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CHAPTER 1

Getting Started as a Collaborative Team

KEY POINTS

- Collaborative teams are the engine of professional learning communities.
- The focus during collaborative meetings must be on student learning.
- Effective teams are clear on their purpose, and they follow key processes that enhance their ability to work efficiently.
- Effective teams are focused on results in student learning.

If you're reading this book, there's a good chance you and your team are familiar with the Professional Learning Communities at Work concept put forth by Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour. However, in case you are not, we will begin by reviewing the big ideas related to PLCs and what it takes to function in effective collaborative teams. We'll discuss the elements of PLCs, as well as some critical strategies and processes that your collaborative team will rely on while building its effectiveness. This review will help clarify the big picture of PLCs, build new knowledge, explore the types of strategies that will help prepare teams for the work of designing and using of common formative assessments, and simply provide some good reminders of what effective teams do. You can explore much of the information within this chapter in greater detail in publications such as *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work: New Insights for Improving Schools* (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008), *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, second edition (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010a), *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever It Takes* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010), and *The Collaborative Teacher: Working Together as a Professional Learning Community* (Erkens et al., 2008). These resources have captured the essence of what it means to work as a PLC and can assist schools and districts as they dig into this important work.

The Big Ideas of a Professional Learning Community

PLCs are not a program, a fad, or a meeting. A PLC is a way of doing business in schools—and that business is learning. PLCs work with that end in mind. As defined by DuFour et al. (2010b, p. 4), a PLC

is “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, they continue, “operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators” (p. 4).

The term *professional learning community* describes a culture and structure now being employed by tens of thousands of schools and districts—not just across North America, but around the world. PLCs are based on the beliefs and practices of highly effective organizations and schools (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Senge, 1990) and characterized by three big ideas that guide their work (DuFour & Eaker, 2008):

1. **A focus on learning**—Schools that operate as PLCs have a constant eye on learning and will stop at nothing to ensure high levels of learning for all students. This commitment is shared across all members of the learning community and assumes that everyone will work together to examine and change instructional practices to make sure all students learn at high levels. Rather than view their role as serving only those students who are in their classroom, teachers assume collective responsibility for the learning of all students. As a result of this collective responsibility, the pathway for attaining high levels of learning isn’t achieved through random acts of improvement implemented in isolation by individual teachers, but rather through systematic improvements that enhance the learning of all students.
2. **A culture of collaboration**—In a PLC, there is a collective commitment to *all* students in the school. The traditional line that divides “your” students versus “mine” evaporates into a culture of “our” students. Teams are responsible for the learning of all students, and in order to get there, everyone’s efforts are pointed in the same direction. To that end, it’s impossible for teachers working in isolation to ensure high levels of learning for all students. It’s clear that the task is too great, and few, if any, teachers are equipped with all the knowledge or the energy to make it happen on their own. In a PLC, teacher teams collaborate to define what students need to know and do, monitor their learning, and respond systematically when students aren’t learning essential concepts and skills. Teachers share their best instructional practices so that all students can benefit. Consequently, students receive a guaranteed and viable curriculum, one that’s clearly defined and consistently delivered regardless of what teacher they have (Marzano, 2003). Their learning is the focus of an entire team, and they reap the expertise of all of its members in a systematic fashion.
3. **A focus on results**—In a PLC, there is a significant shift from a focus on *teaching* to a focus on *learning*. Merely discussing strategies or sharing best practices isn’t enough. PLCs focus on the collective impact their professional practice has on student learning, and that impact is measured along the way by collecting and responding to meaningful data. DuFour (2004) says it best when he states that the mission “is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn” (p. 1). The all-too familiar phrase “I taught it, they just didn’t learn it” is the antithesis of PLCs. In PLCs, it’s all about what students have learned—not what teachers have taught. This constant focus on results in student learning is the impetus for developing and using common formative assessments, as well as any subsequent interventions that provide students with additional time and support.

The Role of Teams in a PLC

According to DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008), the engine behind school improvement in a professional learning community is the team—grade-level teams, departmental teams, or cross-departmental teams. The actions of these teams are guided by the following questions:

- What do we want students to know and do?
- How do we know they are learning?
- What do we do when they're not learning?
- How do we respond when they've already learned the information?

