, which they define as “characteristics of schools that support the learning of students and enhance the ability of teachers to teach,” include high standards for student learning, rigorous curricula, quality instruction, a culture of learning and professional behavior, connections to external communities, and systemic performance accountability that utilizes both internal and external accountability measures (Goldring et al., 2007, p. 2). *Key processes*, which they define as “leadership behaviors . . . that raise organizational members’ level of commitment and shape organizational culture,” included planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating, and monitoring (Goldring et al., 2007, pp. 2–3).

Education Northwest, a prominent research lab, compiled and analyzed a series of studies in 2015 to determine the most essential qualities of an effective school leader (Krasnoff, 2015). The report reveals that effective principals do the following.

- Shape a vision of academic success for all students based on high standards.
- Create a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.
- Cultivate leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their parts in realizing the school vision.
- Improve instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn to their utmost.
- Manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

It could be argued the primary task of the principal is leadership; however, even on this seemingly unassailable responsibility, principals have received mixed messages. Do those who sit in the principal’s chair function most effectively when they act as instructional leaders,

transformational leaders, servant leaders, strategic leaders, learning leaders, empowering leaders, or moral leaders? Even the most diligent principal, one who is willing to explore the numerous recommendations regarding how he or she could be most effective in the role, is likely to be overwhelmed by the avalanche of advice and the ever-expanding list of responsibilities. Principals are now called on to do far more than “run a tight ship,” provide an orderly environment, and ensure the happiness of the adults in the building. In fact, Fullan (2007) claims the increasingly unreasonable demands of the job have put the principalship in an “impossible position” (p. 168).

The Principal in a PLC

The most effective organizations have the ability to “reduce all the challenges and dilemmas to simple ideas” by focusing on what is essential and using the simple ideas as a frame of reference for all their decisions (Collins, 2001, p. 91). The best leaders respond to the complex and competing demands of their position by identifying “the few crucial things that matter most right now and relentlessly communicating about those few things” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 206). In short, effective organizations and those who lead them keep the most important work at the forefront.

Principals benefit from embracing a few key ideas to help them create a meaningful and manageable conceptual framework for addressing the complexities of the position. We assert principals of PLCs must do the following.

1. Be clear about their primary responsibility.
2. Disperse leadership throughout the school.
3. Engage educators in a culture of reciprocal accountability where responsibility is more important than authority.
4. Bring coherence to the complexities of schooling by aligning the structure *and* culture of the school with its core purpose.

Principals of PLCs Are Clear About Their Primary Responsibility

Peter F. Drucker (1992) urges leaders to define and clarify their essential task by considering the question, “What is the one thing that I, and only I, can do that if done well will make a difference in this organization?” (p. 345). Clarity and specificity about the essence of the main task are the hallmarks of effective leaders. When working with principal groups, we often ask participants to imagine they are being visited by extraterrestrials who have been sent to clarify the role of the person earthlings call *the principal*. Participants typically struggle to respond. This is problematic because the way in which people define their job has a significant impact on how they approach their work each day.

We urge those who hope to serve as the principal of a PLC to define their job as follows.

My responsibility is to create the conditions that help the adults in this building continually improve upon their collective capacity to ensure all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success.

If principals approach their work each day with an understanding of and commitment to this fundamental responsibility, they increase the likelihood that their day-to-day decisions will align with the big ideas that drive PLCs.

Principals of PLCs Disperse Leadership

Philip Hallinger (2007) finds that views of the principalship evolved during the three decades he studied the position. The 1980s were the era of strong *instructional leaders*, and the research offered tales of aggressive, dynamic, assertive, and highly directive men and women determined to bring their personal vision of effective schooling to life. Although these strong leaders could serve as catalysts for school improvement, the improvement was difficult to sustain beyond the tenure of the principal.

The 1990s brought the idea of *transformational leadership* to the position (Usdan, McCloud, Podnostko, & Washington, 2000). Principals were now called upon to reduce their control of staff and to instead empower individuals to make their own decisions, fulfill their personal visions of schooling, and help teachers become the best they could be. Just as school sites were given greater autonomy during this era, principals extended greater autonomy to classroom teachers. As we have seen in earlier chapters, however, merely providing educators with more autonomy does not ensure they will focus on matters that have a positive impact on student learning, and individual development does not guarantee organizational improvement.

With the turn of the century, principals were urged to embrace *shared leadership* as the model best suited to the new image of the school as a community of learners. This concept is based on the premise that expertise is widely distributed throughout a school rather than vested in an individual person or position. A principal, therefore, should develop the capacity of people throughout the school to assume leadership roles and view him- or herself as a leader of leaders.

The second decade of the 20th century presented principals with another monumental task: triage and survival. The great recession of 2008, public policy shifts, and a new social reality placed principals in the crosshairs of issues that have little to do with instructional leadership, but are so daunting that they require attention. As of 2017, only twenty-one U.S. states restored school funding to prerecession levels (Leachman, Masterson, & Figueroa, 2017), leaving principals to create an environment focused on improving student learning with fewer resources and less support. Principals were also required to implement very complex and time-consuming teacher evaluation models, which neither teachers nor principals felt were helpful to improve student learning (School Leaders Network, 2014). Finally, principals have been forced to deal with new distractions to learning caused by increased access to technology and social media. Some principals estimate that they can spend up to one-quarter of their day policing student and teacher conflict due to the misuse of social media (Fissel, Wilcox, & Tillyer, 2018).

Each of these images has something to offer the contemporary principal. Principals of a PLC will certainly need to be directive instructional leaders on occasion. They should be committed to empowering teachers and encouraging both the collective autonomy of teams as well as latitude for individuals within well-defined parameters while simultaneously managing fewer resources and mitigating the impact of external distractions. If, however, principals are to create the conditions that help the adults in their schools continually improve on their collective capacity to ensure all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success, they must embrace the concept of widely shared leadership for both research-based and practical reasons.

In chapter 3 (page 61), we offered quotes from researchers both in- and outside education who arrived at the same conclusion: no single person has the expertise, influence, and energy to initiate and sustain a substantive change process. Researchers focused on the role of principals in building PLCs concur. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) find that “strong learning communities develop when principals learn to relinquish a measure of control and help others participate in building leadership throughout the school” (p. 81). Their synthesis of the research on the principalship led Marzano and coauthors (2005) to urge principals to disperse responsibilities throughout a leadership team to create a “purposeful community . . . with the collective efficacy and capacity . . . to accomplish goals that matter to all community members through agreed upon processes” (p. 99). Lieberman (1995) concludes effective principals must “act as partners with teachers, involved in a collaborative quest to examine practices and improve school” (p. 9). Researchers Karen Seashore Louis, Sharon D. Kruse, and Helen M. Marks (1996) find schools with strong PLCs are led by principals who “delegated authority, developed collaborative decision-making processes, and stepped back from being the central problem solver” (p. 193). Kofman and Senge (1995) conclude “leadership in a learning community is inevitably collective” (p. 34). Once again, creating a PLC means shaping a new school culture, and that Herculean task will require more than one leader.

Furthermore, no single person could address all the responsibilities principals have been asked to shoulder. Marzano and coauthors (2005) acknowledge it would be rare indeed to find an individual capable of mastering the twenty-one different responsibilities required of contemporary school leaders. They assert the only practical solution to this challenge is to develop a strong leadership team that assumes collective responsibility for creating conditions that enhance student and adult learning.

The opportunity to lead in a PLC should not, however, be limited to a designated team. Principals should work with staff to create structures to foster widely dispersed leadership. For example, in addition to a school leadership team, a leader could be designated for every grade-level, interdisciplinary, or course-specific team. Individual staff members could lead task forces to examine some aspect of the school and develop recommendations to improve it. Most important, the collaborative-team learning process creates the opportunity for situational leadership based on expertise. Every teacher in a PLC can assume the lead in the team's collective inquiry into best practice when results from common assessments indicate an individual has developed particular expertise in teaching a concept or skill. Membership on a team gives everyone "a chance to shine, a way to demonstrate leadership" (Kanter, 2004, p. 225). As Sergiovanni (2005) writes, "Viewing leadership as a group activity linked to practice rather than just an individual activity linked to a person helps match the expertise we have in a school with the problems and situations we face" (p. 45).

The best way principals can help others learn to lead is to put them in a position where they are called upon to lead, and then provide them with feedback and support as they move forward. A Center for Creative Leadership study concludes:

The goal of leadership development ultimately involves action not knowledge . . . [helping people] to learn from their work rather than taking them away from their work to learn. State of the art leadership development now occurs in the context of ongoing work initiatives that are tied to organizational imperatives. (as cited in Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004, p. 27)

Principals of PLCs Build Reciprocal Accountability

However, building capacity requires more than assigning new responsibilities to people and allowing them to flourish or flounder, to *sink or swim*. When principals ask teachers to lead, they are asking them to take responsibility for something beyond their classroom. Therefore, principals of PLCs recognize they have an obligation to provide staff with the resources, training, mentoring, and support to help them successfully accomplish what they have been asked to do. Elmore (2006) refers to this relationship as *reciprocal accountability*—“for every increment of performance I demand of you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation” (p. 93).

Greg Kushnir (2017), a PLC leader from Canada, offers this explanation of reciprocal accountability in a PLC:

In a traditional school setting, the term *accountability* often holds a negative connotation for teachers because of its connection to evaluation. However, a PLC looks at accountability in a very different light. Accountability in a PLC is seen as a method of ensuring we continue to collectively improve. Therefore, instead of accountability being a negative, one-sided relationship, it must be reciprocal. Reciprocal accountability must be developed between the teacher teams and the leadership team, but most important, it must be present among the members of each collaborative team. (p. 12)

For example, if teachers are being asked to collaborate, principals have an obligation to create structures that make collaboration meaningful rather than artificial, to guarantee time for collaboration during the contractual day, to establish clear priorities and parameters so teachers focus on the right topics, to help teams make informed decisions by making the essential knowledge base easily accessible to them, to provide meaningful and timely training based on the specific needs of each team, to offer templates and models to guide their work, and to specify clear expectations and standards to help teachers assess the quality of their work. Principals will need the support and assistance of other leaders in these endeavors, but they have a responsibility

to provide their staff members with everything they need to be successful in this important work.

The “Critical Issues for Team Consideration” reproducible handout in *Learning By Doing* is a useful tool to help principals, team leaders, and members of collaborative teams stay focused on the right work and to clarify their reciprocal accountability (DuFour et al., 2016). A principal could meet with team leaders prior to initiating each issue with the teams to explore the question, “What resources and support will you need to accomplish this task successfully?”

For example, when considering the first issue on the handout, developing team norms, team leaders might ask the principal the following questions.

- “What is a team norm? How are we defining the term?”
- “Why is it important to have norms? What is the significance of a team having explicitly stated norms?”
- “What are some examples of norms?”
- “What are the norms of high-performing teams?”
- “Can we provide a template or process for writing norms?”
- “What suggestions or tips can we offer to guide the work as teams write norms?”
- “How can we assess the quality of team norms?”
- “What happens if the team balks at writing norms? How should we respond?”
- “What happens if a team member does not honor norms?”

When considering the third issue on the handout of the list of critical issues—clarity regarding the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students must acquire for the course or grade level and every unit of instruction—the principal and team leaders would work together to ensure they could answer questions such as the following.

- Why should we ask teachers to engage in this activity? What are the benefits of addressing this issue?
- What do the state standards stipulate students must learn? Are we providing each teacher with ready access to the state standards?
- What does the district curriculum guide stipulate students must learn? Are we providing every teacher with ready access to the curriculum guide?
- What skills and knowledge have been identified as most essential by national organizations as well as by the teachers in the grade level or course above ours?
- How will we provide teams with time to complete this task?
- What criteria can we use in determining the significance of a recommended standard?
- What knowledge, skills, and concepts are emphasized on district, state, and national assessments that will be administered to our students? What format will those assessments use? How will students be asked to demonstrate their proficiency on the assessments?
- What is a reasonable number of anticipated essential learnings for each grade level or course?
- How will we respond if teachers suggest we can skip this step because the state, district, or textbook has already specified what students must learn?
- How will we respond if teachers suggest we are attempting to take away their autonomy?
- What is the timeline for completing this task?
- What happens if the team cannot reach consensus on this question of what students must learn?

By reviewing each issue and activity with team leaders prior to their leading the collective inquiry process with their colleagues, a principal

can identify and then gather the resources to help leaders facilitate the process, rehearse the questions and issues likely to arise, and help boost the confidence of the team leaders. In this sense, the principal functions as a servant leader by giving the people in the organization the tools and skills to ensure their eventual success as they undertake a challenge. The principal of a PLC will have high expectations for the adults in the organization, but those expectations are always accompanied by the question, What can I do to help you?

When Kouzes and Posner (1987) examined how effective leaders get things done in their organizations, they identified five core practices common to successful leaders. The most significant of those practices is that leaders empower others, which they describe as “the process of turning followers into leaders themselves” (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, p. 179). Two decades later, they reiterate this idea—leaders who leave the most lasting legacy are those who see their role as teaching, serving, and developing others to function as leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2006).

Principals of PLCs Bring Coherence to the Complexities of Schooling by Aligning the Structure and Culture of the School With Its Core Purpose

Establishing clarity and coherence in schools is particularly challenging for educators who suffer from the “projectitis” and “initiative fatigue” caused by the relentless ebb and flow of new programs and projects washing on them constantly from the federal, state, and district levels. But the “coherent integration of cultural and structural conditions” is essential to the success of educators who hope to create PLCs and raise student achievement (Newmann & Associates, 1996, p. 14).

Elmore (2006) asserts coherence on basic goals and values is a “pre-condition for the exercise of any effective leadership around instructional improvement” (p. 63). We urge principals to reverse the logic of Elmore’s assertion and recognize their effective leadership is a prerequisite for establishing the coherent sense of purpose, direction, and goals essential to an improving school.

Principals of PLCs provide clarity and coherence when they remain focused on the purpose of their schools and their responsibilities as principals. They know the school exists to help all students learn at high levels, and they know if that purpose is to be accomplished, they must create the conditions that help the adults in the building continually improve their collective capacity to ensure all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success.

The certainty of purpose that characterizes principals of PLCs does not mean they possess all the answers. It does mean, however, that they are skillful at asking the right questions and engaging people throughout the school in the consideration of those questions. Getting the questions right has been described as essential to effective leadership because engaging people in the right questions can help determine the focus and future of the organization (Block, 2003).

We suggest principals of PLCs use the three big ideas presented in chapter 1—(1) a focus on learning, (2) a collaborative culture and collective responsibility, and (3) a results orientation—to keep the following questions at the forefront.

1. Because we are committed to helping all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success, our collective inquiry should explore the following questions.
 - a. Have we helped each collaborative team of teachers build shared knowledge regarding state standards, district curriculum guides, trends in student achievement, and expectations for the next course or grade level?
 - b. Has our collective inquiry enabled each team to identify the *essential* knowledge, skills, and dispositions for every unit of their course or grade level?
 - c. Can this curriculum be taught in the amount of time we have available to teach?

- d. How can we ensure each teacher is aware of and committed to teaching the agreed-on guaranteed and viable curriculum?
 - e. What evidence are we gathering to assess the learning of our students? Is there additional evidence that would provide us with useful information?
 - f. Have the members of every collaborative team clarified the criteria they will use in judging the quality of student work, and can they apply those criteria consistently?
 - g. What systems are in place to monitor the learning of every student on a frequent and timely basis?
 - h. Do we use assessments to identify students who are experiencing difficulty?
 - i. Do we provide students who experience difficulty with additional time and support for learning in a timely, directive, and systematic way?
 - j. Do we provide students who experience difficulty with multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning?
 - k. What strategies have we put in place to enrich and extend the learning of students who are proficient?
 - l. Have we examined all our practices and procedures to ensure they encourage student learning rather than discourage it?
 - m. Do our day-to-day actions convey the message to our students and each other that we expect all students to learn at high levels?
2. Because we understand we cannot help all students learn without a collaborative and collective effort, our collective inquiry should explore the following questions.
- a. Are all staff members assigned to a collaborative team whose members are working interdependently

- to achieve a common SMART goal for which they are mutually accountable?
- b. Have we provided teams with adequate time to meet? What strategies could we explore for providing more time for collaboration?
 - c. What evidence do we have that teams are focusing on the right things—the issues that can have the greatest impact on student learning?
 - d. What resources and support do our collaborative teams need to develop their capacity to improve student achievement?
 - e. Have we provided parents with the resources, tools, and timely information that enable them to be partners in the education of their children?
3. Because we recognize our collective efforts must be assessed on results rather than activities, our collective inquiry should explore the following questions.
- a. What evidence do we have that our curriculum, instruction, and assessments are preparing all our students for success on the high-stakes tests they are expected to take?
 - b. What evidence do we have that our curriculum, instruction, and assessments have prepared all our students for success at the next level, even after they have left our school?
 - c. Is every member of the staff aware of last year's results on local, state, and national indicators of student achievement for his or her team and for the school in general?
 - d. Are the members of every team aware of our school goals and clear on how their team is contributing to achieving those goals?

- e. Are we providing every teacher and every team with ongoing and timely information about results, and are they able to use that information to improve their individual and collective practice? How do we know?
- f. What evidence do we have that we are more effective in helping students learn today than we have been in the past?
- g. Are we making decisions based on evidence rather than on conjecture or appeals to mindless precedent?

Research on the principalship consistently describes the most effective principals as instructional leaders—a responsibility which adds significant additional responsibility in curriculum and instruction, compared to the role of a school manager (Hallinger, 2007). We advocate for a new image. Schools do not need instructional leaders; they need *learning leaders*—leaders fixated on evidence of learning (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). When principals use the questions presented here to drive a school, they move the conversation from *What was taught?* or *How was it taught?* to the far more important questions of *Was it learned?* and *How can we use evidence of learning to strengthen our professional practice?*

This shift in focus will impact the day-to-day work of the principal in significant ways. For example, the formal teacher supervision and evaluation process used in most schools is grounded in the assumptions of traditional bureaucracy—supervisors must monitor and inspect the work of subordinates to ensure the school meets standards. In this traditional model, it is assumed that teachers only have *regular* vision; therefore, we need principals with *super* vision to monitor and improve their practice. Thus, principals should conduct both frequent walkthroughs of classrooms as well as lengthier classroom observations to gather information to use in the formal evaluations of teachers. A second assumption that drives this process is the notion that principals should improve their schools one teacher at a time

because, once again, a school is nothing more than a series of independent classrooms.

We believe principals should devote considerable time observing the classrooms of teachers new to the building to provide those teachers with support, assist in their orientation to the school, and communicate what the school values. We recognize there are benefits to principals meeting with individual teachers to discuss curriculum and instruction, and the classroom supervision process provides a venue for that discussion. We understand most districts and states require some form of formal classroom observations of teachers on a periodic basis, and we think the clinical supervision model provides the best format for that task. We have high regard for the work of Charlotte Danielson (2007) and believe she provides an important framework for analysis of and dialogue about teaching. Nevertheless, we submit the following hard facts that we contend represent the norm for most formal teacher-evaluation processes.

