



# Starting a Movement

BUILDING CULTURE FROM THE  
INSIDE OUT IN PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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# Introduction

## Ready, Set, Stall . . .

There is a difference between interest and commitment. When you're interested in doing something, you do it only when it is convenient. When you're committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results.

—KENNETH BLANCHARD

As the Professional Learning Communities at Work™ (PLC) initiative gained momentum in the early 2000s, many educators wondered:

- If PLCs were a fad
- If we could really expect all students to learn at high levels
- If working interdependently through collaboration was really best practice

Heated debates arose on whether collaboration really was possible and a desirable way to achieve the stated goals of a school. Detractors vehemently defended the practice of teaching in isolation—not because of any research that supports it, but because it is easier than collaboration. It's true: working together is a lot more challenging than working alone. Focusing on what we as teachers *can do* instead of on what we *don't have* requires a collective commitment.

Since the early years of PLCs, many success stories have helped change the perception of the process from a model that challenges the status quo to a highly regarded framework in which:

- We accept teacher collaboration as best practice to improve student learning and instructional practice
- Educators embrace the notion that teaching hasn't occurred until learning has

Becoming a PLC still presents some challenges to the status quo and an ongoing need for paradigm shifts, but educators by and large agree that the structure offers our best hope for significant school improvement.

Early in the PLC movement, Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (1995) noted that “the development of a learning community of educators is itself a major cultural change that will spawn many others” (p. 3). Likewise, Linda Darling-Hammond (1996) recommends that “schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers: organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding” (p. 198).

Melanie S. Morrissey (2000) notes the benefits:

[PLCs] offer an infrastructure to create the supportive cultures and conditions necessary for achieving significant gains in teaching and learning. Professional learning communities provide opportunities for professional staff to look deeply into the teaching and learning process and to learn how to become more effective in their work with students.

As PLCs gained popularity, more researchers began to pay attention. Another study asserts:

[PLCs] 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)

As Michael Barber and Mona Mourshed (2009) note, “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” (p. 30). Other findings 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).

In addition, many organizations have endorsed the PLC movement. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (n.d.) has developed professional standards for accomplished teaching. The organization’s fifth proposition is that “teachers are members of learning communities” who collaborate with others to improve student learning.

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM; 2008) has called on math leaders to:

1. Ensure teachers work interdependently as a professional learning community to guarantee continuous improvement and gains in student achievement
2. Create the support and structures necessary to implement a professional learning community
3. Ensure a systemic implementation of a professional learning community throughout all aspects of the mathematics curriculum, instruction, and assessment at the school, district, or regional level

Likewise, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) passed a resolution supporting PLCs. Its 2006 position paper argues that PLCs make teaching more rewarding and combat the problem of educators leaving the profession. It notes:

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)

While PLCs receive much external support, the challenge for schools is internal. Regardless of the locale, demographics, or pressures facing a school or district, the title of this chapter identifies one common threat to the success of PLC implementation: ready, set, stall. Schools and districts may set out to implement the PLC model with great energy and a lot of hope. However, if the work feels like one more thing to do then it is just that; a shift from *doing* a PLC (compliance) to *becoming* a PLC (commitment) is necessary.

If schools and districts don't evolve from compliance to commitment, then they won't see the results of their work: improved learning for both students and adults. We contend that belief follows behavior. Though it's human nature to need to see success before believing, success comes about by first examining, exploring, envisioning, and committing to agreed-on, high-leverage best practices. Early in any process, one expects to see more compliance than commitment. The problem emerges when schools remain trapped in a cycle of compliance without evolving toward commitment. Unless something changes, these schools never transform into true PLCs.

Even in schools with the best of intentions, those that find the PLC process stalling have almost always failed to build a culture of *collective responsibility*—the shared belief that the primary responsibility of each member of the organization is to ensure high levels of learning for every student (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008).