Simply put, the power of improvement lies within the team—"a group of people working *interdependently* to achieve a *common goal* for which members are held *mutually accountable*" (DuFour et al., 2010b, p. 6). The goal is to improve student learning, and teams are committed to examining and adjusting their practices so that all students walk away knowing and being able to do the things that are considered essential. The focus on a common goal is what differentiates a truly collaborative team within a PLC from a more traditional grade-level or course team. The ultimate focus of a collaborative team working within a PLC is placed squarely and consistently on student learning, not merely on the adult behaviors or the products they create. Effective teams have established a culture and a structure that enables them to do the work of clarifying their curriculum, identifying measures that monitor the learning of their students, intervening to ensure that students get needed additional time and support, and differentiating their instruction so that all students, no matter where they are, learn at high levels.

John Hattie (2009), in his book *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, examines numerous instructional practices and concludes that teachers working together in collaborative teams to clarify what students must learn, gather evidence of learning, and analyze that evidence so that they can identify the most powerful teaching strategy is indeed the practice that yields the most results in improving student learning. Getting this powerful continuous improvement model in place requires both structural adjustments and cultural shifts.

The Nuts and Bolts of Working as a Team

Before you and your team can move forward with the work of creating and implementing common formative assessments, there are some foundational structures and processes to establish. Let's examine these key factors.

Time to Collaborate

The first, and perhaps most obvious, factor is that your team must have time to collaborate on a frequent basis. The work of developing common assessments is not something that can be accomplished simply by meeting as a team once each quarter or even once monthly. To build clarity and consistency across our classrooms so that all students learn at high levels, team members need to meet with a high level of regularity. Rather than collaborating periodically during isolated events, teams need to establish a work flow that connects their actions from meeting to meeting, with little time between.

Schools of all sizes and grade levels have identified a number of ways to find time during the instructional day so that teachers are empowered to collaborate. These include the restructuring of their

CHAPTER 2

Setting the Stage for Common Formative Assessments

KEY POINTS

- There is compelling research that says that frequent formative assessments improve student achievement for all students.
- Common formative assessments do not have to be tests or quizzes.
- Common formative assessments do not have to take a long time to administer or include lengthy student work products.
- If you don't use the results of the common formative assessment to make a difference in student learning, the assessment is summative.

As we discussed in chapter 1, four critical questions guide the work of teams in PLCs (DuFour et al., 2010a, p. 28):

1. What knowledge and skills should every student acquire as a result of this unit of instruction?
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 and enrich the learning for students who are already proficient?

This book will help your team confidently answer the second question by using common formative assessments. Specifically, this chapter will help define what common formative assessments are and how they fit into a well-developed, balanced assessment system.

When your team begins to create assessments to determine whether or not students have learned the identified essential learning outcomes, you are beginning the work that many believe is pivotal to the process—the work that will really make a difference for your students, but that will also challenge you as a teacher. Before teachers really understand this work, we often hear them say, “We are already testing kids too much. Why would we want to do more testing?” and “I already know which of my kids

need help. I don't need another test to tell me that." These teachers aren't being difficult; they are just expressing their concern that any instructional time they take away from the teaching process will have a negative impact on their students.

Once teachers begin this work and start to see success, they understand that writing and using common formative assessments is not *one more thing* but rather an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Let's examine what teams need to know to help them see the value of this important step in the PLC process.

Formative Versus Summative Assessment

Most teachers are comfortable that they know the difference between formative and summative assessments. They know that formative assessments are assessments *for* learning and summative assessments are assessments *of* learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2004).

Other assessment experts have written about the difference. For example, according to Reeves (2009):

It is absolutely vital that we understand the true meaning of formative assessments—an activity designed to give meaningful feedback to students and teachers and to improve professional practice and student achievement. Tests designed only to render an evaluation cannot achieve the potential of assessment for learning that assessment experts have suggested is an essential element of effective practice. (p. 91)

DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2010) clarify formative assessments even further:

Three things must occur for the assessment to be formative: (1) the assessment is used to identify students who are experiencing difficulty, (2) those students are provided additional time and support to acquire the intended skill or concept, and (3) the students are given another opportunity to demonstrate that they've learned. (p. 63)

We address this clarification in more detail throughout this book. Chapter 7 will help teams see how to use the results from these assessments to identify not only *which* students need help but also *what kind of help* they need. In that chapter, we also explore ways that teams can find the time to provide help for identified students. Later in the chapter, we also explore the idea of how teams will need to think differently about their grading practices once they begin using formative assessments.