- Although one of the stated purposes of teacher evaluation is to identify and remediate unsatisfactory performance, it is an extremely rare occurrence for a teacher to be designated as unsatisfactory because of his or her classroom teaching. As of 2017, only two U.S. states, Nevada and New York, consider ineffective classroom performance as a grounds for teacher termination (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2017).
- Teachers who do receive an evaluation they consider to be negative are unlikely to be receptive to the feedback. They are far more likely to attribute a poor evaluation to personality conflicts with the principal or the principal's subjectivity or lack of understanding than to weaknesses in their instruction. After all, previous principals found them to be satisfactory, if not exemplary (Paufler, 2018).
- Middle and high school principals could not possibly have sufficient content expertise in all subject areas to provide a valid assessment of a teacher's instruction. Although they

may focus on general teaching strategies, they would be hard pressed to determine the rigor, relevance, or clarity of the content being taught in courses ranging from foreign languages, to advanced calculus, to construction trades (Shaked, 2018).

- Even if a principal is able to help an individual teacher develop or improve an instructional strategy, the improvement does not necessarily improve the school because, once again, individual development does not guarantee organizational improvement (Fancera, 2016).
- The hours principals devote to formal teacher evaluation contribute little to the overall improvement of a school (Forman & Markson, 2015). Principal evaluation of teachers is a low-leverage strategy for improving schools, particularly in terms of the time it requires of principals.

Assume a well-intentioned principal devotes 120 hours per year to classroom walkthroughs, preobservation conferences, formal observations, postobservation conferences, write-ups, and conversations associated with teacher evaluation. This is a conservative figure requiring the principal to devote less than 4 hours per week to the task. Now assume that same principal dedicates those 120 hours to working with staff members to develop their capacity to contribute to their collaborative teams, removing obstacles from their collaboration, and ensuring they have the training and support they need to become high-performing teams. As a result of this process, each teacher becomes more certain regarding what students must learn and how students will demonstrate their learning. Each teacher receives evidence of his or her students' learning multiple times throughout the year and is able to consider the extent of their learning compared to the other students attempting to achieve the same standard. Each week teachers are provided with time to meet with colleagues who teach the same content and solicit their help in addressing areas of concern. Which of these strategies—individual teacher evaluation or building the capacity of collaborative teams—more aligns with the

ideas that our school is committed to learning rather than teaching, that we must work collaboratively and collectively to help all students learn, and that we must be hungry for evidence of student learning and use it as part of a continuous improvement cycle? Which of these strategies is more likely to be effective in persuading a teacher to re-examine his or her practice—a judgment about instruction following a single classroom observation or clear evidence his or her students did not learn compared to similar students who did? Which strategy is more likely to result in content-based, instructionally focused discourse? Which strategy reflects more of a commitment to widely dispersed leadership based on expertise rather than authoritarian leadership based on position? Most important, which of these strategies is more likely to have a positive impact on student and adult learning?

Fullan (2007) argues that although the demands on and expectations for principals have increased dramatically, little has been removed from their plates. We concur, and suggest it is time to remove low-leverage but high-time tasks from the principalship. Teacher supervision and evaluation are some of those tasks. If principals cannot be relieved of the task, they should fulfill their state and district's minimum requirement and devote their efforts and energy to more high-leverage strategies for improving their schools.

A New Image of Leadership

The idea of the charismatic individual principal who personally transforms a school must give way to a new image of leadership. Collins (2001) finds a negative correlation between charismatic leadership and sustained greatness in the organizations he studied. The most effective leaders focus on building the capacity of their organizations to improve continuously, on developing the next generations of leaders, and on ensuring the organization will continue to thrive long after they are gone (Collins, 2001). Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) arrive at a similar conclusion, asserting leaders have the most positive impact when they focus on developing systems, teams, and cultures to ensure

the ongoing success of the organization. These leaders view their jobs as establishing the conditions and preconditions for others to succeed.

Principals who hope to leave a positive legacy in their schools must recognize their effectiveness as leaders will be determined *after* they have left their schools. Educators have come to equate changes in leadership with changes in direction. As a result, they approach every initiative by every new principal with an air of resignation—a “this too shall pass” mentality. But a change in leadership need not result in a change in direction if (1) the initiative has been grounded in effective improvement processes and systems rather than on a charismatic individual, and (2) leaders have been developed throughout the organization to sustain those processes. Fullan and colleagues (2004) put it best when they say, “The main mark of an effective principal is not just his or her impact on the bottom line of student achievement but also *how many leaders he or she leaves behind who can go even further*” (p. 31).

Engaging people in the pursuit of the right questions is a powerful way for principals to reveal their priorities and give direction to people throughout the school. We offer additional strategies in chapter 9 (page 259) for the central office, where leaders also face the challenge of clarifying and communicating priorities.

While we have repeatedly stressed the need for shared leadership in a PLC, it is important to recognize that there are some leadership responsibilities best achieved by the principal. In chapter 2, we shared that a leader’s ability to influence others lies in his or her ability to understand and meet four needs of others (Muhammad & Cruz, 2019).

1. Leaders must effectively communicate the rationale—the *why* of the work.
2. Leaders must effectively establish trust—the *who* of the work.
3. Leaders must effectively build capacity—the *how* of the work.
4. Leaders must get results—the *do* of the work.

While the first three needs are best addressed through shared leadership, there will undoubtedly be times in which the staff have built

consensus on the right work, but some individuals will—overtly or passively—refuse to participate and adhere to the faculty's collective commitments. Teacher leaders can try to persuade resistant colleagues to change their ways, but they do not have the authority to require commitment. At the site level, only the principal has the positional power to demand full participation—to hold members accountable to the right work. We have found that principals who do not effectively confront such resistance, and instead choose to tolerate violations to the school's core mission and values, ultimately lose the trust of the staff that have committed to the process.

We close this chapter, however, with advice from the field. We asked principals who are developing some of the most effective PLCs in the United States to share their insights on keys to the principalship.

Regina Owens, Former Principal of Spring Virtual School, Spring, Texas

Utilizing the PLC at Work process in brick-and-mortar and virtual learning environments presents many challenges and opportunities. I led a physical school building in implementing the PLC process—Spring Early College Academy in Spring, Texas—and a virtual school in the same district—Spring Virtual Academy. One of the most essential takeaways from leading this process at a traditional and virtual school is that change is *inevitable*, but growth is *intentional*. Traditional brick-and-mortar schools enjoy the benefit of educators working in close proximity to one another, but physical walls can also promote personal isolation. A virtual school does not enjoy close professional physical proximity, but technology provides an opportunity to collaborate for those truly committed to working together. Circumstances are not as influential as a strong common commitment to collaborate.

PLC at Work is not a process with a list of items we can check off when done. Simply placing educators on teams, having them submit agendas, giving formative assessments, and adding interventions in the schedule do not make a PLC. These actions create change but unfortunately do not always result in forward momentum.

Leaders must become acutely aware that PLC at Work is an innovative process with systems and structures—a process that leads to transformation. Leaders must know the specific stage their PLC is in, the specific steps to take next, and the success criteria by which they will measure effectiveness. The system must produce growth in educators evidenced in student performance. For some, becoming a PLC has become a way to increase test scores, but it is so much more. In a PLC, forward momentum is generated from collective inquiry, increased intelligence, and learning being leveraged across the community. As the professionals grow and work together interdependently, they generate momentum with their desire to learn, know, and improve, moving forward toward a future of continuous learning.

As a leader, I offer this simple advice: (1) manage the process, (2) coach the people, and (3) expect evidence of continuous learning. (R. Owens, personal communication, 2020)

Joe Cuddeemi, Former Principal of Kinard Core Knowledge Middle School, Fort Collins, Colorado

One would be hard pressed to find a school achieving high levels of growth for all students without a principal who has a deep understanding and commitment to the PLC at Work process. I learned this firsthand during my first five years as principal at Kinard Core Knowledge Middle School in Colorado. During this time, I read a few books about PLCs, and in my mind, became an instant expert. I tweaked the master schedule, organizing teachers into teams and carving out time during the school day for interventions, but nothing changed. We saw no gains in student achievement; it was business as usual, but with a different schedule.

A remarkable shift occurred after I attended my first PLC at Work Institute. I participated in a session for principals led by Rick DuFour, titled, “Do You Want to Settle or Soar?” In this session, I learned there are no shortcuts for ensuring high levels of learning for all students, and the principal’s role in transforming a traditional school into a PLC requires leading the staff through significant cultural change. For the next three years, the Kinard staff confronted the question of

whether our fundamental purpose was to merely get along with one another or to persist in doing the right work for our students.

Our PLC journey was nonlinear; however, our student growth increased dramatically, and we received recognition as a Model PLC school. We learned that it was no longer about *who* is right, but about doing the right work, collectively. (J. Cuddemi, personal communication, 2020)

Jasmine Kullar, Former Principal of Northwestern Middle School, Alpharetta, Georgia

I was very fortunate to be introduced to PLCs as a first-year teacher in 2000, when my principal required staff to read the book *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). She took several of us to hear Rick DuFour speak, including my collaborative team of four teachers. We came back from the professional development excited and committed to the PLC at Work process. We were determined to begin our journey, and I was fortunate to experience the power of PLCs firsthand as a classroom teacher.

Eleven years later, when I became a middle school principal, I had an opportunity to lead the journey of PLC transformation from a different role. Little did I know at that time how much more difficult it would be to lead the process. As a teacher, it was straightforward: there were four of us on a team collaborating consistently on the right work and ensuring all our students were getting the support and extensions they needed based on evidence gathered from our deep engagement in the PLC at Work process. But as a principal, I had a staff of almost one hundred teachers whom I had to inspire and convince that this commitment to PLCs was the *right* work. As a principal, I had to identify the current policies and practices hindering student achievement and facilitate change. I also had to be the *teacher of teachers*, set the mission and vision for our school, and ensure we lived that mission as a school. When the reality of this sunk in, I didn't know where to start, but one thing was crystal clear: our journey consisted of the following four critical strategies.

1. Build shared capacity and shared leadership.
2. Create the conditions that produce and protect a collaborative culture.
3. Ensure that all resources, structures, and practices focus on student learning.
4. Monitor progress, but exercise patience.

Three assistant principals and approximately fifteen teachers made up our school's instructional leadership team—my coleaders on the journey. My first meeting with this team taught me a lesson I would never forget. As I was about to begin the meeting, I saw everyone with their yellow notepads, ready to take notes that they would share back to their teams. In that moment, I realized leaders often throw teachers into leadership roles but never actually teach them how to lead. So, we did an activity where I asked them to think about a great leader they have worked under (without mentioning names); we posted characteristics of those leaders on chart paper. Then, I asked them to think about a poor leader they have worked under (again, without mentioning names). We posted those characteristics on different chart paper. As we looked at both papers, I asked everyone to reflect on their own leadership qualities. “What are your strengths?” and “What are your areas for growth?” This activity set the tone for our meetings for the entire year. After doing several other leadership self-assessments as a team, we created a professional learning plan focused on just leadership skills. These included skills like how to have tough conversations with colleagues, how to lead meetings, how to present, and how to facilitate change in your department. The purpose was to help build their leadership skills so I would have not just three assistant principals, but instead almost twenty.

Simultaneously, I worked with the entire staff to refine our vision, mission, and collective commitments and slowly began introducing the work of PLCs. I was fortunate that the principal prior to me had already laid some of the groundwork. Teachers had common planning times, they were giving common assessments, and they were

collaborating and providing interventions and enrichments—I just had to take it further. We then began dissecting each big idea of a PLC.

One of the most difficult changes was shifting our culture to focus on learning instead of teaching. We had to examine which practices hindered student learning, and there were many, including grading, our intervention structure, how we made decisions about teaching assignments, and many more. We examined each of these practices with a focus on student learning. How could we change these practices so they would promote student learning instead of maintaining the status quo or keeping adults in the school happy?

We also focused on strengthening our collaboration culture. We found that we lacked clarity. Teachers were collaborating, but there wasn't any clarity on what exactly they were supposed to do. We began by creating schoolwide job descriptions for each role so everyone knew exactly what the responsibilities were for facilitators, recorders, data analysts, timekeepers, and so on. We had job-alike meetings with teachers in these roles four times a year in which we discussed the roles and how to overcome any challenges they were experiencing. This created another layer of collaboration as all the facilitators began to collaborate, all recorders, and so on. This helped build the capacity of all teachers as they had a better understanding of their role in collaborative meetings, which made the meetings more productive and efficient and more focused on the four critical questions of a PLC.

Finally, creating a results-oriented culture allowed us to openly discuss our collective impact on student learning. This was not easy because our teachers were uncomfortable with the evidence of their students' performance being a topic of collective discussion, and at times teachers reacted very defensively. This shift to a results orientation took time. As teachers observed data being used to stimulate discussion about improvement and collective action (as opposed to penalty), they relaxed and became open to the process. We were all in this together to examine the best ways to ensure all students were

learning at high levels. This trust did not come immediately; it developed throughout our PLC journey.

These changes I describe did not happen in one year. Changing a culture takes time. These were just some of our initial changes we focused on as we began our journey to becoming a PLC. Throughout our journey, we never forgot the importance of professional learning, and of supporting teachers by giving them the tools, knowledge, and resources to do the right work. We never forgot the importance of clarity with expectations, and what to be tight on versus what to be loose on. We never forgot the importance of monitoring expectations for teachers. But most important, we never forgot our mission: to ensure all students learn at high levels. (J. Kullar, personal communication, 2020)

Clarity and Coherence

Although these principals offer different perspectives on the principalship in a PLC, they are united by several common characteristics. They define the purpose of their school as ensuring learning for all students, and they insist the practices of the school align with that purpose. They recognize it takes a collective effort to ensure all students learn, and thus they foster both a collaborative culture and widely dispersed leadership. Finally, their intense focus on student learning and insistence that the school gather and act on evidence of that learning contribute to clarity and coherence for their staff. There is no ambiguity about priorities in their schools.

If effective site leadership is essential to becoming a PLC, then certainly effective leadership at the district or provincial level is equally important. In the next chapter, we dig deeper into the role of the superintendent and the central office in a PLC.



CHAPTER 9

The Role of the Superintendent and the Central Office in a PLC

Major change almost never wells up from the bottom. It begins near the top (and if not, it almost never takes hold without strong backing from the top). It typically starts with a key leader and a small core of people who care strongly about a particular solution to a problem. It spreads out from there. As the process unfolds, the need for pressure and support requires the assertion of executive influence. . . . Authentic leaders develop and maintain their capacity to apply top-down influence.

—ROBERT EVANS

Research findings from the 1970s are clear; the teacher to whom a student is assigned has a significant impact on student achievement. In the 1980s, research interests shifted to the role the individual school played in student success. Effective schools researchers argued that the individual school should serve as the primary unit of change in school-improvement efforts. Consequently, the role of the central office in improving student learning went largely unexamined. This began to change in the early 2000s. If the teacher they are assigned to impacts students, and the building principal heavily influences teachers, the logical extension is the superintendent and central office staff are a powerful determinant of school effectiveness.

Lezotte (2011), one of the leading proponents of the research on effective schools, recognizes the important role district leadership plays in creating and sustaining effective schools, noting that increased student achievement can only be *sustained* with strong district support. Additional research reveals “a statistically significant relationship between district leadership and student achievement” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 3). Considerable attention is now being paid to the important role the superintendent and the central office can play in school improvement, and recommendations regarding how central office leaders can best fulfill that role have become more explicit. For example, Lezotte (2011) observes, “If creating and maintaining schools as effective isn’t a districtwide priority, the school will likely not be able to maintain its effectiveness” (p. 15). DuFour and Fullan (2013) emphasize the importance of districtwide leadership when they write, “We embrace the premise that districts can support and sustain higher levels of learning throughout *all* of their schools, not only because of the research base, but also because we have repeatedly witnessed it in the real world of education” (p. 6). And, as Chenoweth (2015) notes, “School districts share the conditions in which schools operate and as such can support or undermine school success and thus student success. All of which is to say—to steal a phrase—school districts matter” (p. 14).

One review of research studies conducted since 1990 (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004) identifies common themes in the recommendations for district leaders, clustering them into four broad categories.

1. Ensure quality teaching and learning through coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment, coordinated and embedded professional development, and quality classroom instruction.
2. Provide effective leadership by establishing high expectations focused on learning goals and eliminating distractions, and competing programs. Provide stable leadership to sustain improvement programs until they are institutionalized.

3. Develop support for systemwide improvement through timely use of data from a variety of sources. Provide the technological infrastructure, the training, and the time for teachers to delve into the data to inform their practice.
4. Promote clear, collaborative relationships by ensuring understanding of school and district roles with a balance between autonomy and control. Nurture a professional culture and collaborative relationships. Manage the impact of the external environment on schools.

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform conducted its own review of the research and concludes that districts should do the following six things to support school improvement (as cited in Appelbaum, 2002).

1. Remove competing programs and requirements.
2. Empower schools to make decisions.
3. Build links between state standards and accountability measures, the district curriculum, and the improvement initiative at the school level.
4. Create a network of schools engaged in the improvement initiative so they can learn from one another.
5. Assist schools in gathering and using data.
6. Provide each school with a district-level liaison who understands the improvement model.

In 2006, Steve Anderson reported research that identifies twelve keys to district support for school improvement (as cited in Fullan, 2007):

1. A districtwide sense of efficacy
2. A districtwide focus on student achievement and the quality of instruction
3. Adoption of and commitment to districtwide performance standards
4. Development and adoption of districtwide curricula and approaches to instruction

5. Alignment of curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and assessment to relevant standards
6. Multi-measure accountability systems and systemwide use of data to inform practice, hold school and district leaders accountable for results, and monitor progress
7. Use of targets and phased-in focuses of improvement
8. Investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district levels
9. A focus on districtwide, job-embedded professional development and support for teachers
10. A districtwide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community (including, in several cases, positive partnerships with unions)
11. New approaches to board-district relations and in-district relations
12. Strategic relations with state reform policies and resources (pp. 214–215)

Researchers Timothy J. Waters and Robert J. Marzano's (2006) meta-analysis of the research led them to conclude superintendents have a significant impact on student achievement when they focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts using the following strategies.

1. Using collaborative goal setting that engages multiple constituencies in establishing student-achievement goals for the district and for each school
 2. Identifying non-negotiable goals (that is, goals all staff members must act on) in at least two areas: specific student-achievement targets for each school and use of research-based instructional strategies for each classroom.
- The authors clarify that the instructional goal does *not*:

Mean a single instructional model that all teachers were required to employ. It did, however, mean that the district adopted a broad but common framework for classroom instructional design and planning, common instructional language or vocabulary, and consistent use of research-based instructional strategies in each school. (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 13)

3. Securing the support of the board of education for district goals
4. Monitoring district goals on an ongoing basis
5. Providing resources—time, money, training, personnel, and materials—to support the goals

DuFour and Fullan (2013) note the role of the district office in improving student achievement across an entire system. They observe, “In each case, district leaders maintained a commitment to and focus on building the individual and collective capacity of educators throughout the district” (p. 6). DuFour and Marzano (2011) emphasize the importance of district leadership, writing, “Leadership from the central office matters—both in terms of raising student achievement and in terms of creating the conditions for adult learning that lead to higher levels of student achievement” (p. 45).

Despite all this advice, district-level leaders still often lack a clear understanding of how to provide the systematic support to implement and sustain PLCs (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, n.d.). The appropriate delivery of central office support for improvement at the local school site remains a matter of considerable confusion and contention.

