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A Case Study in
Implementing
PLCs at Work™

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Foreword by Richard DuFour and Rebecca DuFour

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about the author



Nicholas Jay Myers, EdD, is assistant superintendent for student learning in Schaumburg Township School District 54, the largest elementary school district in Illinois. He supports the implementation of the professional learning community model in the twenty-seven diverse elementary and junior high schools in the district. Dr. Myers is former principal of Anne Fox School in Hanover Park, Illinois, a targeted assistance Title I school with an exceptionally diverse student population. As a result of its transformation into a PLC, Fox experienced dramatic improvement in student achievement.

During Dr. Myers' tenure, Fox moved from 68 percent of students meeting or exceeding state academic standards in 2005 to more than 95 percent in 2009. The school's story of academic resurgence has been documented in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Daily Herald*, and the *Illinois Alumni* magazine. Fox is included as a model PLC on the allthingsPLC.com website and was referenced in Richard DuFour and Robert Marzano's 2011 book *Leaders of Learning*. Fox received the 2007 and 2008 Academic Improvement Award from the Illinois State Board of Education for significant gains in academic achievement. For his leadership, Dr. Myers received a Those Who Excel Award from the Illinois State Board of Education. His article "Block Scheduling That Gets Results" was featured in the November/December 2008 edition of *Principal* magazine and his co-authored article "Moving Up From Mediocre" was featured in the January 2012 edition of *School Administrator*.

Dr. Myers earned a bachelor's degree in education at the University of Nebraska, a master's degree in administration from Northern Illinois University, and a doctorate in educational leadership and organizational change from Roosevelt University.

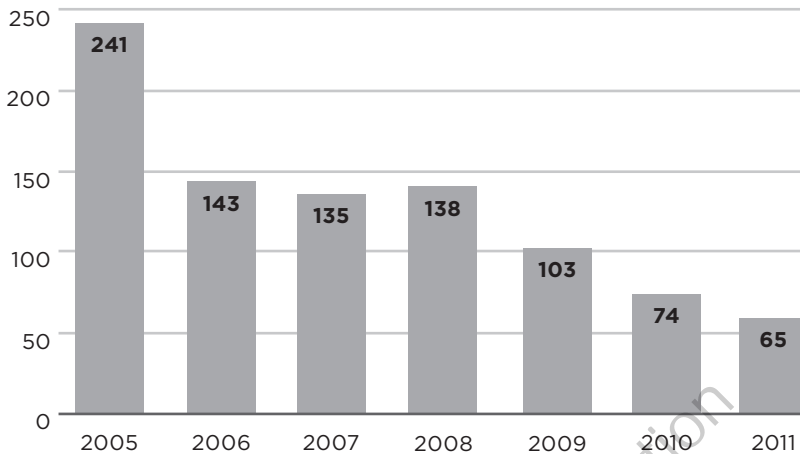


Figure I.1: District 54 state rankings (out of 740 Illinois elementary school districts).

Chapter Overviews

District 54's journey is certainly far from complete, but staff members have learned many lessons along the way. For districts and schools seeking to successfully transform into PLCs at their respective sites, this account of District 54's journey will provide guidance, reassurance, and practical suggestions for ways to develop and enhance PLCs that, ultimately, improve student learning outcomes.

This book provides an understanding of the steps and processes District 54 took and developed to bring about deep implementation of the PLC at Work™ model.

- Chapter 1 discusses the initial steps the district took to introduce the PLC concept systemwide.
- Chapter 2 details the process District 54 used to create its mission, vision, collective commitments, and goals—critical foundational aspects of districts functioning as true PLCs.
- Chapter 3 provides an in-depth discussion of ways to enhance collaborative processes across a school district—from the district office down to grade-level teaching teams.
- Chapter 4 explains how District 54 established essential learning outcomes in all subjects and grade levels through the implementation of a consistent writing process.

Defining Mission, Vision, Collective Commitments, and Goals

The value of creating a meaningful mission, vision, commitments, and goals cannot be overstated. The collaborative process used to create these documents empowers staff to hold themselves highly accountable because they participated in the creation of the objectives. Leaders should not be satisfied with documents that are vague or cliché; they should be a true reflection of the personality and culture of the organization.

—BRIAN LAWSON, DISTRICT 54 PRINCIPAL

People within a PLC are unified by their shared sense of purpose, vision for the future, commitment to enacting positive change strategies, and intention to attain measurable achievement goals. To focus the efforts of the system around PLC concepts and principles, District 54 convened a Board Goals Team during the second year of implementation. This group would be responsible for establishing District 54's mission, vision, collective commitments, and goals that served as the foundation for the district's work moving forward.

DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) note that shared mission, vision, collective commitments, and goals form the foundation of the PLC framework. They emphasize that in creating a shared mission, an organization articulates its fundamental purpose; in establishing a shared vision, an organization describes its ideal future state; and in establishing collective commitments, an organization explicitly delineates how stakeholders intend to make their shared vision a reality. Setting specific, measurable goals further enables an organization to determine its levels of effectiveness. By establishing such a foundation, organizations provide clarity to stakeholders regarding their intended direction and future focus. District 54's PLC journey proved the importance of establishing such a foundation.

The subgroups devoted time to crafting their language before writing their collective commitments draft on chart paper for the group as a whole to see. Because these commitments were specific to each group, other groups were not permitted to change or alter the language. This process ensured that the commitments truly resonated with and connected to the stakeholder groups' roles in the school district. A subcommittee compiled a draft of all the collective commitments, which would be reviewed at the team's next meeting. The district's collective commitments are presented in figure 2.2.

