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## INTRODUCTION

# Systemic PLCs

Rick DuFour has spent a professional lifetime showing what well-implemented professional learning communities look like, how to create them, and why they are good for students and teachers. Hundreds of schools have experienced significant gains in student achievement by embracing the PLC process (as documented on [allthingsplc.info](http://allthingsplc.info)). In 2011, three of the four finalists for national superintendent of the year in the United States attributed their district's success in raising student achievement to the PLC at Work™ process that Rick created with his colleagues Robert Eaker and Rebecca DuFour. He asserts that the best hope for sustained and substantive school improvement is to develop the capacity of educators to function as members of a PLC.

Michael Fullan has devoted his distinguished professional career to the exploration of how to best bring about meaningful change in schools, districts, and the educational system as an entity. Combining a focus on the moral imperative with how to change whole systems, Michael has helped lead large-scale successful reform in several countries.

In one of his latest works, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*, Michael and his coauthor Andy Hargreaves (2012) acknowledge the value of well-implemented PLCs. But they also observe that, too often, PLC strategies “have been imposed simplistically and heavy-handedly by overzealous administrators” (p. 128), that PLCs are sometimes viewed more favorably by those at the top (administrators) than they are by those on the ground (teachers), and that “the current PLC movement should be reconfigured and reconsidered” (p. 136).

With this book, *Cultures Built to Last: Systemic PLCs at Work™*, the two of us have teamed up in an effort to stress our continuing support for the PLC process, but we also recast PLCs from just another attractive innovation for individual schools to the central instrument for changing the culture of the education system: district-, state-, and nationwide. An orientation and commitment to whole-system reform are especially important for PLCs because they started as—and it is easy for them to be stuck at—being an individual-school phenomenon. To make PLCs systemic, leaders at all levels must see the strategy as tantamount to changing the culture of the system. They must abandon the perception that PLCs represent a program to be implemented and recognize that the PLC process is a cultural transformation that has lasting value.

## The Challenge of Cultural Change

Structural change deals with policies, programs, rules, and procedures. A characteristic of structural change, one that political and educational leaders often find attractive, is that these changes can be mandated. A state government can increase graduation requirements, adopt the Common Core State Standards, or increase the number of required school days in a calendar year. A district can move its high schools to a block schedule, adopt a new language arts program, or require students to wear school uniforms as a matter of fiat.

Unlike structural change that can be mandated, cultural change requires altering long-held assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that represent the norm for people in the organization. These deeply held but typically unexamined assumptions help people make sense of their world. More simply put, culture is just “the way we do things around here.” Systemic implementation of the PLC process requires changing the way things have typically been done at all levels.

Two things are true about cultural change: it is absolutely doable, but it is also undeniably difficult. Factors that contribute to the difficulty include the following:

- It requires significant changes to traditional schooling practices that have endured for over a century. In particular, it changes the way that just about everyone relates to each other in the school and across schools and the system.
- It is certain to create conflict.

- It is multifaceted. Leaders do not have the luxury of focusing on a single aspect of the organization that requires attention.
- It is a heuristic process of trial and error. There is no formula to be followed that guarantees the desired outcomes. Much of cultural change involves working through complexity by finding out what is working and what isn't, and by making adjustments based on the findings. The good news is that there are clear ideas for guiding the process.
- It never ends. Creating the commitment to continuous improvement inherent in the PLC process means you never "arrive."

But, although we acknowledge the difficulty of cultural change, we are convinced that unless leaders recognize the need for whole-system reform aimed at changing the very culture of the system, schools will be unable to meet the challenges they confront. Furthermore, even those individual schools that have implemented the PLC process successfully will find it difficult to sustain the process unless the larger system provides a more positive and supportive context.

On the other hand, PLCs as cultural change are exciting for people and can get initial results in fairly short order. They unleash energy and draw in the vast majority of people who begin to make fundamental changes never before thought possible.

When the PLC process drives an entire system, participants come to have a sense of identity that goes beyond just their own piece of the system. They identify in palpable ways with the overall organization, unleashing the energy of mutual allegiance and competition for the common good. This "systemness" exists in the hearts and minds of the people working together for the betterment of the system and is a defining characteristic of the culture.

So to be explicitly overt regarding our purpose in writing this book, we hope to convince readers of three things:

1. If the PLC process is going to impact education beyond the individual school or isolated district, the process must be the driving force of the entire system. It is time for PLCs to go big!
2. The PLC process is just that—a process, not a program. Educators don't "do PLC" one year and then move on to something else the following year. They will not get the lasting benefits from PLCs until they learn to implement the process deeply and widely as a

fundamental change in the culture of schools and school systems. We will elaborate on this distinction between process and program throughout the book.

3. Every person in the system has an obligation to be an instrument for cultural change—rather than waiting for others to make the necessary changes.