Is There a Place for Top-Down Leadership?

We have noticed an interesting phenomenon when we work with educators on strategies to improve student achievement in their buildings. They sometimes confide in us that the central office has issued a *top-down mandate* requiring all schools to embrace and model certain key concepts and practices. The term *top-down* is uttered with disdain, with the assumption that we will be appalled by this affront to the autonomy of educators. After all, is there not ample evidence that top-down improvement does not work (Fullan, 2007; Tyack & Cuban, 1995)? Is it not clear that improvement initiatives will fail unless there is buy-in, a willingness of those engaged in the initiative to rally around it? Have researchers not warned that without this

buy-in, leaders will only generate resentful compliance that dooms the initiative to failure (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006)? Shouldn't the people closest to the action, those at the school site, decide the direction of their schools?

In the ongoing debate over the efficacy of strategies to improve school districts—top down versus bottom up—it is apparent that top down is losing. We have encountered many district leaders who are reluctant to champion improvement for fear of being labeled with the epithet *top-down leader*—the unkindest cut of all.

The glib advice given to superintendents who actually hope to improve their schools is they must simply build widespread consensus for a concept or initiative before proceeding. But what happens when a well-intentioned leader does everything right—engages staff members in the consideration of a change initiative and presents a compelling case for moving forward—and the staff still prefer the status quo? And what if the initiative clearly and unquestionably represents a better way of operating than what currently is in place? Is the laissez-faire leadership of simply allowing people to do as they wish really the only alternative when collective inquiry, persuasion, and attempts at building consensus fail to stir people to act in new ways?

The tension regarding “who decides who decides” how (or even if) a school will be improved ignores a more central issue: *Does professional autonomy extend to the freedom to disregard what is widely considered to be best practice in one’s field?* We suggest educators have danced around this question rather than addressing it, and their inattention to the issue has fostered an unhealthy and unrealistic sense of what constitutes professional autonomy. District leaders have contributed to this peculiar view of professionalism because they have allowed teachers and principals the discretion to ignore even the most widely recognized best practices of the profession.

There is considerable evidence that leaving the issue of school improvement to each school to resolve on its own does not result in

more effective schools (Elmore, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Schlechty, 2005). Therefore, leaders who create schools and districts capable of sustained, substantive improvement are not laissez-faire in their approach to education. As we have advocated for repeatedly throughout this book, they are skillful at using the concept of simultaneous loose and tight leadership—and thus can foster autonomy and creativity (loose) within a systematic framework that stipulates clear, nondiscretionary priorities and parameters (tight). Waters and Marzano (2006) refer to this concept as *defined autonomy* and find that superintendents who have a positive impact on student achievement are very directive in specifying achievement goals and expectations at the same time they provide school leadership teams with autonomy and authority for determining how to meet those goals.

Tight About What?

Of course, the key to effective loose-tight leadership is getting tight about the right things. The standard must rest on compelling evidence of best practice, instead of personal preference. Loose-tight leadership calls on leaders to exercise wisdom, which Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) describe as “knowing what you know and knowing what you don’t know . . . striking a balance between arrogance (assuming you know more than you do) and insecurity (believing that you know too little to act)” (p. 52). Wisdom enables people to act on current knowledge while they remain open to new knowledge, ideas, and insights. *Wisdom* “means they can do things now and keep learning along the way” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 53).

There is compelling evidence that some conditions in education are more effective than others for improving student learning (see table 9.1, page 266). When education leaders are aware of this evidence, they must act on what they know at the same time they remain open to promising new ideas. They must close the knowing-doing gap.

Table 9.1: Conditions in Education That Impact Student Learning

Conditions That Promote Student Learning at Higher Levels	Conditions That Have an Adverse Impact on Student Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers focus on learning rather than on teaching. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers define their role as teaching, regardless of whether students learn.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers are so clear about the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions students must acquire that they have created a guaranteed and viable curriculum aligned with district and state standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What students learn in any course or grade level depends on the teacher to whom they are assigned.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student learning is monitored both through ongoing and varied checks for understanding each day in individual classrooms as well as through frequent common formative assessments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers and administrators use only summative assessments to measure student learning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students understand the learning targets they are expected to achieve, and the criteria used to monitor the quality of their work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are unclear regarding what they are to learn and guess about how their learning will be assessed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools create and implement plans to provide students with additional time and support for learning in a timely, directive, and systematic way when students have difficulty in mastering essential learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What happens when students do not learn depends on the teacher to whom they are assigned.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools have systems in place to extend and enrich the learning for students who are proficient. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The curriculum moves at a lockstep pace regardless of the degree of student proficiency.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers work together collaboratively on matters directly related to quality teaching and learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers work in isolation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers use evidence of student learning to establish SMART goals as part of an embedded continuous improvement process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School improvement focuses on completion of projects rather than evidence of student learning.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">Teachers receive timely information about the learning of their students compared to other similar students, and then they work with their colleagues to build on their strengths and to address their weaknesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Teachers receive data that do not inform their practice.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Teachers communicate high expectations for student achievement, conveying both their conviction that students will be successful if they work hard and their willingness to help students until they are successful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students believe their learning depends on their innate ability rather than their willingness to work at learning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">The staff make a concerted and continuous effort to ensure the practices of the school support and encourage student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Appeals to “mindless precedent” sustain ineffective practices and procedures that interfere with learning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Parents are given timely information about the learning of their children and are provided with multiple avenues for becoming partners in their children’s education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Parents are not informed regarding their children and play no role in promoting their education.

We know schools characterized by the conditions in the left column of table 9.1 are more likely to promote higher levels of learning than schools defined by the conditions in the right column. District leaders cannot be indifferent to the presence of conditions in their schools that have an adverse impact on student learning. They must establish clear expectations for improvement for the principals and staff of every school. District leaders who frame their loose-tight leadership with the big ideas of a PLC might establish such expectations by including the message in the feature box on page 268 as the introduction to the school board policy manual, the faculty manual, and the job description of each principal. More important, they would communicate the message on a daily basis through both their words and actions.

A COMMITMENT TO LEARNING FOR ALL

We know the purpose of our schools is to ensure all our students learn at high levels, and certain things should happen in each school to demonstrate our commitment to that purpose. Systems must be in place to ensure the following.

1. Each teacher is clear on and committed to teaching the knowledge, skills, and dispositions all students must learn for every unit of instruction.
2. Common formative assessments provide every teacher with frequent information regarding the learning of each student.
3. The school provides students who experience difficulty with additional time and support for learning in a timely, directive, and systematic way.
4. The school has a plan to extend and enrich the learning for students who are proficient.
5. Students understand what they must learn, and the criteria teachers will use to assess their work.
6. The school has examined its procedures and practices to ensure it promotes rather than impedes learning for all.

A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

Our schools will organize into collaborative teams of professionals who work together interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable. Staff in our district will not work in isolation. The school will empower teams to make important decisions regarding curricula, pacing, instruction, and assessment, but they must make those decisions collaboratively and collectively rather than in isolation, and they must build shared knowledge of the most effective practices—rather than pooling opinions—before arriving at a decision.

A FOCUS ON RESULTS

We will assess our effectiveness based on evidence of results. To foster this results orientation, every school and every collaborative team within the school will be expected to create a SMART

goal aligned with one or more of the district's goals. Every school will have systems in place to provide each teacher with timely feedback about the success of his or her students in meeting the agreed-on learning standards on a valid common assessment in comparison to all other students in the course or grade level who are attempting to achieve the same standard. Every teacher and team will be expected to use results to inform and impact their professional practice, guide the process of continuous improvement, and facilitate continuous adult learning.

Although these characteristics should be evident in each school, we also will extend considerable autonomy to each site and to teams within the school as they move forward with implementation. Each team can clarify the essential learnings of the district curriculum and determine how its members will pace content. Each team will create its own common formative assessments. The system of intervention and enrichment may vary from school to school. How teams organize, when they meet, the norms they establish, and the goals they pursue may differ from one school to the next. We hope to encourage diversity in instructional techniques so individual teachers have the autonomy to use the strategies they feel are most effective for them, as long as they can demonstrate those strategies lead to good results. Teams will determine the focus of members' professional development, and they will have the opportunity to learn and grow as part of their routine work practices.

We expect to see these practices in all our schools because they are supported by research, proven to be effective, and endorsed by our professional organizations. Most important, they pass the test of common sense. So how can we at the district office help to create these conditions in your school?

Advice on Being Tight

Even leaders who recognize the need to be tight about the key conditions that promote student and adult learning can be ineffective in conveying the message and implementing the processes to foster those conditions. Appreciating the significance of the concept of loose-tight leadership does not ensure skillfulness in applying the concept. We

offer the following four keys to help leaders at the district level employ this powerful tool for shaping culture.

Key 1: District Leaders Must Use Every Aspect of an Effective Change Process and Present a Compelling Rationale for Moving Forward

Being tight does not absolve a leader from the responsibility of building consensus when they ask people to change their practice. In chapter 3 (page 61), we presented a list of mistakes leaders make when attempting to build consensus for change: they attempt to go it alone rather than build a guiding coalition, they use a forum ill-suited to the dialogue necessary to build consensus, they present or pool opinions rather than build shared knowledge, they allow for ambiguity about the standard instead of moving forward, or they set an unrealistic standard for action. Effective leaders address these mistakes by using the strategies also presented in chapter 3.

Effective leaders also encourage—rather than ignore or squash—disagreements because they recognize that when managed well, disagreements provide an opportunity to draw out staff members' assumptions, build shared knowledge, clarify priorities, and find common ground. They listen intently and respond to concerns. They recognize more than one way to solve a problem and are open to exploring alternative strategies or timelines for implementation. They are willing to compromise on details while adhering tightly to core principles.

Central office leaders can use several different strategies in their efforts to persuade staff of the benefits of an improvement initiative. Gardner (2004) offers seven strategies for changing someone's mind (including your own).

1. **Reasoning and rational thinking:** “Doesn’t it make sense that we can accomplish more by working together collaboratively than we can in isolation, by checking for student understanding through formative assessments rather than by waiting for the results of summative assessments, by creating timely schoolwide systematic

interventions when students experience difficulty rather than by expecting each teacher to try to figure out how to respond?”

2. **Research:** “I have shared the research with you that supports this initiative. I found it very compelling. Do you interpret the research another way? Do you have any contradictory research we could look at together?”
3. **Resonance:** “I know you believe in equity and fairness. Wouldn’t it be more equitable and fair if we could assure students they will have access to the same guaranteed curriculum no matter who their teacher is, that their work will be assessed according to the same criteria, and that we have a consistent way of responding when they struggle to learn? Shouldn’t we model the equity and fairness we say are important to us?”
4. **Representational re-description:** “I have presented you with the data regarding the large numbers of our students who are unsuccessful. Now let me put those numbers in human terms. Let me tell you some stories of the impact their failure to learn is having on their lives.”
5. **Rewards and resources:** “I acknowledge this will be difficult. That is why I ask your help in identifying the resources you will need to be successful: time, training, materials support, and so on. Let’s work together to identify the necessary resources, and I pledge I will do everything in my power to make them available.”
6. **Real-world events:** “I understand you have misgivings and predict negative consequences if we implement this initiative. But let’s visit some schools and districts that have done it successfully. You will hear the enthusiasm of the teachers as they explain how they and their students have benefited.”

7. **Require:** “I understand you remain unconvinced, but this is the direction we are going, and this is what you must do to help us get there. I hope you will have a good experience as you work through the process, and I hope you will come to have a more positive disposition toward it.”

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler (2008) also offer insights into changing the mind and the behavior of others in *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything*. Patterson and colleagues (2008) contend the issue of persuading someone to change comes down to two essential questions: Is it worth it (is the change worthwhile or desirable)? and Can I do it (is the change feasible)? They then offer recommendations in three areas—personal, social, and structural—taken from research in psychology, social psychology, and organizational theory for each of the two questions to establish six sources of influence (Patterson et al., 2008).

1. **Influence personal motivation:** Patterson and colleagues (2008) contend that verbal persuasion rarely works against resisters who “don’t merely believe you are wrong; they need you to be wrong to preserve the status quo. And since the final judge exists in their own head, you lose every time” (p. 51). Their advice is emphatic: “*The great persuader is personal experience . . . the mother of all cognitive map changes*” (p. 51) and “*the gold standard of change*” (Patterson et al., 2008, p. 57). They call for field trips to help people see the benefits of the behavior in the real world. If field trips are not possible, they suggest leaders create “vicarious experiences” through vibrant, credible stories and compelling testimonials. As they write, “A well-told narrative . . . changes people’s view of how the world works because it presents a plausible, touching, and memorable flow of cause and effect that can alter people’s view of the consequences of various actions or beliefs” (Patterson et al., 2008, p. 59). A

powerful story, one that evokes empathy, can help move a person from the role of critic to the role of participant. Ultimately, like so many others who examine the change process, Patterson and colleagues (2008) contend that commitment to change follows rather than precedes new behavior. Thus, the task of the change leader is to immerse people in the new activity to create new personal experiences.

Leaders can also influence others when they create new motives. Patterson and colleagues (2008) caution leaders to fight against all forms of moral disengagement such as justification ("We can't expect these kids to learn given their socioeconomic status") or displaced responsibility ("I taught it; it is their job to learn it"), and to connect the new behavior to a resister's sense of values. This does not mean being preachy or judgmental. It means talking, and more importantly, listening to others to discover what they want and reframing the change so it links to a person's image of his or her higher self—the person he or she wants to be. It also means focusing on the human rather than the statistical consequences of failure to change (for example, stories of specific students rather than last year's test results) and helping people take their eyes off their immediate demands to view the change as a personally defining moment within a larger moral issue. Learning by doing, seeking to understand through dialogue, and linking ideas to moral purpose are advice that should sound familiar to students of the PLC concept.

2. **Enhance the personal ability of others:** Because one of the pressing issues on the mind of someone being asked to change is "Can I do it?", effective leaders can help build capacity to build confidence. They set aside time for people to practice new vital behaviors. *Deliberate practice*

is a critical element of this task. Deliberate practice requires complete attention, provides immediate feedback against a clear standard, and breaks mastery into several specific minigoals.

The concept of deliberate practice has significant implications for school leaders. It calls on them to clarify the high-leverage vital behaviors that improve teaching and learning. It means providing educators with very focused training in those behaviors over an extended period of time rather than offering the short-term, disjointed potpourri of offerings that characterizes professional development in so many districts. It then requires giving people time to practice with immediate and specific feedback against a clear standard.

Deliberate practice calls for breaking complex skills and behaviors into short-term goals. Finally, it demands an organizational commitment to learning by doing. Patterson and colleagues (2008) stress the difference between *knowing* and *doing* and urge leaders to over-invest in strategies that call on people to learn skills by practicing the skills.

3. **Harness the power of peer pressure:** Patterson and colleagues (2008) contend that “no resource is more powerful and accessible” than the power of peer influence, and the most effective leaders “embrace and enlist” that power rather than “denying, lamenting, or attacking it” (p. 138). Effective leaders strive to create an environment where both formal and informal leaders constantly promote behavior essential to the change and skillfully confront behaviors misaligned with the change.

One strategy for creating such an environment is identifying and enlisting the support of the organization’s *opinion leaders*—people who are considered knowledgeable, trustworthy, and generous with their time. Opinion leaders, who make up about 15 percent

of the people in the organization, are socially connected and respected. Most importantly, “the rest of the population—over 85%—won’t adopt the new practices *until opinion leaders do*” (Patterson et al., 2008, p. 148). Patterson and colleagues (2008) insist it is not the merits of an idea that will determine its adoption but rather whether the opinion leaders endorse it. They conclude leaders should not worry about convincing everyone at once. Leaders must, however, spend disproportionate amounts of time with opinion leaders, establish open and trusting relationships, be amenable to their ideas, and call on them for support. Finally, Patterson and colleagues (2008) caution that opinion leaders are not necessarily people with titles, nor are they people who jump immediately to embrace every new initiative. They can be identified simply by asking people throughout the organization who they believe are the most influential and respected people among their peers. Those whose names show up consistently are the opinion leaders.

Another strategy Patterson and colleagues (2008) recommend for bringing about changes in behavior, particularly when the change seems in conflict with long-standing norms, is to “transform taboo subjects into a routine part of the public discourse” (p. 155) because “when you make the undiscussable discussable, you openly embrace rather than fight the power of social influence” (p. 160). We saw evidence of this in a workshop we conducted for all the teachers and administrators of an entire school district. At every break, participants would approach us privately to express their pessimism regarding implementing the PLC concept, not because of the merits of the concept, but because of the lingering resentment over the unrelated outcome of the contract negotiations completed six months earlier. Seventy percent of the teachers had voted to support the negotiated agreement,

but those who had opposed it were bitter regarding both the outcome and the negotiations process. They suggested that neither the board of education nor the leaders of their own teachers' association had acted in good faith, and they were angry with colleagues who supported the vote and their state association for not supporting their position. They warned us the bitterness was so pervasive that any attempt to implement any improvement initiative was likely to be sabotaged.

After listening to this consistent refrain during every breakout session for two days, we publicly suggested there was an “elephant in the room” we should address. We repeated the concerns expressed and proposed those concerns should be raised and resolved so the district could move forward rather than continue to focus on and complain about decisions made six months earlier. When we gave participants a few minutes to react to our observation, several came to us privately to express their outrage and offense that we had posed the issue for consideration. The palpable animosity swirling around the room was, in their minds, not discussable. But as Patterson and colleagues (2008) write, “It is silence about the norm of silence that sustains the norm. If you can’t talk about it, it will never go away” (p. 159). Changes in behavior will require changes in discourse, or as Kegan and Lahey (2001) put it, changing the way we talk can change the way we work.

4. **Find strength in numbers:** Patterson and colleagues (2008) define social capital as “*the profound enabling power of an essential network of relationships*” (p. 174). To build social capital and increase the likelihood of successful change, they recommend organizing people into interdependent teams where the success or failure of the group depends on contributions from each member (Patterson et al., 2008). When the organizational structure requires people to work together, share ideas

and materials, support one another in difficult moments, and contribute to collective goals, those people are more likely to hold one another accountable. The result is “synergy through non-voluntary interaction” (Patterson et al., 2008, p. 183).

Patterson and colleagues (2008) also call for structures that allow more experienced members or members with particular expertise to serve as coaches, mentors, and trainers to others in the organization. These structures allow members throughout the organization to receive real-time feedback from experts, which is, again, critical to changes in behavior.

The link between the recommendations of Patterson and colleagues (2008) in this area and our recommendations regarding school structures should be evident. When teachers work not in isolation but in *teams* (which we define as people working together interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are mutually accountable), we help build their social capital. When, through the use of common assessments, it becomes evident that one member of the team has expertise in teaching a particular skill, that member can serve as a coach who provides real-time feedback to his or her colleagues. As Patterson and colleagues (2008) report, social psychologists discovered long ago that we are far more likely to hold ourselves accountable if we are members of a group. Finally, their call for “synergy through non-voluntary interaction” echoes our assertion that “collaboration by invitation, won’t work!”