Collective Commitments for the Board of Education

As the board of education, we will use a collaborative process to support the District 54 vision of Ensuring Student Success by our commitment to:

- Celebrate student, employee, alumni, and community accomplishments
- Foster positive relationships with all employees
- Operate in a fiscally responsible manner
- Utilize data to continuously review and evaluate the effectiveness of district programs
- Remain active in the legislative process
- Maintain intergovernmental relationships and networks
- Encourage open communication while recognizing the need for confidentiality
- Participate in a biennial board self-evaluation and ongoing professional development activities

Collective Commitments for Parents and Community

As parents and community members, we recognize that we have the most significant role in shaping the lives of our children. We can contribute to their success and support the District 54 vision of Ensuring Student Success by our commitment to:

- Work collaboratively with school personnel by
 - + Engaging in open and timely communication with the school
 - + Attending parent-teacher conferences and school sponsored programs
 - + Knowing and supporting student goals
 - + Advising the school of information that impacts student learning
 - + Advocating for our children by asking questions, expressing concerns, and seeking information

Expressions and Equations

Students will:

- Fluently compute with real numbers
- Solve linear equations and inequalities
- Use and apply proportional reasoning
- Compute and evaluate expressions
- Solve systems linear equations
- Perform operations with polynomials
- Solve and factor polynomials
- Solve and perform operations with radical expressions and equations
- Solve and perform operations with rational expressions and equations
- Apply exponent properties
- Justify and explain the steps used to solve a problem

Functions

Students will:

- Graph and write linear equations and inequalities

Geometry

Students will:

- Solve real-life and mathematical problems involving angle measure, area, surface area, and volume
- Understand and apply formulas and theorems

Source: School District 54 (n.d.b).

Figure 4.3: Eighth-grade essential learning outcomes for mathematics.

essential outcomes in the same manner, critiqued each potential essential outcome, and were asked to state their support of the final products they created. This ensured that the district's essential outcomes were uniform in scope, coherence, and understanding and that the teachers developing the documents could take full ownership in the product and process.

2. Consult Multiple Resources

Districts and schools engaging in this work should use a variety of different resources to identify essential learning outcomes, including state learning standards, the Common Core State Standards, state assessment frameworks, assessment data, and curriculum pacing guides. By examining these documents, teachers will gain a

grade-level proficiency in targeted areas. Without reliable data, teams struggled to develop intervention strategies. In short, grade-level teams at Fox did not consistently focus on results.

Additionally, staff at Fox relied solely on outdated and ineffective modes for supporting students struggling to grasp essential skills. Prior to their PLC transformation, the school had three main responses for remediation: (1) afterschool tutoring groups, (2) group pull-out instruction using a canned literacy remediation program administered by an instructional assistant, and (3) referral to the school's special education Child Study Team. For years, students languished with these ineffective responses, and the building inched dangerously close to failing to meet adequate yearly progress as dictated by No Child Left Behind.

To change this disturbing trend, the staff began by first considering if they clearly identified the essential outcomes in core academic areas that all children must have in place before moving along to the next grade level (as discussed earlier in chapter 4). Next, they developed meaningful formative assessments that truly identified the specific learning needs of each child (as discussed in chapter 5). After that, they examined the following three questions:

1. Do we intervene the moment *any* child demonstrates difficulty mastering essential grade-level skills and concepts, or do we wait until children fail before placing them into intervention programs?
2. Are our interventions by invitation, or are they systematically built into our 8:40 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. school day and delivered to *all* students in need of additional time and support?
3. Do we wait until a child has an IEP before we provide additional time and support?

To accomplish change, Fox needed to devise new systems of both instruction and support for all students, especially those students struggling to master essential outcomes. The first critical discussion that took place on the Fox campus involved teachers committing themselves to creating serious academic learning environments, including a daily, ninety-minute minimum literacy block for all children. During this ninety-minute block, teachers implemented a comprehensive, balanced literacy model (developed by the District 54 Department of Instruction) calling for daily guided, shared, and independent reading and writing, as well as vocabulary and word

to the implementation of PLC concepts, the teachers' union shared the following:

- Scheduling of individual and team planning time for teachers
- Trying to fit all instructional goals into the school day
- Developing common assessments
- Gaining a clear understanding of what each of the district's principals consider to be loose and tight expectations for PLC implementation

To the credit of the district's union leadership, board of education, and administrative leadership, time was taken to problem solve collaboratively and formulate productive solutions around these concerns that are in the best interest of the district's students. Regular meetings between the Schaumburg Education Association executive board and district administrators were held so concerns of members could be openly presented and addressed by the administration. In addition, a Superintendent Communication Council, consisting of the superintendent and two representatives per school, was established in the second year of PLC implementation to provide yet another avenue for communication regarding district goals and operating practices. Building representatives submit any building level questions or concerns from their respective schools, and time is spent openly responding to each item presented.

Make Celebration and Recognition Meaningful

District 54 remains dedicated to celebrating and recognizing the achievement gains that resulted across the system during the PLC transformation. Awarding individual honors, asking teacher teams to present before colleagues, and honoring schools that met the board of education's 90/90 goals all represent ways the district has utilized celebration and recognition of successes to propel PLC implementation forward. There are many challenges that schools and districts face when implementing PLCs, and by recognizing and celebrating successes, staff morale and enthusiasm related to the process remained high and supportive.

Listen to Teachers

District 54's teachers embed collaborative processes into their daily routines and use data to differentiate their instructional practices in