By *system*, we mean multiple schools and communities that are tied together within a single authority. The school district is the minimum size for us, but increasingly we mean all the districts in a given province or state, and in some cases, we mean the entire country. If the overall system is not the focus of ongoing improvement, it will be extremely difficult for schools or districts to sustain continuous development.

## Why We Need Systemic PLCs

At a time when the link between education and lifetime opportunity is stronger than ever before, the United States continues to score low on measures of education performance, and the gap between high and low performance is growing. The United States scores twentieth or worse among the thirty-four countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In addition, studies show that American students are increasingly bored as they move up the grade levels. A study by Lee Jenkins (2012) found that 95 percent of kindergarteners like school, but by grade 9, this percentage has decreased to 37. The news is not much better for teachers. A 2012 MetLife Survey (Markow & Pieters, 2012) shows that teachers are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their jobs, with almost one in three teachers contemplating leaving the profession. Equally shocking is the rapidity of the decline. The survey found that 39 percent of teachers in 2012 were satisfied compared to 62 percent only two years earlier. We have to contemplate what kind of places our schools really are if so many people would rather be somewhere else.

PLCs can play a central role in dramatically improving the overall performance of schools, the engagement of students, and the sense of efficacy and job

*Changing culture in systemic ways is at the heart of any successful large-scale education reform.*

satisfaction of educators. Furthermore, this improvement can occur not just in isolated individual schools, but across entire districts, states, and provinces. To do this, leaders must grasp the underlying principles of PLCs and realize that changing culture in systemic ways is at the heart of any successful large-scale education reform.

## Why Systemwide Reform Is Best

In the late 1970s and 1980s, researchers Ron Edmonds, Wilbur Brookover, Larry Lezotte, Michael Rutter, and others presented evidence that some schools were significantly more effective than others in helping students learn when external factors such as the socioeconomic status or family background of students were held constant. The focus of their research was the individual school, and they concluded that the school, rather than the district, should serve as the primary unit for reform. In fact, Lezotte (2011) acknowledged that early in their research, he and his colleagues leading the effective schools movement concluded that the district was “irrelevant” when it came to promoting effective practices in schools. They pointed to the fact that, while a district typically provided similar policies, programs, materials, and resources to all of their schools, some of the schools in the district were highly effective and some were not. Their conclusion reflected popular opinion at the time: the central office has little impact on student achievement.

Over time, Lezotte and his colleagues changed their view. They recognized that without central-office support, other schools in a district were unable to learn from an effective school. Furthermore, the effective school was unlikely to sustain a commitment to continuous improvement. As Lezotte (2011) notes:

If creating and maintaining schools as effective isn't a district-wide priority, the school will likely not be able to maintain its effectiveness status. Without broader based organizational support, school effectiveness tends to depend too heavily on the heroic commitment of the school leader or only a few staff. We have [seen] numerous cases where the principal of any effective school moved on for one reason or another and was replaced by someone who did not share the passion, vision or values. When this happened the school usually, and quickly I might add, returned to its earlier state. (p. 15)

Numerous other studies have now affirmed that an effective central office can play a major role in improving schools throughout the system. When Robert Marzano and Tim Waters (2009) conducted one of the largest-ever quantitative research studies on superintendents, they found a statistically significant relationship between district leadership and student achievement. Another study (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), funded by the Wallace Foundation, demonstrated the link between effective school leadership and

established the vital role of the central office in creating the conditions that promote and support such leadership at the school level.

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.

- How did Adlai E. Stevenson High School District 125 in Lincolnshire, Illinois, become one of the highest-performing districts in the United States, and then continue to improve student achievement each year for over a quarter of a century under the leadership of four different superintendents?
- How did Sanger Unified School District in California, located in the congressional district with the highest level of poverty in the United States, move from one of the first districts in the state assigned into program improvement because of low student achievement to a district that now exceeds state goals and has become a national model for districtwide reform?
- How did Schaumburg District 54 in Schaumburg, Illinois, increase the percentage of its students demonstrating proficiency on the state assessment from 75 percent to over 90 percent in five years? How did this district, where no school had ever helped 90 percent or more of its students achieve proficiency in mathematics and language arts, transform itself into a system where nineteen of its twenty-seven schools achieved this benchmark goal in just a few years?
- How did Whittier Union High School District in California steadily improve student achievement in all of its schools at the same time the percentage of its students living in poverty skyrocketed from 40 percent to 80 percent?
- How did Blue Valley School District in Kansas move student achievement from good to great—and then sustain greatness year after year?

In each case, district leaders maintained a commitment to and focus on building the individual and collective capacity of educators throughout the district. In each case, the district provided educators with the ongoing clarity and support to help them succeed at what they were being asked to do. In short, they worked to ensure that every school in their districts was functioning as a PLC.