5. **Design rewards and demand accountability:** Patterson and colleagues (2008) emphasize that reward structures should be addressed only after considering other strategies to impact behavior such as intrinsic motivation and social support of peers. But effective leaders do use rewards, and when they do, they make certain the rewards are

directly linked to vital behaviors and valued processes. Patterson and colleagues (2008) advise leaders not to wait for phenomenal results, but to recognize and reward observable small improvement early in the change process because “even small rewards can be used to help people overcome some of the most profound and persistent problems” (p. 198). We will have a lot more to say about celebrating and rewarding small accomplishments in the final chapter.

An excellent example of this is the “A-Team Award” in the Bartow County School System. District leadership designed the award to honor teaching *teams* that exemplify the three main ideas of the system’s PLC culture: a focus on learning, collaboration, and results. When the superintendent, Phillip Page, presented Emerson Elementary first-grade teachers Suzanne Bennett, Chelsey Edgar, and Shelley Harger the district’s first-ever A-Team Award, he told them, “This is a very prestigious award that we now have in our school system. I don’t believe there’s a higher award that we will ever give in our school system. We’re proud to honor and recognize you” (Harris, 2020).

Patterson and colleagues (2008) remind leaders, however, that “punishment sends a message, and so does its absence—so choose wisely” (p. 210). Failure to address those who refuse to engage in the vital behaviors sends a loud message to others that the behaviors are not so vital after all. They recommend preceding punishment with a clear warning to an individual of what *will* happen if he or she continues with the unacceptable behavior (Patterson et al., 2008).

The point isn’t that people need to be threatened in order to perform. “The point is that if you aren’t willing to go to the mat when people violate a core value . . . that value loses its moral force in the organization. On the other

hand, you do send a powerful message when you hold employees accountable” (Patterson et al., 2008, p. 216).

Sounds a lot like the willingness to confront when people violate what we must be tight about, does it not?

6. **Alter the environment to support the change:** Patterson and colleagues (2008) argue that change in the structure and physical environment of an organization can make the right behavior easier and the wrong behavior more difficult. When the fundamental structure of the organization is the collaborative team, when time for collaboration is built into the weekly schedule, when members of a team work in close proximity to one another, they are far more likely to collaborate. As Patterson and colleagues (2008) write, “Often, all that is required to make good behavior inevitable is to structure it into your daily routine. If we have learned only one thing about today’s overscheduled world it is that structure drives out lack of structure” (p. 250). If one team seems toxic, leaders would change the environment by reorganizing teams and assigning toxic members to high-functioning teams.

Patterson and colleagues (2008) stress effective leaders also alter the environment by making sure vital information emerges from “dark nooks and crannies of the unknown into the light of day” (p. 230). They acknowledge that most organizations are awash in data. The challenge of leadership is not merely to pump out more data but to seek the kernels of gold, the critical data points that can change how people think and act (Patterson et al., 2008). Effective leaders understand the importance of making information visible, timely, accurate, and relevant. As they write, “Instead of falling victim to data, they manage data religiously” (Patterson et al., 2008, p. 232).

Finally, while each of these six strategies can help promote the vital behaviors, Patterson and colleagues (2008) argue the most effective

leaders use *all* the strategies in a continuous and comprehensive effort, rather than picking and choosing.

A comparison of these two extensive studies—Gardner (2004) and Patterson and colleagues (2008) in table 9.2 offers great consistency for those seeking strategies for changing the mind and behavior of others.

Notice neither Gardner (2004) nor Patterson and colleagues (2008) suggest leaders begin the process of persuasion with *require*. They are saying, however, leaders must be prepared to use that strategy if they are to bring about substantive change in their organizations. Psychologist Daniel Goleman (1998) came to the same conclusion. As Goleman (1998) writes:

Persuasion, consensus building, and all the other arts of influence don't always do the job. Sometimes it simply comes down to using the power of one's position to get people to act. A common failing of leaders . . . is the failure to be emphatically assertive when necessary.
(p. 190)

Effective leaders must recognize that school improvement cannot wait for everyone in the organization to have a favorable attitude toward the proposed change. As Robert Evans (1996) notes:

If innovation is merely offered as a suggestion or left as a voluntary initiative, it generally fails. . . . It is insufficient simply to wait for changes in belief to produce changes in behavior; one must insist on some of the latter as a way to foster some of the former. (p. 244)

There is abundant evidence in the fields of psychology, organizational development, and education that changes in attitudes follow rather than precede changes in behavior (Elmore, 2006; Fullan, 2007; Glasser, 1998; Kotter & Cohen, 2002; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Reeves, 2006). Remember the conclusion of Patterson and his colleagues (2008): "*The great persuader is personal experience . . . the mother of all cognitive map changes*" (p. 51). When work is designed to require people to act in new ways, new experiences are created for them. If those new experiences are positive, they can lead to new attitudes and assumptions over time.

Table 9.2: A Comparison of Strategies for Changing the Mind and Behavior of Others

Gardner's Advice (2004)	Patterson and Colleagues' Advice (2008)
• Reasoning and rational thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek to understand. Diagnose before you prescribe. Mine the data stream to present the hard, cold facts of actual real-life data.
• Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review research of best practice to identify vital behaviors and conduct action research to find the positive deviants.
• Resonance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect to individual values by linking ideas and behavior to the person an individual wants to be.
• Representational re-descriptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Move beyond data to stories. Create empathy.
• Rewards and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use rewards after addressing intrinsic motivation and social supports. Recognize small steps.
• Real-world events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take field trips to see the behavior at work in the real world.
• Require	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insist resistant or incongruent behavior be changed. "Fire a shot across the bow" to warn of the specific consequences if the change is not forthcoming. Use the power of peer pressure. Identify and create partnerships with opinion leaders and make the "undiscussables" discussable. Create interdependent relationships through teams. Change structures to support the desired change in behavior. Build capacity through training, learning by doing, and real-time feedback.

Key 2: District Leaders Must Communicate Priorities Effectively, Consistently, and With One Voice

District leaders send mixed messages when they say the purpose of the organization is to ensure all students learn at high levels (as virtually all our mission statements claim), and then allow people

throughout the organization to opt out of practices that are clearly more effective at promoting learning than the prevailing practices. Thus, they fail to fulfill a fundamental responsibility of leadership. Marcus Buckingham (2005) concludes the “one thing” leaders must always remember to be effective about is the importance of *clarity*—clarity regarding the fundamental purpose of the organization; the future it must create to better fulfill that purpose; the most high-leverage strategies for creating that future; the indicators of progress it will monitor; the explicit standards, rubrics, and exemplars that illustrate the quality of work expected in the organization; and the specific ways each member of the organization can contribute both to its long-term purpose and short-term goals.

The challenge of clarity and congruence is greater in larger districts if different central office leaders fail to speak with one voice regarding priorities (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Patterson and colleagues (2008) concur that “solidarity” among leaders at all levels is one of “the most powerful forms of social capital” and a key element in bringing about change (p. 189). When different district administrators seem to be competing for the attention of those at the school site and pressing the different agendas of their respective offices, they create confusion and cynicism rather than coherence.

Central office leaders should, therefore, engage in periodic reviews of how clear they are communicating priorities to people throughout their organizations. These reviews will be more powerful if principals and staff participate in anonymous surveys that give feedback to the central office. The following questions could be helpful in gathering honest feedback.

1. What systems have been put in place in our district to ensure priorities are addressed in each school?
 - a. Do we have systems for clarifying what students must learn?
 - b. Do we have systems for monitoring student learning?

- c. Do we have systems for responding when students have difficulty?
 - d. Do we have systems for enriching and extending learning for students who are proficient?
 - e. Do we have systems for monitoring and supporting teams?
 - f. Do we have systems for providing each teacher and team with the timely information essential to continuous improvement?
2. What do we monitor in our district?
 - a. How do we monitor student learning?
 - b. How do we monitor the work and effectiveness of our collaborative teams?
 - c. How do we monitor the work and effectiveness of our building administrators?
 - d. How do we monitor the work and effectiveness of the central office?
 3. What questions do we ask in our district?
 - a. What questions are we asking people to resolve through collective inquiry?
 - b. What questions drive the work of individuals and teams throughout our organization?
 4. How do we allocate resources (time, money, people) in our district?
 - a. How do we provide time for intervention and enrichment for our students?
 - b. How do we provide time for our collaborative teams to engage in collective inquiry?
 - c. Are we using our resources most effectively?

5. What do we celebrate in our district?
 - a. What process is in place to help identify schools and teams that are improving?
 - b. How do we acknowledge and celebrate improvement?
 - c. Who are the heroes in our district?
6. What are we willing to confront in our district?
 - a. Have we recognized confronting resistance to the fundamental purpose and priority of our district is essential to our credibility?
 - b. Have we recognized confronting resistance is essential to the clarity of our communication?
 - c. Have we been willing to address the problem of principals or staff members who have resisted this initiative?
7. What do we model in our district?
 - a. What evidence shows that the central office is committed to and focused on high levels of learning for all students?
 - b. What evidence shows that we work together collaboratively?
 - c. How does the central office gather and use evidence of results to inform and improve our own practice?

When administrators ask teachers to work as members of a PLC they are, in effect, asking teachers to participate in a process to focus on student learning, work collaboratively, agree on indicators they will track to monitor student learning, share data on the achievement of their students, be concerned about the learning of students outside their own classrooms, and help one another improve the current levels of student performance. Administrators should demonstrate their commitment to that process by modeling it and changing the

focus of administrative meetings. This offers a perfect opportunity for such modeling.

The focus of administrative meetings in most districts is on managerial tasks rather than on leadership issues that impact learning. A central office could, however, use those meetings to help the district staff and principals function as a high-performing collaborative team. For example, at each meeting one principal would be responsible for presenting to the group evidence of student learning in his or her school during the past three years. The principal would identify trends, highlight strengths, call attention to areas of concern, report on the SMART goal the school has established to address the concern, and discuss the specific strategies his or her school staff are considering to improve results. The presenting principal would then invite district office staff and his or her colleagues to comment on his or her interpretations of the data, ask clarifying questions, and share any ideas or strategies they believe would help the school improve. Notice the focus is on evidence of student learning, administrators are working collaboratively, the entire group uses data to confront the brutal facts and explore strategies for improvement, and principals are expected to be concerned about and contribute to the success of other schools.

An article in the *Harvard Business Review* by W. Chan Kim and René Mauborgne (2003) examines how William Bratton, arguably the most successful police chief in America, used this identical process to achieve dramatic reductions in the crime rate of New York City. Bratton required mandatory attendance of his precinct captains at these strategy review meetings. The precinct captain selected to present data to the group was notified only two days prior to the meeting to emphasize Bratton's expectation that each captain should be aware of the data for his or her precinct at all times.

This structured process clarified priorities to every leader in the department and created an intense focus on results. Participants were expected to help identify and resolve problems outside their precincts and to learn from both the good and bad results occurring everywhere

in the city. The focus of these meetings was not on ranking precincts because Bratton recognized New York would always have a best and worst precinct based on the crime data (that is, in order for one precinct to move up from the lowest ranking, another precinct must take its place). The emphasis instead was on which precincts were improving, an emphasis that allowed a high-crime precinct to be celebrated for a reduction in crime rates and challenged a low-crime precinct to engage in continuous improvement rather than rest on its laurels. The process gave everyone a chance to be recognized and celebrated, and most important, it increased the collective strength of the department. Over time, this management style filtered down through the ranks as captains created their own versions of the meeting for their precincts.

A superintendent and central office staff could adopt this process as the standard operating procedure for their administrative meetings. It would provide principals with a powerful model for transforming faculty meetings into team-led data analysis, dialogue, and problem-solving sessions. Fullan (2007) argues that for the PLC concept to spread across a district, a principal must be almost as concerned about the success of other schools as his or her own school. This format could foster that interdependence. Furthermore, it could give principals their own learning community and a powerful tool for their own ongoing development.

Key 3: District Leaders Must Limit Initiatives to Allow for the Sustained Focus Essential to a Change Initiative

When the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Harvard Business School collaborated in a joint project to develop a districtwide improvement strategy for central office leaders, they concluded that the biggest impediment to improving schools was the unmanageable number of initiatives and total lack of coherence (as cited in Olson, 2007). This project echoes the conclusion Fullan (2001) offered six years earlier when he asserted the main problem confronting educators is not the absence of innovation but the “presence of too many disconnected, episodic, piecemeal, and superficially

adorned projects” (p. 109). Reeves (2006) agrees schools suffer from “initiative fatigue” and discovered the size of a district’s strategic plan was actually inversely related to student achievement—the thicker the plan, the lower the results. Elmore (2003) asserts that most districts are engaged in a frenetic amount of unconnected activities and initiatives characterized by volatility (jumping from one initiative to another in a relatively short period of time) and superficiality (choosing initiatives that have little impact on student achievement and implementing them in shallow ways).

Rebecca DuFour (2003b) describes the diverse and competing initiatives of a school district she consulted with in an article for *The School Administrator*:

The director of staff development had mandated all professional development days should be devoted to training teachers in differentiated instruction and problem-based learning. The technology department had developed a new checklist requiring classroom teachers to assess each child’s proficiency on numerous computer skills. The math coordinator had insisted that all K-12 teachers fully implement the newly adopted project-based math curriculum—even though most were unfamiliar with the concept. The assessment director had required all K-8 teachers to conduct time-intensive independent reading inventories on every student three times each year although teachers were not clear on how the results were to be used. The director of elementary education had decreed all schools must implement cognitive coaching by the end of the school year. (pp. 15–16)

This district had lost sight of the fact that schools are staffed by mere mortals who have lives outside their jobs. There are limits to the energy and effort even the most well-intentioned and enthusiastic educators can expend. The additional demands of every new initiative disperse the attention and resources of people throughout the organization, thereby reducing the likelihood of successful implementation of any initiative. As Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) conclude:

Leaders who push for fewer changes and push for them harder are more likely to have success than leaders who

introduce so many changes that people become confused about which matter most and least to the company and how to spread their time and money among the initiatives. (p. 174)

Blanchard (2007) advises leaders to “spend ten times more energy reinforcing the change they just made than looking for the next great change to try” (p. 246). District leaders who hope to build the capacity of schools to function as PLCs should focus the entire organization’s energies on that challenging task, coordinate all central office services to support it, declare a moratorium on new initiatives for several years, and allow staff in each school to determine the training and resources they require to move forward with the initiative.

Reeves and Eaker (2019a) propose a collaborative, three-step initiative-analysis process to address the problem of too many initiatives. The first and most important step is for leaders to undertake an *initiative inventory*, which involves identifying every single initiative currently underway. The second step calls for the creation of implementation rubrics for each initiative. A general outline for the rubrics looks like this:

Level 1: We have the materials, but we have not yet begun implementation.

Level 2: We have trained the staff, but there is minimal implementation by only a few early adopters.

Level 3: We have achieved full implementation by more than 90 percent of the staff.

Level 4: We have achieved full implementation and have clear evidence of the effect on student results. (Reeves & Eaker, 2019a, p. 35)

The third step calls for the application of the rubrics at every school—class by class. As a result of this process, leaders should lead the effort to create a *not-to-do list*—a listing of initiatives that the district will deliberately discard.

Janel Keating, superintendent of the White River School District in Buckley, Washington, generally follows the rule to only implement

initiatives that will directly impact either a high priority of the district or one of the four critical questions of a PLC. In addition, there is always clear and frequent communication pointing out the connection between each initiative and the district's priorities.

Regardless of the process used, district leaders must make every effort to limit new initiatives, and eliminate ineffective existing ones—regardless of how popular they might be—in order to free up valuable time for a few high-leverage initiatives that will have a positive impact on student success.

Key 4: District Leaders Must Help Teachers and Principals Build Their Collective Capacity to Raise Student Achievement by Embedding Ongoing Professional Development in the Routine Work of Every Educator

Once again, Elmore's (2006) concept of *reciprocal accountability* dictates a central office must commit to building the capacity of the staff of a school functioning as a PLC to meet that expectation. Unfortunately, the way districts have typically approached professional development has not built capacity. Instead, it has contributed to teacher isolation in schools and a lack of coherence in districts.

In most districts, individual teachers enjoy tremendous discretion in choosing both the topics and providers of their professional development and are even offered financial incentives to pursue the advanced training of their choice. Many districts pay part of their teachers' tuition for graduate courses or workshop registration fees, and most advance their teachers on the salary schedule upon completion of graduate work. This happens even though there is little evidence that either graduate work or most workshops improve teacher quality (Haskins & Loeb, 2007). Thus, individual teachers are rewarded for pursuing random training through scores of disconnected providers on curricula of varying quality over which the district exercises no control. Rarely is there an attempt to align that training with school goals or district priorities or to reinforce it within the school.

It has been evident for some time that this approach to professional development is fundamentally flawed. Goodlad (1983) addressed its ineffectiveness over thirty years ago:

We must build into each school a continuing attention to instruction and the curriculum. This does not occur when teachers are drawn out of schools as individuals to engage willy-nilly in workshops and courses and are then returned to the isolation of their classrooms and a school culture where how and what one teaches are not matters for peer-group analysis, discussion and improvement. Teaching must be taken out of its cloak of privacy and autonomy to become the business of the entire school and staff. (p. 557)

Educational researchers and organizations repeatedly reinforce Goodlad's (1983) call for focused, collaborative, ongoing, and job-embedded professional development. Consider the following.

- “Effective system leaders recognize that the best professional development does not take place away from work or during the occasional presentation—it happens in the workplace on an ongoing basis. So these leaders focus on creating the processes and culture that enable educators to learn continually as part of their routine professional practice.” (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 54)
- “The most powerful and effective form of professional learning is job-embedded.” (Johnson, 2020, p. 410)
- “Job-embedded professional development aligned with teacher professional growth is critical to improving instructional practice.” (Boss, 2020, p. 96)
- “Staff development should be conceived as ongoing and embedded in the process of developing and evaluating curriculum, instruction, and assessment. As teachers consult with one another in collectively developing, analyzing, and evaluating student work; embedding assessment in their regular teaching practice; restructuring their school day; and transforming schools

into learner-centered communities, a powerful form of learning occurs. An important part of staff development, then, should include time—along with the resources of research, information, and expertise—for teachers to work together on the development and implementation of school changes.” (Darling-Hammond, 1995, p. 173)

- “Learning is always an on-the-job phenomenon. Learning always occurs in a context where you are taking action. So we need to find ways to get teachers really working together; we need to create an environment where they can continually reflect on what they are doing and learn more and more what it takes to work as teams.” (Kofman & Senge, 1995, p. 20)
- “In schools with model professional development the very nature of staff development shifted from isolated learning and the occasional workshop to focused, ongoing organizational learning built on collaborative reflection and joint action. . . . Substantial progress is made only when teacher learning becomes embedded in the school day and the regular life of the school.” (WestEd, 2000, p. 11)
- “Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district. . . . The most powerful forms of staff development occur in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. These teams . . . operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of district and school goals for student learning.