We believe the purpose of the assessment and how teams use the results is what really determines whether it is formative or summative, not how it's written or administered. If the assessment occurs during the learning process, and the results will be used to help students continue to learn, it is considered formative. As DuFour et al. (2010b) note, *formative assessment* is "used to advance and not merely monitor each student's learning; the assessment informs the teacher regarding the effectiveness of instruction and the individual student regarding progress in becoming proficient" (p. 3). If the assessment occurs after the learning is complete, and is used to give a grade or provide a final measure of student results, it is *summative*. So the biggest difference will not be in what the assessment looks like but rather in how teachers respond to the results. For example, if an English teacher asks her students to complete a graphic organizer comparing themes of two stories, grades the assignment, and then returns them to her students believing it's a formative assessment, she's confused the difference between formative and summative. What would make this assessment formative is if she used the assignment to determine which of her students were not able to compare the themes of the stories and then provided them with additional instruction as a result of the information.

You will learn in chapters 4 and 5 that in order to develop truly effective formative assessments, you will need to break *standards*—the narrowest item listed by a state when describing what students should know and be able to do—into each of the learning targets that are made clear to students. *Learning targets* are the smaller skills, strategies, and pieces of content information a student needs to know in order to be able to complete the standard (see figure 2.1). The process your team will use to carefully uncover these learning targets is described in chapter 4, *The Unwrapping Process: Achieving Collective Clarity on Learning Targets*.

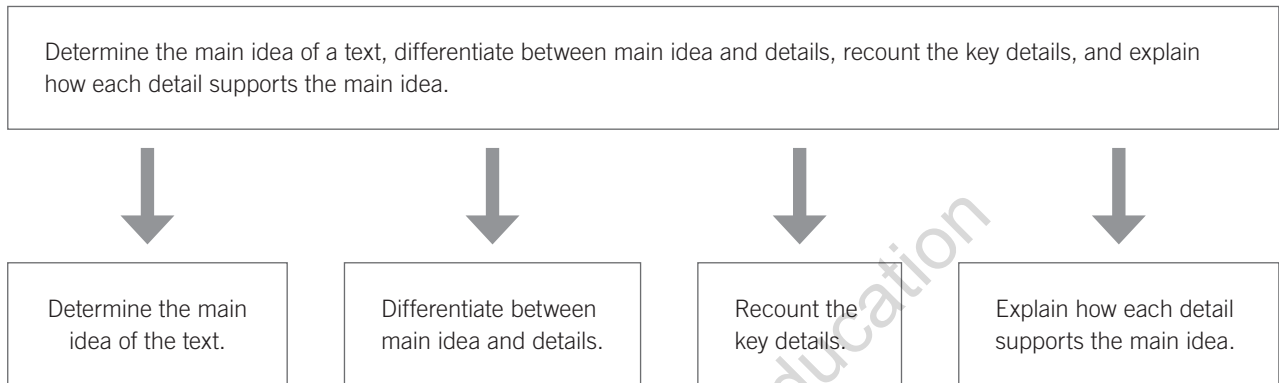


Figure 2.1: Example of how a learning standard breaks down into learning targets.

The term *standard* is used throughout this chapter in a generic way. The Common Core State Standards Initiative uses the term *standard* to “define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K–12 education careers so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010a). However, before these standards were developed, most states used a variety of terminology to mean this same thing. For example, Arizona uses the term *performance objective*, and Illinois uses the term *performance descriptor*. And to make it even more complicated for teachers, even within the same state, standards often are written with a different *grain size*. That is, one might be a specific skill, while another, a much larger learning outcome.

This concept of unwrapping is one of the key strategies teams can use to write formative assessments to guide their instruction. A formative assessment is usually written around learning targets (specific skills and strategies), and a summative assessment is usually written around more complex standards or even multiple standards. The reason that this is important is that the learning targets are the step-by-step processes we teach students as they move toward their understanding of a bigger concept. We assess them formatively so that we know exactly how to respond when a student is experiencing difficulty during the learning process.

In chapter 5, your team will learn a process for designing a formative assessment around a small number of learning targets so that you can identify and respond to students who haven’t learned the targets in an expeditious way.