

## Developing a PLC

toolkits

### Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Researchers and professional organizations alike have come to endorse the Professional Learning Community concept as our best hope for sustained, substantive school improvement.

But, unfortunately, the term professional learning community—or PLC—has been used so ambiguously that it is in danger of losing all meaning. So what does it really mean to be a PLC?

School leaders who hope to build the capacity of their organizations to function as PLCs must first engage their staff in building shared knowledge of PLC concepts.

According to DuFour et al.<sup>1</sup>, a PLC is defined as follows:

“...a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order 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.”

In addition to a shared understanding of key terms, educators must also come to grips with the current reality in their schools. All school leaders and districts are different, and so are the unique challenges they face. But one thing all PLC-inclined education leaders must contend with is the daunting task of convincing their staff that the PLC model is worth the investment of effort. How can leaders build support for PLC concepts when faculty is often suffering from initiative fatigue?

They must do this not by sugarcoating the process but instead by acknowledging the brutal facts inherent to educational reform. But how do educators and administrators take the powerful concept of PLCs and put it to work in the classroom?

To find the answer, one must first ask some pointed questions:

- What is it you want students to learn?
- How will you know if students have learned it?
- What will you do if students have not learned it?
- How will you deepen the learning for students who have already mastered essential knowledge and skills?

Successful principals engage teachers in a collaborative process of seeking answers to these critical questions of learning. As a result, teachers clarify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions all students must acquire. Thus a school committed to helping all students learn to the highest possible level is born.

Schools working to form PLCs are clear about what is important. And while collaboration and collective inquiry are essential to the PLC concept, they are only successful if teachers remain focused on the right issues.

Principals in PLC-empowered schools foster a collaborative culture and are results-orientated. Teacher teams clarify essential outcomes by grade or course; develop common assessments; establish learning targets; monitor each student's learning on a timely basis; and provide systematic, timely, and directive interventions when students do not learn. These findings help educators develop strategies to enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient.

Results are a key aspect of PLCs. Faculty members encourage the efficient use of data as part of a continuous improvement process designed to provide timely information about student learning to teacher teams. Teachers in schools with a results orientation embrace the belief that their policies, practices, and procedures are aligned to promote the idea that all students can learn. When educators experience tangible results, however incremental at first, they feel the excitement of being involved in something that truly works. Becoming a PLC, however, is not something a faculty engages in for a year or two, only to abandon before moving on to a new initiative. It's a process. Something your school or district just becomes.

Principals can identify the current reality of the collaborative relationships in their schools by collecting the meeting agenda, norms, and SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) goals created by each team or gathering evidence of how teams are organized, when they are provided with time to meet, and how the work of the teams is monitored and supported. Finally, principals can assess their school's results orientation by reviewing analysis sheets indicating team conclusions and strategies for improvement and by seeking evidence that teacher teams are using protocols that promote the efficient and effective analysis of data.

As author Dennis Sparks<sup>2</sup> once said, understanding what really is important in your school "is essential because individuals and organizations move toward that which they are clearest about. It is very difficult for leaders to lead in the creation of that which they cannot describe in some detail."

The emphasis on collaboration, collective inquiry, shared decision-making, and widely dispersed leadership in PLCs has led some administrators to conclude that strong leadership is not required. Strong leadership, however, is imperative if PLC concepts are to take hold in the culture of a school or district.

The most effective leaders of PLCs are skillful at applying the leadership concept of "simultaneous loose and tight leadership"—a concept in which leaders encourage autonomy and creativity within well-defined parameters.

Leaders must acknowledge that significant change is difficult. But success breeds success, and with success comes sustainability. As the benefits of the processes for both teachers and students become more evident, teachers will become more skilled in meaningful collaboration, and what was once met with cynicism will simply be the way things are done.

<sup>1</sup> DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press

<sup>2</sup> Sparks, D. (2005). *Leading for results: Transforming teaching, learning, and relationships in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.