“Research shows that the kinds of professional development that improve instructional capacity display four critical characteristics; . . . they are:

- › ongoing
- › embedded within context-specific needs of a particular setting
- › aligned with reform initiatives
- › grounded in a collaborative, inquiry-based approach to learning” (National Staff Development Council, 2001)
- “Effective professional development to improve classroom teaching also concentrates on high learning standards and on evidence of students’ learning . . . enabling adult learners to expand on content knowledge and practice that is directly connected with the work of their students in the classroom. . . . Again, professional learning communities meet these criteria.” (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, n.d., p. 1)
- “The consensus view of effective professional development . . . derives from the assumption that learning is essentially a collaborative rather than an individual activity—that educators learn more powerfully in concert with others who are struggling with the same problems—and that the essential purpose of professional development should be the improvement of schools and school systems, not just the improvement of the individuals who work in them.” (Elmore, 2003, p. 96)
- “Professional development should be aligned with state and district goals and standards for student learning, and should become an everyday part of the school schedule rather than be conducted as a set of ad hoc events. The content of this professional development should be driven by frequent assessments that identify the specific topics

that individual students are having trouble with, so that an individual teacher's instructional practices can be altered to directly address these students' learning needs. Professional development activities should also involve opportunities for collaboration so that teachers can learn from each other." (Teaching Commission, 2004, p. 49)

- "Districts in the forefront of development promote 'learning in context'—not just through workshops but through daily interactions in cultures designed for job embedded learning. . . . Capacity building . . . is not just workshops and professional development for all. It is the daily habit of working together, and you can't learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn by doing it and having mechanisms for getting better at it on purpose." (Fullan, 2005a, p. 69)
- "The more time teachers spend on professional development the more significantly they change their practice, and participating in professional learning communities optimizes the time spent on professional development." (American Educational Research Association, 2005, p. 4)
- "School-based teacher learning communities align with current empirical evidence of the most effective professional development strategies. . . . Researchers agree that teachers learn best when they are involved in activities that: (a) focus on instruction and student learning specific to the settings in which they teach; (b) are sustained and continuous, rather than episodic; (c) provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues inside and outside the school; (d) reflect teachers' influence about what and how they learn; and (e) help teachers develop theoretical understanding of the skills and knowledge they need to learn." (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, pp. 8–9)

The message is consistent and clear. The best professional development occurs in a social and collaborative setting rather than in isolation; is ongoing and sustained rather than infrequent and transitory; is job-embedded rather than external; occurs in the context of the real work of the school and classroom rather than in off-site workshops or courses; focuses on results (that is, evidence of improved student learning) rather than activities or perceptions; and systematically aligns with school and district goals rather than random ones. In short, the best professional development takes place in PLCs.

Professional development often represents another classic case of the knowing-doing gap. Central office leaders who make any attempt to explore best practice in professional development will hear a consistent message—they will come to *know* the most powerful approaches to professional development, but too often they have failed to act on what they know.

If district offices are to play a role in building the capacity of school personnel to function as PLCs, they must redefine professional development and embrace a new approach to promoting adult learning. They must create structures and provide incentives to ensure educators are learning *together* in the context of their own schools and classrooms as part of their routine work practices. They must ensure professional development is specifically designed to improve student learning, and they must assess its effectiveness based on results. They must stop thinking of professional development in terms of courses, workshops, or one-size-fits-all districtwide training, and recognize the responsibility of the central office is to support the specific and timely learning needs of different collaborative teams, and provide training team-by-team that is “just in time” and “just what’s needed” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003, p. 28). For example, the second-grade team highlighted in chapter 5 (page 123), whose formative test results demonstrated the team’s students were struggling to learn a mathematics concept, benefited far more from the timely and focused help it received based on the team’s

specific need than it would have with central office–determined professional development on a general topic.

We are not suggesting that a team, school, or district should rely exclusively on internal expertise or resources to promote adult learning. External experts, consultants, and facilitators can be powerful allies in building the capacity of an organization, and McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) argue an external facilitator may be essential to helping a staff learn to function as a PLC. It is, however, typically more powerful to bring the external resource into the school than it is to send isolated individuals from the school in search of external resources. We are not arguing that large-group or faculty-wide training can never be beneficial. In the right school culture, even the much-maligned *one-shot workshop* can serve as a catalyst for improvement if (1) it leads to collective inquiry and action research and (2) staff members have access to additional support and coaching as they move forward. But we *are* arguing the most powerful staff development will occur most often as part of the routine work practices of a collaborative team of teachers *if* the central office ensures the team is focused on the right work and provides the necessary encouragement, resources, and assistance to build the capacity of each team and school.

Finally, when the central office uses this approach to staff development, it honors the expertise and professionalism of the district's educators. Job-embedded professional development recognizes that very often the answers to the questions and challenges of schooling are found within the building and district, and when teams are able to determine their specific needs, professional development becomes something that is done *by* educators rather than *to* educators.

The Role of Pressure and Support in Districtwide Improvement

Janel Keating, the aforementioned superintendent of the White River School District in Buckley, Washington, has successfully embedded PLC at Work concepts, practices, and processes districtwide.

When asked for insights regarding the role of district leadership, she always includes, “Relentless pressure, gracefully applied.” The point is, there are responsibilities district leaders *must* address if they are to have a positive impact on student learning. They should utilize every component of an effective change process and present the rationale for the proposed initiative using a variety of strategies. They must be willing to listen to concerns, seek common ground, and compromise on the details of implementation, but not on the district’s core purpose, vision of the future, values and collective commitments, and goals. They must provide school sites with considerable autonomy as they move forward within clearly defined parameters. They must communicate clearly, ensuring there is congruence between their actions and their words. They must limit the number of initiatives they implement and provide adequate time for new practices and processes to become embedded into the culture of schools. They must demonstrate a sincere commitment to reciprocal accountability by providing the time, training, and resources necessary to build the capacity of their schools’ staffs to complete what they have been asked to accomplish. They must recognize some schools will need far more support and direction than others to move forward. And importantly, they must, on a frequent and timely basis, let both individuals and groups know their hard work and commitment to the education of each student are truly appreciated.

Ultimately, however, central office leaders must be prepared to insist that those within their organization heed, rather than ignore, clear evidence of the best, most promising strategies for accomplishing the purpose and priorities of the district. Educational leaders must provide both pressure *and* support if they are to play a role in improving their schools and districts.

Introspection

Before district leaders, especially superintendents, plan for what *others* need to do, they should develop a collaborative process in which

a smaller guiding coalition examines the district's current state by addressing questions such as the following (DuFour et al., 2016).

- What do the data tell us about our district? What do student achievement, grades, grade distributions—grade by grade, subject by subject, course by course, subgroup by subgroup—reveal to us? This analysis should be based on comparison; that is, How does the achievement of students compare to previous years? Are our students improving? How do our students compare to students in districts in our area, state, and nationally?
- What is our depth of knowledge about PLCs? What are PLCs? How do they function? What evidence shows PLC concepts and processes can have a positive impact on student learning? How can we successfully implement the concepts and processes reflective of a high-performing PLC districtwide?
- What are our priorities? What are the most effective ways of communicating our priorities?
- What specific conditions do we expect to see in every school?
- What must we do to build the capacity of people throughout the organization to create these conditions?
- What commitments are we, the superintendent and district office staff, prepared to make to create these conditions?
- What indicators of progress will we monitor?
- What attitudes and behaviors will we publicly recognize and celebrate?
- What current practices should we stop doing? What current practices and leadership behaviors do not align with our articulated purpose and priorities?

- What can we stop doing to provide more time for implementation of the PLC process in all our schools?

In short, it is not unusual for district leaders to begin the journey of implementing PLC concepts and processes districtwide by communicating what others need to do, without first examining the district as it currently exists and the assumptions, priorities, and commitments that the district-level team, led by the superintendent, must *first* adopt to effectively lead others.

The “Must Dos” for Getting Started

While there is no definitive checklist regarding what leaders must do to implement the PLC at Work process districtwide, there are some practices and decisions essential to long-term success. We have observed that effective district-level leadership almost always includes the following.

- **The superintendent works with the school board in building a superintendent and school board team that accept the responsibility of leading the district in collaborative efforts to improve student learning in every school, every team, and every classroom.**

It is unlikely that PLC concepts and processes can be successfully implemented and sustained without support of the school board. Developing the school board into a high-functioning collaborative team is one of the most essential responsibilities of a superintendent. The superintendent should work collaboratively with the school board—and others from representative groups—to build a solid foundation of a clear mission, vision, and values (collective commitments) that will guide the work to follow. The school board must model the ideal of a learning organization by collaboratively analyzing district data, the essentials of best practices found in a high-performing PLC and elsewhere, and continually seeking ways to improve as a school board and superintendent

team. The quality of the work of other teams within the district (the administrative and principal teams, as well as the teacher teams, and the support staff teams) will be directly tied to the quality of teaming the school board and superintendent team model.

- **Each school must organize into collaborative teams of teachers.** Organizing each school into collaborative teams must not be optional. Although the size of a school will affect how teams might organize, generally, the emphasis should be on organizing schools into collaborative teams of teachers who teach the same or similar content.
- **The district leadership team must direct the work of teams.** This includes clearly articulating why collaborative teaming is such a critical practice, providing high-quality training, support, and resources where needed, and clearly articulating what is essential for each to address.
The most essential work of teacher teams involves:
 - › Creating and implementing a guaranteed and viable curriculum that gives focus to the essential concepts and skills essential for every student to learn in every grade, subject, course, and unit of learning
 - › Using an assessment process that includes frequent team-developed common formative assessments to monitor the learning of each student on a timely basis and to inform and improve the professional practices of the team
 - › Applying a data-analysis protocol to collaboratively analyze student learning data, and using the results of these analyses to make decisions regarding meeting student learning needs, and to guide the improvement of individual teacher and team effectiveness
- **Each school must collaboratively develop a schoolwide plan for intervention that guarantees additional time**

and support for students who experience difficulty learning, and extension of learning for students who demonstrate proficiency. Such plans must be implemented during the school day, and must be directional in nature, rather than invitational. The plans must be systematic regardless of the teacher to whom students are assigned. Only rarely should students miss core instruction to receive additional time and support. And there must be a process and criteria for frequent monitoring of the plan's effectiveness.

- **District-level leadership must focus on the work of principals.** It is not unusual for improvement initiatives to focus directly on teachers and what they do, especially how they teach. Such efforts often bypass the capacity of the principal to *lead* improvement efforts. The importance of building leadership has often been cited in the research on effective schools (Lezotte, 2011). While it is possible to find pockets of excellent teaching in most schools, it is rare to find a highly effective school, one in which the various elements of effective schooling are brought together and sustained over time, in a school with a weak and ineffective principal. Fullan (2014) writes that an effective principal should be a “learning leader—one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis” (p. 9). DuFour and coauthors (2016) concur by observing:

The very term *professional learning community* implies a ‘community of learners.’ And, in such a community, the principal is the leader of learning, the one who leads the school community in learning about and implementing best practices and ensuring a culture of continuous learning and improvement. (p. 247)

The superintendent plays the same role at the district level, recognizing that the key to effective schooling districtwide is developing the leadership capacity

of principals. Such a focus on the principalship is achieved in many ways. One of the most important is by organizing principals and principal meetings in a manner that models effective collaborative teaming practices. After all, what would cause one to believe that teacher teams will function at a higher level than administrative teams?

In many of the more effective districts, traditional administrative teams changed dramatically. Eaker and Keating (2012) describe how district-level meetings shift from the more traditional nuts-and-bolts information meetings to meetings in which principals and district-level administrators work to not only model the protocols of an effective team but also anticipate and mitigate potential issues and problems likely to arise, seeking best practices along with practicing and rehearsing the work expected of teacher teams. In addition, members share student learning data and team-developed products. In short, the administrative and principal team members work and learn together.

- **Develop systems to monitor progress on a frequent and timely basis.** The power of formative assessment practices—assessment *for* learning—is not limited to student learning. If a district is to reflect practices of a *learning* community, it must monitor the learning of both individuals and teams of adults during the learning process—and not by merely relying on annual summative results. This requires a monitoring plan, one built on a few districtwide results-oriented processes and product goals. This allows each school and team in each school to develop goals that align with the district goals, thus enabling effective ongoing monitoring practices. Effective monitoring plans will review goal attainment by collaboratively analyzing not only data but also the

quality of products teams and individuals produce. This requires clear expectations, understanding, and communication of what high-quality products should look like. The use of high-quality examples—*exemplars*—is an essential aspect of this process.

- **Align policies, practices, procedures, and staff development with the district's purpose and priorities.**

Most long-standing large organizations have policies, practices, and procedures incrementally developed to address issues or problems over different periods of time. Subsequently, the policies, practices, and procedures of a district might not align with the reality of the district's current priorities. Reculturing a school district into a high-performing PLC is virtually impossible unless the policies, practices, and procedures within the district are organized and aligned with the overarching purpose of ensuring high levels of learning for all students. Such an alignment includes aspects of district practices often overlooked. These include areas such as hiring, budgeting, staff development, technology, maintenance, and transportation. (A bus driver can undo in one afternoon what a teacher has worked with a student on for weeks!) In other words, becoming a districtwide PLC requires systemic district alignment that supports the district's mission, vision, commitments, and priorities, thus avoiding the mixed messages that often make success of districtwide initiatives marginal at best.

- **Create and use a common vocabulary.** District leaders must continually and purposefully work to create and use a common vocabulary throughout the district. Knowing, and even using, terms is not the same as understanding the underlying meaning and implications of various key words and phrases. District leaders face the challenge of developing a clear and commonly understood

vocabulary so everyone throughout the district is clear on district priorities and parameters. This will not happen unless district leaders make a conscious effort to establish a common language resulting in a widely shared understanding of the meaning of key terms. If key terms are only vaguely understood, or misunderstood, by people throughout the district, it will be virtually impossible to implement the PLC processes districtwide. (Visit go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks to download a reproducible glossary of key PLC terms and concepts.)

Leading the Journey

School districts are complex organizations. The journey to becoming a districtwide high-performing PLC is not easy. *The key is to get started, and then get better!* Keating and colleagues (2008) compare reculturing a school district to undertaking a journey from San Francisco to New York. They note that people will proceed at different speeds depending on several variables. Those who undertake the journey will encounter roadblocks along the way, and some might experience the occasional mechanical breakdown. Some will make more stops than others. Some will take a wrong turn. Some will get lost. Those who embark on such a trip may take different routes. Some might take the northern route, while others might choose the southern route. Either way, they can still reach the Big Apple (Keating et al., 2008).

Despite this flexibility, however, there are at least two absolute requirements for those who wish to undertake this cross-country trip. First, they must start the engine, take the car out of park, and put the car in drive. Second, they must take their foot off the brake, press the gas pedal, and head east!

We propose another aspect to this cross-country journey: those who organize and support it. These people clearly and convincingly articulate the necessity to undertake the journey, engage in collaborative planning for the trip, demonstrate a commitment to working together

along the way, provide the needed resources, and model a passionate commitment to persist in spite of the inevitable bumps in the road. It is the superintendent who starts the car, puts the car in drive, presses the gas pedal, and leads the district on the journey into the future. We are more convinced than ever before that effective leadership from the superintendent and the central office staff can make the journey to becoming a high-performing PLC a sustained reality.



CHAPTER 10

How to Sustain the PLC Process

Look at a stone cutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not the last blow that did it, but all that had gone before.

—JACOB A. RIIS

In some ways, it seems redundant to offer a chapter on sustaining a PLC. As we have discussed throughout the previous chapters, a PLC is defined as an *ongoing, never-ending* process in which educators work in *recurring cycles* of collective inquiry and action research to improve student learning (DuFour et al., 2016). An essential characteristic—and fundamental requirement—to being a PLC is a commitment to continuous improvement. Said as succinctly as possible: it is impossible to be a PLC without a sustained focus on the right work.

This constant, relentless focus is also the key to achieving higher levels of student learning. Reeves's (2015b) analysis of 196 schools—with a combined enrollment of more than 750,000 students—finds that the use of PLCs was significantly correlated with student-achievement gains, but *only* when the principles were practiced in depth and duration. Reeves (2018) concludes that the most dramatic gains in student learning are achieved at schools that “intensively applied the principles of PLCs—collective ownership of student results, deliberate reflection

on teaching practices, explicit intervention for struggling students, and clear strategies for extending learning for students who need it.”

So, if a sustained focus on the PLC at Work process will dramatically increase student learning, why aren’t more schools achieving similar gains for their students? Candidly, the discipline and persistence required to attain this level of implementation is hard—*very hard*. Working collaboratively, as a general concept, is appealing to most people. But as educators dig into the four critical questions of a PLC, disagreements are inevitable. And while working in isolation is not the best way to ensure all students learn, it is usually a more efficient way to get work done. Likewise, the skills and behaviors required to be a good teammate are not genetic but instead develop through careful consideration, dedication, and reflection.

Deep levels of collaboration can be both inspiring and frustrating, empowering and demanding. When the idealistic vision of teaming dims, and the reality of embracing new assumptions and practices becomes clear, many schools look for enticing shortcuts to minimize adult discomfort and avoid doing the actual work of a PLC. When on the journey to becoming a true PLC, we challenge leaders to avoid the following dangerous detours.

Dangerous Detour 1: We Need More Training Before We Can Begin

Often educators called upon to implement the PLC process respond with the assertion they could not possibly undertake the task without extensive training over a long period of time. They assert they simply do not know how to work together collaboratively, identify essential curricula, develop valid assessments, interpret achievement data, create systems of intervention and enrichment, reach out to parents, or trust one another. They could not possibly begin the endeavor until they have been buttressed by years of training.

Peter Block (2003), one of the world’s leading organizational theorists, contends that the question, “But *how* do we do this?” is a favorite defense against taking action because it looks for the answer outside

us. Block (2003) considers the question an “indirect expression of our doubt that we know enough and are enough” (p. 5). He advises people in organizations accomplish most by taking action and believing in their capacity to learn through their shared experiences and joint reflections on those experiences rather than waiting for more training, more knowledge, more skills, and more support to ensure greater certainty as a precondition for moving forward (Block, 2003).

Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) came to a similar conclusion when they discovered organizations often substitute training for doing. They find the most effective organizations appreciate the power and necessity of *learning by doing* rather than *learning by training*. As they note, “Learning is best done by trying a lot of things, learning from what works and what does not, thinking about what was learned, and trying again. Enlightened trial and error outperforms the planning of flawless intellects” (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, p. 249). They conclude that the single most powerful strategy for eliminating the knowing-doing gap and developing deeper understanding is to learn by doing (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000).

We often ask educators to reflect on their own experience to illustrate the power of learning by doing. Most spent four or five years training to become teachers—taking coursework in content and pedagogy, observing teachers, and completing student teaching under the tutelage of a supervising teacher. But when we ask, “How many of you feel you learned more about the profession in your first semester of teaching than you did in the four or five years you devoted to *preparing* to become a teacher?” there is virtually universal agreement that it was doing the work of a teacher that provided the deepest understanding and most profound learning.

