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Professional Learning Communities at Work Journal

Since the mid-1990s, Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker and Rebecca DuFour have championed a professional learning communities (PLC) model for school improvement. A **professional learning community** is *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*. A PLC operates under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators.

Professional learning communities are characterised by shared mission, vision, values and goals; collaborative teams focused on learning; collective inquiry into “best practice” and “current reality”; action orientation and experimentation; commitment to continuous improvement; and a focus on results.

A PLC places its emphasis on learning for all (students and adults), building a collaborative culture and maintaining a constant focus on results. These factors are critical to the sustained and substantive school improvement process that characterises professional learning communities at work.

How This Journal Is Organised

Most journals are designed to guide the individual classroom teacher in instructional decisions. They focus on, “What will *I* teach, when will *I* teach it and how will *I* teach it?” The *Professional Learning Communities at Work Journal* is unique because it not only assists the individual teacher, but also guides the collaborative team planning and processes essential to schools that operate as PLCs. Most importantly, this journal calls upon teachers to go far beyond the traditional questions of teaching to a relentless focus on *learning*—for both students and adults.

The first section of the *Professional Learning Communities at Work Journal* contains an overview of the three big ideas that shape a PLC, cultural shifts that are to be expected and keys to building high-performing collaborative teams. It also includes forms to help you work with your team more effectively as well as the standard forms you need to collect and organise information about your students and your classes.

The second section includes text and activities to inform, inspire and challenge you and your teammates as you take the professional learning community journey.

The third section provides references and resources for further study.

What Is a "Professional Learning Community"?

To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively and hold yourself accountable for results.

By Richard DuFour

The idea of improving schools by developing *professional learning communities* is currently in vogue. People use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education—a year-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school, a state department of education, a national professional organization and so on. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning.

The professional learning community model has now reached a critical juncture, one well known to those who have witnessed the fate of other well-intentioned school reform efforts. In this all-too-familiar cycle, initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative, followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative. Another reform movement has come and gone, reinforcing the conventional education wisdom that promises, "This too shall pass."

The movement to develop professional learning communities can avoid this cycle, but only if educators reflect critically on the concept's merits. What are the "big ideas" that represent the core principles of professional learning communities? How do these principles guide schools' efforts to sustain the professional learning community model until it becomes deeply embedded in the culture of the school?

Big Idea #1: Ensuring That Students Learn

The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift—from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning—has profound implications for schools.

School mission statements that promise "learning for all" have become a cliché. But when a school staff takes that statement literally—when teachers view it as a pledge to ensure the success of each student rather than as politically correct hyperbole—profound changes begin to take place. The school staff finds itself asking, "What school characteristics and practices have been most successful in helping all students achieve at high levels? How could we adopt those characteristics and practices in our own school? What commitments would we have to make to one another to create such a school? What indicators could we monitor to assess our progress?" When the staff has built shared knowledge and found common ground on these questions, the school has a solid foundation for moving forward with its improvement initiative.

Critical Issues for Team Consideration

Team Name: _____

Team Members: _____

Use the scale below to indicate the extent to which each of the following statements is true of your team.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not True of Our Team						Our Team Is Addressing		True of Our Team	

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. ___ We have identified team norms and protocols to guide us in working together.</p> <p>2. ___ We have analysed student achievement data and have established SMART goals that we are working interdependently to achieve.</p> <p>3. ___ Each member of our team is clear on the essential learnings of our course in general as well as the essential learnings of each unit.</p> <p>4. ___ We have aligned the essential learnings with the relevant standards and the high-stakes exams required of our students.</p> <p>5. ___ We have identified course content and/or topics that can be eliminated so we can devote more time to essential curriculum.</p> <p>6. ___ We have agreed on how to best sequence the content of the course and have established pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learnings.</p> <p>7. ___ We have identified the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need in order to master the essential learnings of our courses and each unit of these courses.</p> <p>8. ___ We have identified strategies and created instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.</p> <p>9. ___ We have developed strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking in those areas.</p> | <p>10. ___ We have developed frequent common formative assessments that help us to determine each student's mastery of essential learnings.</p> <p>11. ___ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our common assessments.</p> <p>12. ___ We have developed common summative assessments that help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of our program.</p> <p>13. ___ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our summative assessments.</p> <p>14. ___ We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learnings of our course, and we practise applying those criteria to ensure consistency.</p> <p>15. ___ We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and have provided them with examples.</p> <p>16. ___ We evaluate our adherence to and the effectiveness of our team norms at least twice each year.</p> <p>17. ___ We use the results of our common assessments to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of a process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.</p> <p>18. ___ We use the results of our common assessments to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learnings, and we work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.</p> |
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PLC Example: Collaborating for Excellence

This school's PLC journey is founded on teacher collaboration. Most departments have mapped their curriculum, aligned it to the content standards and developed bench mark assessments to administer every 6 weeks. Teachers analyse student scores to monitor progress and improve instruction, using best-practice teaching strategies.

Notes:

Three years ago [our school] was cited as an "under-performing school". This year it was designated as a [...] Distinguished School and [...]Academic Achieving High School. It is the only high school in the state [lauded] for its successful inclusion program.

This dramatic turnaround was grounded in the implementation of PLC concepts in the school. Teachers committed to the success of every student began working together collaboratively and monitoring the learning of each student on an ongoing basis.

One teacher described the change in the school's culture this way: "When we confronted low achievement in the past, we would say, 'But we are just [our school].' Now when there is evidence of a student experiencing difficulty, our response is, 'But we are [our school].'"

PLC concepts are making a huge difference in our school.

—Marc Johnson, Superintendent

PLC Example: Streamlining Improvement

This school used the process of becoming a PLC as an opportunity to consolidate all of the school improvement requirements that had come their way. Using the four critical questions of a PLC, the staff took a single, focused approach to sustained school improvement. As a result, the school has surpassed the other schools in the area in student achievement. By using common pacing guides, common formative assessments and other PLC strategies, the school has:

- Increased proficiency in English from 49.2% in 2001 to 63.3% in 2005
- Increased proficiency in science from 10.4% in 2001 to 72.4% in 2005
- Excelled in assessment scores for English, maths, science and social studies from 2003 to 2005, with scores well above the state averages

Notes:

[Our school] has built a deep, meaningful collaborative culture and has transformed our school by making learning rather than teaching its fundamental purpose. The staff members take justifiable pride in the powerful results their collective efforts have produced, even as they look for additional ways to reach all students.

—Dave Ingham, Principal