



INTRODUCTION

I believe we are closer than ever in knowing what must be done to engage all classrooms and schools in continuous reform. Knowing what must be done . . . is not the same as getting it done.

—MICHAEL FULLAN, 2007

We will know we have succeeded when the absence of a “strong professional learning community” in a school is an embarrassment.

—MIKE SCHMOKER, 2004

In our writings on professional learning communities (PLCs) that have spanned more than a decade, we have challenged educators to confront the question, what happens in our school when, despite our best efforts in the classroom, a student does not learn? We have contended that traditionally the response to that question has been left to the discretion of individual teachers, leading to a kind of educational lottery for students. We continue to argue that this individualistic and random approach is neither effective nor equitable. We insist that a school committed to helping all students learn at high levels should provide a multilayered *collective* response that *guarantees* all students who struggle will receive additional time and support for learning. We propose that a school sincerely interested in the learning of each student should actually have a plan for monitoring that learning and a comprehensive pyramid of interventions for responding promptly, consistently, and effectively when some students do not learn. In short, a school that purports to be a PLC should be able to answer in the affirmative to the following questions about its response to students who experience difficulty:

- Is our response based upon **intervention** rather than remediation? Does our plan provide students with additional time and support for learning as soon as they experience difficulty rather than rely on remediation—summer school, retention, remedial courses—when students fail to meet a standard at the conclusion of a course or grade level?
- Is our response **timely**? How quickly are we, as a school, able to identify students who need additional time and support? How often do we ask, “How do we know if our students are not learning?” And

how quickly are we able to respond when a student has been identified as in need of additional help?

- Is our response **directive**? Do we *invite* students to seek additional help, or does our systematic plan *require* students to receive the additional assistance and devote the extra time necessary to master the concept? A decade of research into the “things that matter most” in raising student achievement found that schools that improve the most insist students get extra help whenever there is evidence that those students are having difficulty in learning (Bottoms, 1998).
- Is our response **systematic**? Have we created processes that ensure we respond to students according to a schoolwide plan rather than according to the discretion of individual teachers? Are procedures in place to monitor the execution of the plan? Are all staff members aware of the procedures? Do we provide consistent responses if asked to explain the steps our school takes when students have difficulty in learning?

We have raised these same issues in our previous books as we have attempted to:

- Persuade educators to confront the brutal facts regarding how schools have traditionally been organized and how they have responded when students experience difficulty
- Examine the historical antecedents and continuing assumptions behind the way schools are structured
- Make a compelling case that a new conceptual framework, the professional learning community, is needed if schools are to help all students learn
- Provide specific recommendations regarding the conceptual framework and how it can be implemented in schools, tools and resources to assist with implementation, and clear parameters and benchmarks for monitoring progress
- Clarify the new roles, responsibilities, and relationships that educators must embrace if their schools are to operate as PLCs
- Explain how such vital activities as curriculum implementation, assessment, and professional development are addressed in a PLC
- Offer detailed illustrations of how different schools have implemented the PLC concept at the elementary, middle, and high school levels

1 A commitment to high levels of learning for all students

The fundamental purpose of our school is to ensure all students learn at high levels, and the future success of students depends on how effective we are in achieving that fundamental purpose. There must be no ambiguity or hedging regarding our commitment to learning, and we align all practices, procedures, and policies in light of that fundamental purpose. We recognize that a commitment to the learning of each student means we must work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, provide systematic interventions that ensure a student receives additional time and support for learning when he or she struggles, and extend and enrich learning when a student has already mastered the intended outcomes. We also recognize that if all students are to learn at high levels, we must also be continually learning. Therefore, we must create structures to ensure all staff members engage in job-embedded learning as part of our routine work practices.

2 A commitment to a collaborative culture

We cannot achieve our fundamental purpose of learning for all if we work in isolation. Therefore, we must build a collaborative culture in which we work together interdependently and assume collective responsibility for the learning of all students.

3 A commitment to using results to foster continuous improvement

We will not know whether or not all students are learning unless we are hungry for evidence that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions most essential to their success. We must systematically monitor each student's learning on an ongoing basis and use evidence of that learning to respond immediately to students who experience difficulty, to inform our individual and collective professional practice, and to fuel continuous improvement.

In other words, we concur with Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009), who conclude that RTI will not impact student learning unless it is part of a larger effort to build the capacity of educators to shape the cultures and structures of their schools so that they can function as members of a professional learning community.

The Need for Reform

It could be argued that there is much to celebrate when looking at the contemporary educational landscape. A greater percentage of high school

graduates are pursuing postsecondary education, more students are taking rigorous college-level courses in high school than ever before, public approval for the quality of their local schools has risen almost 20 percent since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), and that approval is at one of its highest points in four decades (Rose & Gallup, 2006). How is it that the victims of an educational system that has been so deficient for half a century have continued to accomplish so much? Why is it that schools represent the fundamental problem in bad times but apparently contribute so little to the good? We concur with the assessment of educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995), who concluded, “The public schools, for all their faults, remain one of our most stable and effective public institutions—indeed, given the increase in social pathologies in the society, educators have done far better in the last generation than might be expected” (p. 38).

Even if, however, much of the popular criticism of schools has been unfair and unfounded, we contend that educators have both a professional and moral responsibility to constantly seek better ways of meeting the needs of their students. We want to stress that, while we are sympathetic to the difficult conditions in which educators find themselves, we are not apologists for the status quo. The assumptions, expectations, beliefs, behaviors, and structures that have guided educational practice throughout the history of this country and others are inadequate to meet the present challenges. Educators can help more students succeed at higher levels than ever before *if* they are willing to change many of their assumptions and practices, most of which draw their origins from earlier times when education was intended to serve a far different purpose. Educators *must* escape the burdens of their history and make substantive changes in the structure and culture of their schools and districts. In the next chapter we present some of the preliminary work that must be done as educators examine the issue of how they can better respond to the needs of their students.

A Shift in the Response When Students Don't Learn	
From individual teachers determining the appropriate response ...	to a systematic response that ensures support for every student
From fixed time and support for learning ...	to time and support for learning as variables
From remediation ...	to intervention
From invitational support outside of the school day ...	to directed (that is, required) support occurring during the school day
From one opportunity to demonstrate learning ...	to multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning
A Shift in the Work of Teachers	
From isolation ...	to collaboration
From each teacher clarifying what students must learn ...	to collaborative teams building shared knowledge and understanding about essential learning
From each teacher assigning priority to different learning standards ...	to collaborative teams establishing the priority of respective learning standards
From each teacher determining the pacing of the curriculum ...	to collaborative teams of teachers agreeing on common pacing
From individual teachers attempting to discover ways to improve results ...	to collaborative teams of teachers helping each other improve
From privatization of practice ...	to open sharing of practice
From decisions made on the basis of individual preferences ...	to decisions made collectively by building shared knowledge of best practice
From "collaboration lite" on matters unrelated to student achievement ...	to collaboration explicitly focused on issues and questions that most impact student achievement
From an assumption that these are "my kids, those are your kids" ...	to an assumption that these are "our kids"
A Shift in Focus	
From an external focus on issues outside of the school ...	to an internal focus on steps the staff can take to improve the school
From a focus on inputs ...	to a focus on results
From goals related to completion of projects and activities ...	to SMART goals demanding evidence of student learning
From teachers gathering data from their individually constructed tests in order to assign grades ...	to collaborative teams acquiring information from common assessments in order to (1) inform their individual and collective practice, and (2) respond to students who need additional time and support

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