We are not suggesting that training in the PLC at Work process is unnecessary. As we have repeatedly stressed throughout this book, a PLC begins any effort to improve student learning by committing to collective inquiry—learning together. Educators will certainly need training as they proceed on the PLC journey, but the training is most relevant and valuable when delivered as they engage in doing the work

of a PLC and is specific to the task at hand. As DuFour and coauthors (2006) advise:

When we wrote *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, we made a conscious decision to emphasize *work* in order to stress the importance of an action orientation in PLCs. We did not refer to “PLCs at training,” “PLCs at study,” “PLCs at reading,” or “PLCs at staff development.” Now that we have had the opportunity to work with school systems throughout North America, we are more convinced than ever schools develop as PLCs when their staffs actually work at the process rather than train for the process. (p. 198)

In our work with districts, we typically spend several days with educators helping them to examine the PLC concept, answering their questions, and offering specific implementation strategies. It is not uncommon at that point for the district to request “advanced PLC training.” Our response continues to be, “Advanced training is doing the work. Take steps to implement strategies and we will support you as you run into challenges, but further training at this point is merely procrastination.” The training and professional development that often occur in schools and districts create the *illusion* of action rather than building capacity. Beware of substituting training, reading, or planning for *doing* the work of PLCs.

Dangerous Detour 2: Let’s Find a Way to Shortcut Key Processes

Given the already crushing demands on their time, it is understandable that educators instinctively seek ways to shortcut key processes as they implement the PLC concept. Predictable refrains will include the following.

- “Our team doesn’t have time to talk about the essential curriculum, so just give us the state standards (or district curriculum, or textbook) as the guaranteed curriculum for our course or grade level.”

- “We don’t have the time or expertise to create common formative assessments as a team, so we will just use the district assessments (or the questions at the end of each chapter, or lobby for the purchase of commercial tests).”
- “Why bother sharing results from assessments when any differences between teachers are probably a function of the students in our classes? I will just look at my own data.”
- “Shouldn’t someone in the central office or the principal analyze results from assessments rather than our team?”
- “We understand collaboration is important, but if someone doesn’t want to collaborate, shouldn’t he or she be allowed to opt out of the process?”
- “If we provide students with additional time and support, aren’t we really just enabling them?”

Questions like these get to the very heart of the PLC concept, and when the essence of PLC practice is compromised, the improvement process is almost certain to fail. The products created in a PLC—a clearly defined, guaranteed, and viable curriculum; formative assessments; analysis of data; and intervention plans—are not as important as *the process* that leads to their creation. If the process does not include the educators themselves, it robs them of the opportunity and absolves them of the responsibility to learn. As DuFour and coauthors (2006) observe:

We are convinced that the most common cause of the demise of PLC initiatives is not the result of a single cataclysmic event, but rather repeated compromises regarding the fundamental premises of PLCs. There is no one fatal blow: PLCs die from a thousand small wounds.
(p. 195)

Beware of compromises that violate the fundamental premise and practices of a PLC. Beware of allowing the powerful concept to die from a thousand small wounds.

Dangerous Detour 3: Someone Else Needs to Do It

There is an almost universal tendency for people at all levels of a school district to point out what others need to do to improve a school or district. A recurring reaction we hear from participants at the conclusion of our PLC at Work Institutes is “My _____ (superintendent, principal, department chairperson, board president, state legislator, governor, colleague) should have been here to learn what he or she needs to do to make this happen.”

Author Terry Pratchett (2006) captures this tendency to assign responsibility to others:

It is so much easier to blame it on Them. It was bleakly depressing to think it might be Us. If it was Them, then nothing was anyone's fault. If it was Us, well I am one of Us. I've certainly never thought of myself as one of Them. No one ever thinks of himself as one of Them. We are always one of Us. It is Them that do the bad things.

(p. 206)

Educational consultant and author Dennis Sparks (2007) contends educators are particularly prone to this tendency of assigning responsibility to others for improving their situation. As a result, they fall victim to a sense of resignation that robs them of the energy essential to improving their schools and districts. Elmore (2006) also cites the “culture of passivity and helplessness that pervades many schools” (p. 127) as working against improvement. Change expert Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2004) uses the similar phrase, “passivity and learned helplessness,” to describe what she considers “one of the most damaging pathologies to people and the places they work” (p. 256). Kanter (2004) writes:

When people become resigned to their fate, nothing ever changes. When people are surrounded by pessimism—that feeling that they are the victims of uncontrollable forces around them—they drag others down with them, finding the worst in everything and resisting other people's ideas but offering none of their own. (p. 256)

Rick DuFour captures this cultural trait in his poem, “It’s Not My Fault.”

“He doesn’t have the skills we need,”
the employer harrumphed with disgust.
“The colleges are ivory towers
so training him falls to us.”

“It’s not our fault,” the professors cried.

He was deficient in every way.

Remediation has become our task
because high schools fail kids today.”

“But kids we get can’t read or write.

He doesn’t know things he should.

We high school teachers aren’t at fault
The middle school’s no damn good.”

“We can’t overcome six years of neglect,”
the middle school teachers explained.

“If elementary schools won’t do their job
then they’re the ones to blame.”

“He wasn’t school ready when he arrived,”

the K–5 teachers moaned.

“All we can do is babysit.

The fault lies in the home.”

“It’s really not the poor dear’s fault,”

his mother was heard to say.

“He’s a victim of his family tree . . .

His father’s the same way.”

Fortunately, people who have succumbed to “learned helplessness” are not doomed to a life of resignation; they can learn to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy (Seligman, 2006). School leaders help overcome a tradition of dependency and resignation when they create cognitive dissonance by identifying schools and districts with similar student populations and resources that are outperforming their schools.

An even more effective strategy for creating cognitive dissonance is to create systems in each school to identify the *positive deviants*—the teachers who consistently help students achieve at higher levels than colleagues who teach similar students (Richardson, 2004). It becomes increasingly difficult for educators to claim they have no impact on student achievement when they are confronted with evidence of similar districts, schools, and teachers who have been far more effective in helping all students learn. As Patterson and colleagues (2008) write, “Nothing changes the mind like the cold, hard world hitting it with actual real-life data” (p. 51). When information regarding student learning becomes easily accessible and openly shared among members of the same team, teachers and principals can discover and learn from their own positive deviants.

Yet another powerful strategy for overcoming dependency and resignation is to insist educators focus within their own sphere of influence and identify and honor the collective commitments they make to improve teaching and learning. Attention to this critical component of the foundation of a PLC can help educators heed Mahatma Gandhi’s advice: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Dangerous Detour 4: We Pick and Choose Programs Rather Than Work at Comprehensive Cultural Change

Patterson and colleagues (2008) describe a common mistake of those who visit high-performing organizations to learn about and replicate their practices:

They see a place that works, then they go home and adopt only one idea to add to their existing ineffective efforts. Of course this single element rarely adds enough horsepower to create change, so their new and improved strategy fails, and the earnest change agents wonder why their efforts did not work. (p. 260)

For example, in 2006 the faculty at Pioneer Middle School in California developed a nationally recognized *flex period* to provide targeted interventions and extensions during the school day. Over the

years, many educators visited Pioneer, hoping to emulate the logistics of their *tutorial period*—how to revise their bell schedule and transition students to different locations. What most visitors fail to embrace is the foundational work that guides the intervention time. Long before the school started to discuss how to create intervention time, the school began its PLC journey by doing the following.

- Building consensus and commitment to a learning-focused mission and culture
- Creating collaborative teams to drive the work
- Identifying the essential outcomes for each course
- Using common formative assessments to identify student needs and determine the most effective instructional practices

These essential actions created the need for flexible time during the school day, and then to target how this time is utilized to ensure student learning. As Pioneer continuously improved at identifying essential standards and using common assessments, the effectiveness of their flex time increased. The need for dedicated intervention time is essential to ensure student learning, but that time alone is insufficient when implemented as a singular program in isolation of the larger PLC at Work process.

Similarly, we have worked with district leaders who have asked for training on PLCs, but request that we do the following.

- Skip discussing the first critical question, as the district has already purchased a “guaranteed and viable” curriculum from a publishing company, so there is no reason for teachers to identify the essential curriculum.
- Avoid discussing team-created common formative assessments because the district purchased an assessment program.
- Disregard training on interventions, as the district has purchased software that targets student interventions.

We are not saying that instructional programs are inherently bad or have no use in a PLC. These resources can be helpful tools. The problem is when these programs replace the collaborative efforts that increase adult learning and create shared ownership of the process. As Jim Collins (2005) states in *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, “In building a great institution, there is no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no miracle moment” (p. 23). Instead, great organizations have a dogged focus on getting better and better at the practices proven to best achieve the institution’s mission.

Dangerous Detour 5: We Quit When the Going Gets Tough

Kanter (1999) concludes, “Years of study and experience show that the things that sustain change are not bold strokes but long marches” (p. 267). She also advises, “Everything can look like a failure in the middle” (Kanter, 2005, p. 267). Predictable problems occur during every substantive improvement process, but in education, too often these difficulties are viewed as evidence of failure and a reason to abandon the effort.

Substantive change efforts do not proceed smoothly or in a linear fashion, and it is unrealistic and arrogant to assume *initial efforts* to improve a school or district represent the *final* solution. It is much more productive to think of the improvement process as action research, trial and error, and learning by doing. As Kouzes and Posner (2006) write:

The phrase, “failure is not an option” is one of the dumbest clichés ever uttered. . . . In real life, when we’re trying to do something we’ve never done before, we virtually never get it right the first time. . . . In real life, we make lots of mistakes when doing something new and different. In real life, failure is always an option. (p. 164)

State, district, and site leaders exacerbate this tendency to abandon initial change efforts when they fail when these leaders offer a parade of new yearly initiatives. Ask most veteran teachers what they expect

from the newest district improvement plans, and the most likely answer is, “This too shall pass.” Why would teachers invest their time and effort to overcome the obstacles of deep implementation when their dedication is not rewarded with a commitment from leadership to stay the course?

The key to transforming initial failure into ultimate success is how people respond to the failure—how long they sustain their effort in the face of adversity (Kanter, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2006). As Kanter (2004) writes:

The dividing line between winning streaks and losing streaks is the choice of behavior in response to setbacks. The decision to build rather than retreat, to rally rather than get discouraged, involves viewing setbacks through an optimistic lens, as an opportunity to learn and move on. Optimists assume that negative events are temporary glitches rather than the permanent state of affairs that pessimists see, and that setbacks are due to specific causes that can be identified and fixed. (pp. 356–357)

When confronted with difficulty and uncertainty, it is natural for people to seek the security and comfort of the status quo. It will always be more comfortable and easier to focus on teaching rather than learning; to work in isolation rather than collaboratively; to use summative rather than formative assessments; to leave the question of responding to student difficulties to the discretion of each teacher rather than create a systematic response; to assign responsibility for results to others rather than ourselves; to care only about what happens in our room or our school rather than concern ourselves with the success and well-being of others; and to cling to our assumptions and practices rather than examine them. It will always be easier to quit and return to the familiar than to persevere in the face of challenges, reversals, and disappointments.

Therefore, the key to success in implementing PLC concepts is demonstrating the discipline to endure at the hard work of change rather than retreating to the comfort of traditional practices. Collins (2001) finds companies that make the leap from good to great inevitably do so with:

A quiet deliberate process of figuring out what needed to be done to create the best future results and then taking those steps, one after another. By pushing in a constant direction over an extended period of time, they inevitably hit a point of breakthrough. (p. 169)

Great results, Collins (2001) concludes, can only be achieved “through consistent, coherent effort over time” (p. 182). Kouzes and Posner (2006) discovered it was not the absence of mistakes but rather the ability to learn from mistakes and integrate that learning into the next effort that is key to the success of organizations. Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) call on leaders of substantive change to “embrace the mess, do the best you can with the knowledge and evidence at hand, learn as you go, and take action in the meantime” (p. 184). Goleman (1998) finds the most effective leaders are resilient, celebrating effort and learning when things did not go well at the same time they consider how to make the situation better. Patterson and colleagues (2008) find the most influential leaders “interpret setbacks as opportunities to learn, as guides not breaks” (p. 129). Blanchard (2007) advises the key to organizational success is sticking with focused improvement initiatives rather than launching new ones.

Hugh Burkett (2006), director of the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, offers this advice to educators:

I learned that a leader should choose carefully what to focus on and then stick with it. . . . I know that the urge to try something new is often born of a fear that we've chosen wrong and a frustration that we aren't getting quick results. . . . In hindsight, I see that moving forward and doing something innovative often won out over painstakingly measuring our progress and adjusting our strategies. My advice? Stay the course. Work the plan. Monitor progress and analyze results. It's not glamorous; it doesn't make headlines. But patience and persistence work when trying to achieve success at this most difficult of tasks. (p. 3)

Fullan (2007) concludes the advice about implementing change in organizations “all amounts to focus, persistence, implementation, monitoring, corrective action, and humility” (p. 121), and he advises

districts to stay the course for a period of ten years or more to transform school cultures. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) decry the tendency of district leaders to launch new initiatives “in order to make a splash.” They advise that building and sustaining learning communities is “neither flashy nor sexy . . . [but] entails slow, steady effort” (p. 114).

The message is consistent: discipline, persistence, determination, and resilience are essential to substantive improvement initiatives. The challenge confronting leaders at all levels of schools and districts is to help people sustain their effort during the hard work of change rather than retreat to the comfort of the status quo. But how can this be done?

Sustained Effort Requires Creating Short-Term Wins

The journey to become a PLC is not a sprint, but a marathon. Knowing that the road is long and challenging, leaders must plan carefully how to support team members through the peaks and valleys of the trip. Let’s return to our analogy of the road trip from San Francisco to New York. Two families, each made up of mom, dad, and a brother and sister, set out from San Francisco, but they take very different approaches to the experience.

Mr. Smith considers New York the reward for enduring an arduous and boring drive, and he is determined to complete it as quickly as possible so the family will have more time in the city. He insists the family begin the trip in the middle of the night to avoid traffic. He drives relentlessly, fourteen hours each day, despite the protestations of his wife and children. He suggests they stop at drive-through restaurants for meals so he can push on with minimal interruption. He resents stopping for bathroom breaks. He assures his family that New York will be so wonderful that their experience there will be well worth the temporary discomfort they are experiencing. Tedium and tension grow in the car. The children are bickering, and midway through the trip, Mr. Smith and his wife have stopped speaking to

each other. In Cleveland, his wife announces she and the children have no intention of continuing on the trip and will instead fly back home. Mr. Smith is left with an empty car.

The Williams family takes a different approach. Mr. Williams is determined to make the entire journey memorable, not merely the destination. In Utah, they rent mountain bikes for a day. In Denver, the family attends a Colorado Rockies baseball game, much to son Brandon's delight. In Chicago, they take time to attend the Grant Park Summer Shade Festival and visit the Museum of Science and Industry. His daughter, Julie, is an avid fan of classic rock, so the family stops in Cleveland to visit the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Each member of the family has the opportunity to select a place for dinner one night during the trip. But the trip is not without its problems. Julie becomes nauseous on the curvy mountain roads of Utah. Mr. Williams takes a wrong turn coming out of Denver, and they are lost for several hours. Traffic in Chicago has them at a standstill. A tire goes flat in Cleveland. Despite these unforeseen problems, however, by the time the Williams family arrives in New York, they have shared a wonderful week's worth of memories.

The difference between our two families is that Mr. Williams was attentive to the needs and interests of his family, and he made certain to build in stops along the way to honor their interests and celebrate their progress. This attention to breaking long journeys into incremental steps and then recognizing and celebrating the completion of those steps is crucial to sustaining the effort to transform schools and districts into PLCs. Consider the following advice and identify the trend.

- “In successful change efforts, empowered people create short-term wins—victories that nourish faith in the change effort, emotionally reward the hard workers, keep the critics at bay, and build momentum. Without sufficient wins that are visible, timely, unambiguous, and meaningful to others, change efforts inevitably run into serious problems.” (Kotter & Cohen, 2002, p. 125)

- “Many change plans underestimate the momentum generated by short-term wins. . . . Short-term wins have several benefits. First, they proactively address impact concerns (such as ‘Is the change working?’). Second, they provide good news early in the change effort, when good news is hard to come by. Third, they reinforce behavior changes made by early adopters. Fourth, they help sway those who are ‘on the fence’ regarding action.” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 238)
- “Milestones that are identified, achieved, and celebrated represent an essential condition for building a learning organization.” (Thompson, 2006, p. 98)
- “The most effective change processes are incremental—they break down big problems into small, doable steps and get a person to say ‘yes’ numerous times, not just once. They plan for small wins that form the basis for a consistent pattern of winning that appeals to people’s desire to belong to a successful venture. A series of small wins provides a foundation of stable building blocks for change.” (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, pp. 218–219)
- “Specific goals should be designed to allow teams to achieve small wins as they pursue their common purpose. Small wins are invaluable to building members’ commitment and overcoming the obstacles that get in the way of achieving a meaningful, long-term purpose.” (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p. 54)
- “There is no motivator more powerful than frequent successes. By replacing large-scale, amorphous improvement objectives with short-term, incremental projects that quickly yield tangible results, managers and employees can enjoy the psychological fruits of success.” (Schaffer & Thomson, 1992, p. 86)
- “When people see tangible results, however incremental at first, and see how the results flow from the overall

concept, they will line up with enthusiasm. People want to be a part of a winning team. They want to contribute to producing visible, tangible results. When they feel the magic of momentum, when they begin to see tangible results—that's when they get on board.” (Collins, 2001, p. 175)

- “Reward small improvements in behavior along the way. Don’t wait until people achieve phenomenal results.” (Patterson et al., 2008, p. 205)
- “Win small. Win early. Win often. People can’t argue with success.” (Hamel, 2002, p. 202)
- “Through exhaustive analysis of diaries kept by knowledge workers, we discovered the *progress principle*: Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work. And the more frequently people experience that sense of progress, the more likely they are to be creatively productive in the long run.” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011)
- Short-term wins provide feedback to change leaders about the validity of their visions and strategies; give those working hard to achieve a vision a pat on the back, an emotional uplift; build faith in the effort, attracting those who are not yet actively helping; take power away from cynics. (DuFour, 2015)
- “The beauty of small wins is, if you design a small win, people see that they have produced change. Anytime you create a goal for yourself and you achieve the goal, you start to believe *I'm a person who can make a difference in my environment*. That inspires further change.” (Correll, 2019)

Our colleague, Maria Nielson, created an excellent example of planning for short-term wins. When she became principal of a failing

elementary school in northern Utah, she quickly learned that the staff felt overwhelmed by the needs of their students and skeptical of new ideas after years of failed reform attempts. Working with her leadership team, Maria asked the faculty to complete a *15-day challenge*. Each grade-level team would select one essential learning outcome to teach within a three-week unit of study. For this one standard, each team would work together to answer the four critical questions of a PLC. During this short cycle, each team did the following.

- Determined proficiency for the standard
- Wrote a common assessment to measure student mastery
- Taught the unit
- Administered and graded the common assessment
- Identified students who needed additional time and support to master the standard and which students learned the standard and were ready for extension
- Determined the most effective teaching practices to use for reteaching
- Shared students for interventions and extensions

At the end of the three weeks, the faculty marked the increases in the number of students who successfully mastered essential grade-level standards, discussed what they did to achieve these gains, and celebrated their collective efforts. Maria then challenged the staff to do it again! By breaking down the process into doable steps, and engaging every teacher in the work, the faculty experienced early success. Within three years, Maria's elementary school was recognized as a Model PLC school—a journey that began with fifteen days of focused commitment.

Sustained Effort Requires Celebrating Short-Term Wins

It is not merely achieving small victories but recognizing those victories and the people behind them that sustain momentum for

change. As Kotter and Cohen (2002) caution, “The more visible the victories are the more they help the change process. What you don’t know about is not a win” (p. 129).

Each year, employees report their biggest complaint is that their efforts and achievements go unrecognized (Patterson et al., 2008). This tendency to “astonishingly under communicate” appreciation and positive regard robs organizations of the vitality they need to sustain improvement (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). The need to feel that what we do matters and is valued by others represents one of our “deepest hungers” because it “can confirm for us that we matter as a person [sic]” and because “it connects us to other people” (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, p. 92). Kouzes and Posner (2006) advise, “There are few if any needs more basic than to be noticed, recognized, and appreciated for our efforts. . . . Extraordinary achievements never bloom in barren and unappreciative settings” (p. 44).

A sense of significance, competence, and connections represents vital human longings, and we strongly advise those who hope to embark on the PLC journey to use public recognition and celebration of achievement, effort, and improvement to address those needs and to sustain the journey. As Kanter (1999) writes:

Remembering to recognize, reward, and celebrate accomplishments is a critical leadership skill. And it is probably the most underutilized motivational tool in organizations. There is no limit to how much recognition you can provide, and it is often free. Recognition brings the change cycle to its logical conclusion, but it also motivates people to attempt change again. (p. 20)

Sadly, we have found that some schools that achieve Model PLC school status are not recognized or celebrated for their success. This happens frequently when there is an adversarial relationship between district leadership and site administration, especially if the school’s growth in student learning was achieved *despite* the district’s directives. Instead of celebrating and embracing evidence of better results, the district leadership views school leadership as a threat to the status quo. Unfortunately, we have seen several model schools slowly sink

back to mediocracy after district leaders drove away effective site leaders. This observation leads to our final recommendation for sustaining a PLC.

Sustained Effort Requires Consistent, Effective Leadership

Throughout this book, we repeatedly stress that becoming a PLC requires effective leadership. Most assuredly, at some point on the journey a key leader will leave the organization. When this leader holds a title of significant positional power—such as a site principal, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, or district superintendent—the transition in leadership has the potential to sustain or stymie the organization’s continuous focus on the right work.

One way to sustain leadership is through *succession planning*. The primary reason why Adlai E. Stevenson High School has sustained its focus on the right work for over three decades is because of their consistency in leadership. After helping create the PLC at Work process as principal of the school, Rick DuFour became the superintendent, and his assistant principal—Timothy D. Kanold—assumed the principalship. When Rick retired, Tim became the superintendent, and one of his assistant principals—Eric Twadell—was promoted. As of the writing of this book, Eric serves as the superintendent. This succession has not happened by accident.

Another way to sustain leadership is when there is consistency in focus and expectation between educators, site leadership, and the larger system. The best example we have seen of this is happening across the state of Arkansas. Legislative leaders from both major parties, working with the Governor’s Office and the Arkansas Department of Education, selected a cohort of about a dozen schools to develop as PLCs in the state. These schools received three years of job-embedded professional development, all designed to support them in doing the work of PLCs. As part of the application process for the cohort, site and district leaders had to make commitments. These

commitments—at the state, district, and site levels—created clarity of expectations and mutual accountability for success.

After the first couple of years, state leaders reached out to the universities in the state producing the largest number of teaching graduates. Leaders of the university education departments agreed to embed the essential components of the PLC at Work process into the curricular requirements for their teacher-preparation programs.

This coordinated, sustained effort between state, university, district, and site leadership is producing exceptional results! Almost every school in the program has shown significant, sustained growth in student achievement, with eight schools reaching Model PLC school status. State leaders are so pleased with the results they funded at least two additional cohorts of schools into the program, while the first cohort is helping support other schools across the state.

Final Thoughts

In some of our workshops, we ask participants to think of and describe the very best teachers they have ever had. The following are some of the comments on virtually every list.

- “He took a personal interest in me. He cared about me as a person.”
- “She had a contagious enthusiasm, a passion for her subject and for teaching that was infectious.”
- “He was energizing. He made learning fun.”
- “She had high expectations for me. She demanded my best.”
- “He believed in me and made me believe in myself.”
- “She never gave up on me. She was tenacious, always encouraging me and expressing her confidence that I would succeed.”

The common themes stated over and over again are personal connections, enthusiasm for the work, high standards coupled with high

expectations for success, and constant encouragement and support. The teachers our participants describe believed in themselves as well as their students, and their belief resulted in students who felt empowered, more confident that their efforts held the key to their success. Saphier (2005) describes such teachers as “spiritual leaders” who are able to “mobilize students’ desire to learn, build their confidence and belief in themselves, and teach them how to exert effective effort” (p. 16). Teachers who lack self-efficacy, who attribute their students’ failure to learn to external forces, or who hold their students in low regard never make this list.

We also ask participants to think of the very best leader they have known. Their responses, inevitably, echo those of the group that describe their best teacher. The point has often been made that great leaders are great teachers and great teachers are great leaders (Gardner, 1988; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Tichy, 1997). And like great teachers, great leaders believe not only in themselves but also in those they serve. School leaders who have no regard for the ability of those with whom they work, or worse, hold them in contempt, will never lead a PLC.

As Kanter (2004) writes, “self-confidence is not the real secret of leadership. The more essential ingredient is confidence in other people” (p. 328). Fullan (2008) goes even further when he argues the first of six secrets for leading the change process is to love employees as much as customers. Students may rightfully be considered the primary customer of the school, but those who hope to serve those customers cannot be indifferent to the needs, concerns, and capacity of those who are called upon to educate them.

We have grave concerns about some of the school-reform efforts in vogue today. Efforts that set out to improve schools by applying more and more severe sanctions, by prescribing what teachers in every classroom must say and do on any given day of the school year, or by providing the incentive of merit pay for those who excel are based on the premise that educators have simply not chosen to put forth the effort to raise student achievement. They resort to the “stick and

the carrot” to evoke the prerequisite effort. We believe the underlying premise of these strategies is fundamentally wrong. The problems confronting public education have never been a result of lack of effort or lack of caring among educators. We have taken good people and put them into bad systems. It is time to quit blaming the people and to transform the system. Educators must play the key role in that transformation.

We have spent decades arguing on behalf of the PLC concept specifically because it honors rather than denigrates educators. Certainly, educators are not blameless for the conditions in the systems in which they work. As a profession, we have been slow to close the gap between knowing what needs to be done to improve schools and actually doing what needs to be done. Educators must acknowledge that often, the primary cause for our inaction has been conflict from within rather than the opposition of external forces. But if those conditions improve, we must invest in, support, and develop the capacity of teachers, principals, and central office staff. If contemporary schools are to reflect fundamentally different assumptions than schools of the past, if they are to reflect a genuine commitment to high levels of learning for all students, if they are to be places of collective inquiry and collaborative efforts, it will be because of, rather than in spite of, the educators within them. We hope this book makes a small contribution to that transformation.



APPENDIX A

Support for Professional Learning Communities

Research Supporting PLCs

- “The most successful corporation of the future will be a learning organization.” (Senge, 1990, p. 4)
- “Every enterprise has to become a learning institution [and] a teaching institution. Organizations that build in continuous learning in jobs will dominate the twenty-first century.” (Drucker, 1992, p. 108)
- “The new problem of change . . . is what would it take to make the educational system a learning organization—expert at dealing with change as a normal part of its work, not just in relation to the latest policy, but as a way of life.” (Fullan, 1993, p. 4)
- “Outcomes for both staff and students have been improved by organizing professional learning communities. For staff, the results include:
 - › reduction of isolation of teachers
 - › increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school and increased vigor in working to strengthen the mission
 - › shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students’ success
 - › powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice, which creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners
 - › increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles that they play in helping all students achieve expectations
 - › higher likelihood that teachers will be well-informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students
 - › more satisfaction and higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism

- › significant advances into making teaching adaptations for students, and changes for learners made more quickly than in traditional schools
- › commitment to making significant and lasting changes
- › higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental, systemic change
- For students, the results include:
 - › decreased dropout rate and fewer classes ‘cut’
 - › lower rates of absenteeism
 - › increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools
 - › larger academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools
 - › smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds” (Hord, 1997, pp. 33–34)
- “A school-based professional community can offer support and motivation to teachers as they work to overcome the tight resources, isolation, time constraints and other obstacles they commonly encounter. . . . In schools where professional community is strong, teachers work together more effectively, and put more effort into creating and sustaining opportunities for student learning.” (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994, p. 4)
- “Preferred organizations will be learning organizations. . . . It has been said that people who stop learning stop living. This is also true of organizations.” (Handy, 1995, p. 55)
- “We have come to realize over the years that the development of a learning community of educators is itself a major cultural change that will spawn many others.” (Joyce & Showers, 1995, p. 3)
- “If schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building

a professional community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff.” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 37)

- “Only the organizations that have a passion for learning will have an enduring influence.” (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1996, p. 149)
- “[I recommend] schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers; organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding.” (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 198)
- “We argue, however, that when schools attempt significant reform, efforts to form a schoolwide professional community are critical.” (Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996, p. 13)
- Researchers Karen Seashore Louis and Helen M. Marks (1998) found that when a school is organized into a professional community, the following occurs.
 - › Teachers set higher expectations for student achievement.
 - › Students can count on the help of their teachers and peers in achieving ambitious learning goals.
 - › The quality of classroom pedagogy is considerably higher.
 - › Achievement levels are significantly higher.
- “We support and encourage the use of professional learning communities (PLCs) as a central element for effective professional development and a comprehensive reform initiative.“In our experience, PLCs have the potential to enhance the professional culture within a school district.” (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, n.d., p. 1)
 - “Such a tipping point—from reform to true collaboration—could represent the most dramatic shift in the history of educational practice. . . . We will know we have succeeded

when the absence of a ‘strong professional learning community’ in a school is an embarrassment.” (Schmoker, 2004c, p. 431)

- “The framework of a professional learning community is inextricably . . . linked to the effective integration of standards, assessment, and accountability . . . the leaders of professional learning communities balance the desire for professional autonomy with the fundamental principles and values that drive collaboration and mutual accountability.” (Reeves, 2005, pp. 47–48)
- “Well-implemented professional learning communities are a powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways that produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers.” (Sparks, 2005, p. 156)
- “Strong professional learning communities produce schools that are engines of hope and achievement for students. . . . There is nothing more important for education in the decades ahead than educating and supporting leaders in the commitments, understandings, and skills necessary to grow such schools where a focus on effort-based ability is the norm.” (Saphier, 2005, p. 111)
- “Participation in learning communities impacts teaching practice as teachers become more student centered. In addition, teaching culture is improved because the learning communities increase collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous learning; . . . when teachers participate in a learning community, students benefit as well, as indicated by improved achievement scores over time. . . . The collective results of these studies offer an unequivocal answer to the question about whether the literature supports the assumption that student learning increases when teachers participate in PLCs. The answer is a resounding

and encouraging yes.” (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, pp. 87–88)

- “The notion of professional learning communities (PLCs) has really taken off around the world. Researchers have focused attention on the topic for some time, especially in North America, but there’s a growing realization that professional learning communities hold considerable promise for supporting implementation of improvement initiatives and the progress of educational reform more generally. . . . An effective professional learning community has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning.” (Stoll et al., 2006, pp. 3–4)
- Yvonne L. Goddard, Roger D. Goddard, and Megan Tschanne-Moran (2007) studied student achievement in fourth-grade mathematics and reading and find fourth-grade students have higher achievement in both “when they attend schools characterized by higher levels of teacher collaboration for school improvement” (p. 878). Schools with a one standard deviation increase in teacher collaboration showed a 0.07–0.08 standard deviation increase in fourth-grade test scores (Goddard et al., 2007). This holds true even when they accounted for student characteristics such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status.
- “In the most successful schools, leadership *ensures there are integrated communities of professional practice in the service of student academic and social learning. There is a healthy school environment in which student learning is the central focus.* Research has demonstrated that schools organized as communities, rather than bureaucracies, are more likely to exhibit academic success.” (Goldring et al., 2007, p. 7)
- “Findings from many studies suggest that participation in a professional community with one’s colleagues is an integral

part of professional learning that impacts positively on students.” (Timperley, 2008, p. 19)

- “Successful systems are creating more opportunities and spaces for teachers to work together in sharing practices and research, developing lesson plans, and building consensus on what constitutes good teaching practice. . . . The expansion of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is indicative of the increased emphasis on teacher collaboration as the means of professional development.” (Barber & Mourshed, 2009, pp. 30, 32)
- “In those studies where the work of PLCs is linked to student achievement, the research clearly demonstrates a strong positive connection. In each of these cases the key was collaboration with a clear and persistent focus on data about student learning. . . . The studies in our sample documented changes in student achievement over time, in some cases up to 5 yr. What these studies show is that working collaboratively is the process not the goal of a PLC. The goal is enhanced student achievement.” (Vescio et al., 2008, p. 89)
- “PLCs are an indication of a broader trend toward professional development that is increasingly collaborative, data-driven, and peer-facilitated, all with a focus on classroom practice.” (Barber & Mourshed, 2009, pp. 30, 32)
- “In general, a school-based professional community entails new work arrangements for faculty that (1) make teachers’ classroom work public for examination by colleagues and external consultants; (2) institute processes of critical dialogue about classroom practices (for example, what is and is not happening in our classrooms? How do we know that something is actually working? Where is the evidence of student learning? Are there other practices that might work better, and how might we figure this out?); and (3) sustain collaboration among teachers that focuses

on strengthening the school's instructional guidance system. . . . Strong instructional leaders promote the growth of a professional community around a shared system of teaching and learning and also stay the course, guided by a coherent, strategic plan that aims to advance the entire enterprise over time." (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010, pp. 56, 133)

- "Here we emphasize the importance of professional community, largely because accumulating evidence shows that it is related to improved instruction, student achievement, and one of our leadership variables (shared leadership). . . . Professional community amounts to more than just support; it also includes shared values, a common focus on student learning, collaboration in the development of curriculum and instruction, and the purposeful sharing of practices. . . . Professional community is closely associated with organizational learning, and the term 'professional learning communities' has become a common shorthand expression among practitioners. Thus, the presence of a professional community appears to foster collective learning of new practices—where there is principal leadership." (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 42)
- "It is no accident that the standards for professional learning begin with the standard on learning communities. While many forms of professional learning may lead to improved knowledge and skills for adults, only the learning community offers a structure, process, and product that lead to systematic continuous improvement for both educators and students." (Hirsh, 2012, p. 64)
- Using the PLC process to its full potential can help create a school environment that is safe, orderly, collaborative, and learner focused. "The PLC process can change the basic dynamic of leadership within a school, allowing school

leaders to have a more efficient and direct impact upon what occurs in classrooms.” (Marzano, Warrick, & Simms, 2014, p. 27)

- “One of the most often mentioned structures for effectively using professional learning time is sometimes referred to as a ‘professional learning community,’ or PLC. Frequently organized to include teachers within a subject or grade, a PLC can be used to strategically focus on selected aspects of teaching and learning that will allow teachers to improve their practice and increase student learning.” (Farbman, Goldberg, & Miller, 2014, p. 10)
- “As with teacher self-efficacy, the strongest association between job satisfaction and collaboration with colleagues involves participating in collaborative professional learning activities.” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014, p. 27)
- One key to successful implementation of the Common Core is the “professional-learning-communities model, in which teachers meet frequently by grade level or content area to collaborate on strategies, set goals, and analyze data.” (Schneider, 2015)
- “Administrators and teachers in the effective schools worked closely together in developing and selecting instructional materials, assessments, and learning strategies. Teachers had time set aside each week to work with one another to systematically improve instructional practices.” (Anrig, 2015)
- The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21; 2015) calls for schools to organize into PLCs to model and teach the skills students will need. The organization argues that the best environments for teaching 21st century skills are “professional learning communities that enable educators to collaborate, share best practices, and integrate 21st century skills into classroom practice.” (P21, 2015)

- “PLCs can also help establish a culture in which teachers feel more empowered in their work. In a 2009 study by Patricia Hoffman, Anne Dahlman, and Ginger Zierdt, the researchers surveyed fifty-six teachers who had participated in a PLC program and found extremely high rates of agreement with items regarding the experience’s positive impacts on their teaching practice as well as feelings of efficacy.” (Marzano, Heflebower, Hoegh, Warrick, & Grift, 2016, p. 9)
- “The collegiality of the PLCs and distributed leadership seem to be supporting teachers as they make changes to their pedagogical practices, with positive outcomes for students that also help to ensure teacher well-being. Many teachers indicate that they did not believe the changed practices or improved student learning would have occurred without a highly functioning PLC.” (Owen, 2016)
- In their research, Priyanka B. Carr and Gregory M. Walton find that participants who were primed to act collaboratively stuck at their task 64 percent longer than their solitary peers, whilst also reporting higher engagement levels, lower fatigue levels and high success rate (Gaskell, 2017).
- “With a focus on improving student learning, participating teachers have enhanced their leadership capacity as they have worked as members of an ongoing collaborative PLC.” (Budgen, 2017)
- “There is an emerging international consensus that more powerful professional learning opportunities are needed . . . and that job-embedded, teacher-led learning is an essential component of these opportunities.” (Stewart, n.d.)
- “There are many open questions about what type of professional development can improve teaching. Research suggests that effective teacher professional development includes active learning over a sustained period of time,

with a focus on a specific subject. School-level research also shows positive effects when teachers share knowledge and reflect in professional learning communities.” (Bernath, 2018)

- “Given the nature of time constraints in physical meeting spaces, and the availability of new technologies, teachers as well as their supervisors should consider incorporating online PLCs into their programs . . . to address teacher isolation, teacher attrition, professional development, and student achievement with the ultimate goal of enacting fundamental changes within their districts.” (Battersby, 2019, p. 20)

Organizations That Endorse PLCs

In addition to research validating the effectiveness of PLCs, there is overwhelming support from the most prominent professional organizations in education. A sampling of this support includes the following.

- In its *Best Practices* series, the National Education Association concludes that “Research has steadily converged on the importance of strong teacher learning communities for teacher growth and commitment, suggesting as well their potential contribution to favorable student outcomes. . . . Effective professional development might thus be judged by its capacity for building (and building on) the structures and values, as well as the intellectual and leadership resources, of professional community.” (as cited in Little, 2006, p. 2)
- The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) passed a resolution supporting PLCs, and they created the Professional Learning Communities at Work series—topical resource kits to help teachers work as PLCs. An NCTE position paper argues that PLCs make teaching more rewarding and combat the problem of educators leaving

the profession: “Effective professional development fosters collegial relationships, creating professional communities where teachers share knowledge and treat each other with respect. Within such communities, teacher inquiry and reflection can flourish, and research shows that teachers who engage in collaborative professional development feel confident and well prepared to meet the demands of teaching.” (NCTE, 2006, p. 10)

- The National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) issued a position paper in 2006 in which it asserts: “There is broad agreement in the field, and increasingly empirical evidence as well, about what constitutes quality professional development for science educators. Key principles, synthesized by the National Institute for Science Education, include reflecting the research on effective classroom learning and teaching; building content and pedagogical content knowledge and skills and examining practice; using research-based methods that mirror those needed in the classroom; facilitating the development of professional learning communities; supporting teacher leadership; integrating professional development with local and state priorities and systems; and continuously evaluating effectiveness. . . . Professional development should promote collaboration among teachers in the same school, grade, or subject.” (pp. 1–2)
- The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was formed to advance the quality of teaching and learning by developing professional standards for accomplished teaching. Its position statement includes the following statement: “Proposition 5: Teachers are members of learning communities. NBCTs [National Board Certified Teachers] collaborate with others to improve student learning. . . . They work with other professionals on instructional policy,

curriculum development and staff development.” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2007b)

- The National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics (NCSM; 2008) calls on mathematics leaders to (1) ensure teachers work interdependently as a PLC to guarantee continuous improvement and gains in student achievement, (2) create the support and structures necessary to implement a PLC, and (3) ensure a systemic implementation of a PLC throughout all aspects of the mathematics curriculum, instruction, and assessment at the school, district, or regional levels.
- The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future insists that quality teaching requires strong PLCs. It has presented a summary of the research on PLCs which, it contends, must become the building blocks that establish a new foundation for America’s schools. Its director writes that it is imperative to support schools where teamwork begins with systematic induction of new teachers into a “collaborative learning culture” (as cited in Carroll & Doerr, 2010).
- With the support of the National Science Foundation, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future engaged in a joint study of STEM teachers in PLCs. The study revealed that there was universal support for PLCs across forty STEM professional organizations and that “STEM teaching is more effective and student achievement increases when teachers join forces to develop strong professional learning communities in their schools” (as cited in Fulton & Britton, 2011, p. 4).
- In 2012, NCTM co-published a series of books on using the PLC at Work process for implementing the Common Core State Standards in mathematics. (Briars, Asturias, Foster, & Gale, 2012; Kanold & Larson, 2012;

Larson et al., 2012a, 2012b; Zimmermann, Carter, Kanold, & Toncheff, 2012)

- The American Federation of Teachers (AFT; 2010) passed a resolution encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice and share what they have learned with colleagues to “fundamentally [reshape] school culture, turning the school into a professional learning community, reducing isolation, and opening new leadership opportunities for teachers.” Furthermore, its Center for School Improvement Leadership Institute includes a component designed to “identify and examine attributes of effective professional development and professional learning communities.” (AFT, 2013)
- The National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE; 2014) recommends that schools restructure to provide more time for teacher collaboration because “educators’ most powerful professional learning experiences come from collaborating with their colleagues around how they can best improve their students’ literacy learning” (p. 5).
- The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP; 2008) clarifies the essential responsibilities of that position in its publication, *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. The first book in this jointly published new series, *Essentials for Principals*, is titled, *The School Leader’s Guide to Professional Learning Communities at Work*. (DuFour & DuFour, 2012)
- The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) calls on high schools to engage in an improvement process that will ensure success for every high school student. In *Breaking Ranks II*, the NASSP (2004) urges principals to focus on the development of a PLC within each school as a primary improvement strategy.

- In *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*, the NASSP (2006) organizes thirty recommendations for improving middle schools into three general areas, the first of which calls for “collaborative leadership and professional learning communities” (p. 23).
- In 2012, the Association for Middle Level Education Board of Trustees endorsed a research report that urged principals to develop the capacity of staff to function as PLCs (as cited in Ruebel, 2011). This review of the research states: “The focus on responsive networks of school individuals, continuous reflection directed at student learning, and ongoing focus on teacher development to meet school and student needs corresponds well with the middle level concept articulated in *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2003). . . . PLCs have a consistently positive impact on student achievement results. . . . Educators can and should take comprehensive knowledge and experience related to developmentally responsive middle level schools and teachers on the journey toward the professional learning community.” (as cited in Ruebel, 2011)
- The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015) replaced what was known as the *Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards* with *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*. These standards urge education leaders to promote the success and well-being of every student by supporting professional norms in communities for teachers and other professional staff by:
 - › Collaboratively developing, implementing, and promoting a shared vision and mission for quality teaching and learning
 - › Developing the individual and collective capacity of the staff
 - › Providing for collaborative work

- › Nurturing a commitment to shared goals and shared ownership
- › Nurturing a culture of shared accountability (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015)
- The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (n.d.) supports and encourages the use of professional learning communities as a central element for effective professional development and a comprehensive reform initiative.
- The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools' Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA) calls for member schools to operate as PLCs: "Working at complementary levels—the school and classroom—the NCA school improvement and PLC processes reinforce and strengthen one another. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually supportive. If we want to ensure that no child is left behind, we must understand the important relationship between the NCA school improvement process and PLC. . . . The use of PLC at the classroom level has dramatically increased teachers' ability to implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum, monitor student progress with colleagues on school improvement goals and curriculum objectives, and improve the teaching and learning process. The strong link between school improvement goals and PLC at the classroom level allows all children to be successful." (as cited in Colliton, 2005, pp. 1–2)
- The American Educational Research Association (2005) concludes that "the more time teachers spend on professional development, the more significantly they change their practices, and that participating in professional learning communities optimizes the time spent on professional development" (pp. 2, 4).
- In *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs*, the American Association of School Librarians

(2009) calls on its members to collaborate with members of PLCs as both learners and teachers.

- The National Center for Educational Achievement (2009) finds that teachers and administrators in high-performing, low socioeconomic schools “continually used student data and feedback . . . to evaluate, adjust, and align instruction. Teachers report that student data from formative assessments and state tests help them to identify gaps in instruction, or ways that instruction needs to be changed or tailored to individual student needs” (p. 38). Assessment results are also used to adjust instruction in response to the strengths and weaknesses of entire groups of students (National Center for Educational Achievement, 2009).
- Learning Forward established standards for effective professional development. The first standard calls for schools to organize as PLCs. “Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.” (Learning Forward, n.d.)
- Both the Center for American Progress and the National Center on Time and Learning endorse the PLC process. In a 2014 study they note, “Indeed, it is not surprising that researchers have found that PLC sessions have proven to be a cornerstone of effective teaching and, in underperforming schools, a catalyst for improvement” (as cited in Farbman et al., 2014, p. 10).



A P P E N D I X B

Artifacts

Adlai Stevenson High School Vision Statement

Stevenson High School is an exemplary learning community school. To ensure future development and growth, the school must have a clear sense of the goals it is trying to accomplish, the characteristics of the school it seeks to become, and the contributions the various stakeholders in the school will make in order to transform ideals into reality. The following vision statement is intended to provide the standards Stevenson High School should strive to achieve and maintain.

Curriculum

In order to ensure “Success for Every Student,” Stevenson High School dedicates itself to a comprehensive and clearly articulated curriculum comprised of what should be learned, how it will be taught, and how learning will be assessed. From the classroom to the athletic field and in all activities, students prepare to thrive in a global community and learn to accept the challenge and responsibility of participating and leading in a democracy. To attain this vision:

1. Students learn important academic content, analyze and think critically, attain physical well-being, and develop social and emotional competencies.
2. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are dynamic, intellectually challenging, and attentive to the diverse learning needs of students.
3. Formative and summative assessments monitor student learning and track progress toward explicit learning targets, inform instruction, and support programmatic decisions.
4. Curricular teams collaborate to meet educational goals through the use of technology, interdisciplinary learning, and innovative teaching techniques.
5. Students actively engage in their learning and the assessment of such learning. Feedback provides

focus for learning and growth and promotes individual improvement.

6. Students learn leadership skills in all curricular and co-curricular pursuits.

Equity and Access for All Students

In order to ensure Success for Every Student, Stevenson High School establishes high expectations for all students and provides the support required to help them meet those expectations. Every student is recognized and valued as an individual, and the creation of support systems allows each student to attain the high standards the community holds for them. Staff members understand the importance of pursuing equity; therefore, they provide each individual student with appropriate levels of support to meet or exceed expectations. To attain this vision:

1. Faculty and staff provide students with access to opportunities and resources that allow students to meet high expectations for learning in academic, social, and emotional contexts.
2. Faculty and staff provide students with necessary support and interventions to ensure achievement of curricular expectations and appropriate social and emotional development.
3. Faculty and staff provide students with the information and support to develop educational and career goals for transitioning to, through, and beyond high school.
4. Faculty and staff teach and guide students to accept increasing responsibility for their learning, decisions, and actions.
5. Faculty and staff provide students access and encouragement that allow students to explore and take advantage of the variety of opportunities for participation in curricular and co-curricular programs.

6. Faculty and staff encourage students to persevere and excel intellectually and ethically as they actively engage in academic and co-curricular pursuits.

Building a Professional Learning Community

In order to ensure “Success for Every Student,” the Board of Education, administration, staff, students, parents, and community commit to collaborative practices that ensure continuous improvement and progress toward the vision. The collective expertise and passionate commitment to learning drive individuals to excellence in their fields.

To attain this vision:

1. All members of the school community actively promote and uphold the District’s mission, vision, values, and goals.
2. The District commits to recruiting, developing, and retaining individuals who embrace the school’s mission, vision, values, and goals.
3. All adults commit to developing and contributing to high-performing collaborative teams to better serve and support all students.
4. All members of the learning community understand that personal and professional development depends on goal setting resulting from thoughtful and critical reflection, which leads to continued learning and growth.
5. Everyone commits to innovation, collective inquiry, and evidence-based decision making, and reflects on the results of teaching and learning.

A Culture for Learning

In order to ensure “Success for Every Student,” Stevenson High School establishes a safe, caring environment and fosters a culture that is highly collaborative and enables everyone to engage in ongoing learning. Stevenson dedicates itself to meaningful teaching and learning experiences. Such a culture maximizes learning, builds mutual

respect between all members of the Stevenson community, and supports high levels of collaboration. To attain this vision:

1. All members recognize and appreciate the diversity in the greater school community, encourage mutual respect, and promote social awareness among all school stakeholders.
2. Learning is dynamic and socially constructed, requires student engagement and collaboration, and supports relationships with peers and teachers.
3. Students learn to balance the curricular and co-curricular aspects of school life to promote personal growth and life-long learning.
4. All members value social-emotional learning and work diligently to serve as models for all members of the school community.
5. The community promotes and models healthy life choices and responsible decision making as we continue to work to eliminate alcohol, drugs, violence, and bullying.
6. The community promotes, recognizes, and celebrates individual and collective effort and achievement.
7. The district maintains an environmentally responsible physical facility that meets the needs of all members of the Stevenson community and meets the learning needs of the 21st century.

Community Engagement

In order to ensure Success for Every Student, Stevenson High School values the importance of strong collaborative relationships with its extended community—families, residents, businesses, government agencies, and other educational systems. Stevenson recognizes its position as a leading professional learning community and actively participates in state, national, and global educational initiatives. To attain this vision:

1. The school provides shared-learning opportunities for the extended community to foster partnerships promoting the District's vision and values.
2. The extended community provides the various resources that enable the school to offer exemplary academic and co-curricular programs and, in turn, expects effective stewardship in the use of those resources.
3. The extended community utilizes school resources and facilities.
4. Parents play an active role in the education of their children, monitor their children's academic performance, and work collaboratively and positively with staff to maximize their children's educational experience.
5. The school, business community, and other organizations collaborate to provide authentic learning experiences for students and staff, thereby reinforcing the relevance of the academic and co-curricular programs.
6. The school continually seeks effective partnerships with consortium districts and postsecondary institutions to maintain articulation and provide seamless transitions.
7. The school promotes community participation through volunteer efforts, service learning, and leadership opportunities.
8. The school reaches out to use expertise in the community in order to develop authentic career experiences and opportunities for growth that ignite a passion for learning and exploration beyond the classroom.

Stevenson High School Board and Administrative Leadership Team Collective Commitments

The Board and Administrative Leadership Team of Stevenson High School are committed to the education and well-being of each

student. As part of a professional learning community, we have identified the following values in order to guide the policies, procedures, programs, priorities, and day-to-day decisions of the district. The team will honor, advance, and protect these values. We will also acknowledge and address behaviors that are inconsistent with the district's vision and goals.

- We will model and advance the behaviors established in the Stevenson Vision Statement to all members of the Stevenson community. These behaviors include:
 - › Active promotion of the District's vision, values, and goals
 - › High standards and expectations for student success and engagement in reflection and collective inquiry regarding best practices
 - › A commitment to the contribution toward high-performing collaborative teams
 - › A commitment to lifelong learning through ongoing professional development and growth
 - › A commitment to collective inquiry and reflection on the results of student achievement in order to improve student learning
 - › A commitment to a high level of mutual support and trust between all members of the learning community
- We will recruit and retain individuals who are best suited to advance the vision and goals of the district, and we will create conditions which support their ongoing professional growth.
- We will facilitate the development of curricular and cocurricular programs that result in high levels of student engagement, address student needs and interests, integrate technology when appropriate for achieving program goals, and enable students to understand and appreciate diversity.

- We will model, monitor, and enforce student and adult behaviors that contribute to a safe and orderly environment while respecting the rights of others within a diverse community.
- We will develop and implement policies, programs, and procedures to monitor and support collective achievement and individual student success.
- We will develop and implement policies, programs, and procedures that result in increased responsibility for student learning, decisions, and actions.
- We will recognize and celebrate the individual and collective efforts and achievements of the Stevenson community.
- We will fulfill our responsibilities for good stewardship by managing the district's resources in a manner that addresses the needs of the community, establishes community partnerships, and builds community support.
- We will fulfill our responsibility as leaders of a lighthouse school, providing effective interaction and collaboration with the educational community at large.

These commitments are designed to help the Board/Administrative Leadership Team serve the advancement of the five components of the Vision Document: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Emphasis on the Individual Student: Equity and Access for All; Working Within a Professional Learning Community; A Culture for Learning; and Community Engagement.

Stevenson High School Faculty Collective Commitments

We have established these guiding principles as a basis for our values as teachers and professionals at Stevenson High School. They are intended as a means for informal personal reflection and are not

intended to be used in the formal evaluation process. They represent our *shared purpose* and will continue to guide us as educators.

- We will develop curriculum and instructional strategies that utilize various resources, which will promote active involvement of students, and provide for their varied experiences as well as their individual abilities and talents.
- We will assist each student in his or her transition into high school, through high school, and beyond by providing appropriate instruction, monitoring his or her progress, and offering guidance and support services tailored to individual needs.
- We will model the importance of lifelong learning through our ongoing professional development.
- We will collaborate with one another to create conditions that provide equity and promote student success.
- We will act in a professional manner with integrity and honesty and develop relationships characterized by caring and respect—relationships that will lead to a rewarding professional experience.
- We will provide a supportive school atmosphere where everyone feels emotionally, physically, and intellectually safe.
- We will hold high expectations for student achievement and character, and will guide students to make responsible choices for their lives and the learning process.
- We will care for our physical environment and school property and will expect the same of students.
- We will communicate with parents and each other about students and encourage parents to be positively involved in their children's education.

Stevenson High School Support Staff Collective Commitments

As members of the Stevenson High School support staff, we affirm our active participation in helping Stevenson achieve its mission to become an exemplary learning community. In fulfilling our respective responsibilities, we share the following common commitments.

- We will support the collective effort to create the school described in Stevenson's Vision Document.
- We will foster a safe, nurturing, responsible, and positive environment that is conducive to the academic, ethical, and social growth of each individual student.
- We will continue to develop and support positive relationships with our colleagues, students, and community.
- We will show appreciation for cultural diversity and be sensitive to the thoughts and opinions of others.
- We will participate in effective and open communication throughout the school and community.
- We will pursue a commitment to continuous improvement in our performance.
- We will honor our commitment to lifelong learning.
- We will demonstrate pride and ownership in the school taking responsibility for informed decision making.
- We will develop a sense of responsibility and mutual respect in each student.
- We will celebrate school accomplishments and promote school spirit.

Collective Commitments for Stevenson Students

For more than thirty years, Stevenson High School has been building a tradition of excellence. As a student of Stevenson, you are asked to help contribute to that tradition. By maintaining high personal expectations for success, utilizing open communication with staff and fellow students, and following the guidelines listed below, you both increase your opportunities for success and help make Stevenson an excellent school. To ensure this success, we will:

- Take responsibility for our education, decisions, and actions
- Act in a manner that best represents ourselves, our school, and our community
- Be active in the school and community
- Maintain a balance between academics, cocurricular activities, and other endeavors, continually giving our best efforts to each
- Respect our fellow students and their activities
- Respect cultural diversity, individuality, and the choices and rights of others
- Promote a safe and healthy learning environment

Collective Commitments for Stevenson Parents

We, as parents, must first become familiar with the established vision statement of Stevenson High School. We can contribute to the pursuit of that vision and the success of our children when we do the following.

1. Become informed and knowledgeable about the curricular, co-curricular, and student support programs available to students by

- › Carefully reviewing school publications such as the Curriculum Coursebook, Cocurricular Handbook, and Student Guidebook
 - › Attending and participating in parent information programs sponsored by the school
 - › Reading *The Minuteman* each month
 - › Reading and using the Stevenson website
2. Assist our children in making important educational decisions by
 - › Helping them set educational goals that are appropriate to their individual capabilities, interests, and needs
 - › Participating in the course selection process
 - › Encouraging involvement in school activities
 - › Helping our children identify and pursue post-secondary education and career goals
 3. Engage in open and timely communication with the school by
 - › Responding to the school's feedback about our children's academic progress and behavior
 - › Advising school personnel of any special circumstances or needs of our children
 - › Being proactive in asking questions, expressing concerns, and seeking information
 4. Become actively involved in the life of the school by
 - › Attending school programs
 - › Participating in parent support groups such as the Patriot Parent Association, Booster Clubs, task forces, and so on
 - › Volunteering in the school

- › Acting as an advocate for quality education within the community
 - › Utilizing the resources of the school through adult education and community access programs
 - › Promoting Stevenson to the extended community
5. Help our children become responsible, self-reliant members of the school community by
- › Teaching them to accept responsibility for their own learning, decisions, and behavior
 - › Insisting they observe the rules of the school
 - › Demonstrating respect, consideration, and cooperation in dealing with others and expecting our children to do the same
6. Create a supportive environment for learning in our homes by
- › Modeling the importance of lifelong learning
 - › Providing a quiet time and place for study
 - › Helping our students make connections between their learning experiences and their everyday lives
 - › Expecting achievement and offering encouragement and praise
7. Promote healthy lifestyles by
- › Modeling and supporting responsible lifestyle choices
 - › Monitoring the activities of our children and responding to behavior which jeopardizes their health and well-being
 - › Becoming informed of the risks associated with teenage use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs
 - › Discussing and developing family rules that prohibit illegal use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs

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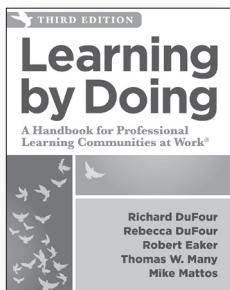
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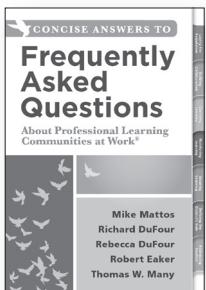


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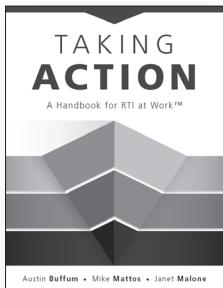


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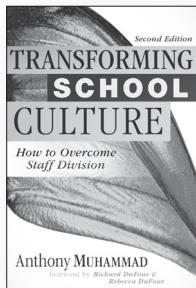


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