



# A NEW BEGINNING

Sitting at his desk, Steve could not believe his luck. Having worked in the Seneca Township School District as a building principal for the past nine years, he knew he was a respected leader with a wide range of experiences, but like most educators, he did not see himself as anything special. That is why his conversation over lunch with district superintendent Patricia Tines had caught him by surprise.

“Steve,” said Superintendent Tines, “I’ve got an important role for you to fill, and I’m hoping that you’ll agree to a bit of a change.”

Never one to shy away from change, Steve was excited. In fact, an inherent fear of stagnation had always pushed him professionally. He had moved from a successful ten-year career as a high school English teacher into administration, intent on having a greater impact on more students by working beyond the classroom—and once there, he discovered that he loved learning about leadership. Schools were tricky places built on social relationships and influence, but Steve was an old pro at using relationships to drive change. What is more, he spent countless hours reading, determined to understand the inner workings of organizations. He always seemed to get the most out of his teachers, and as a result, his schools always seemed to produce impressive results, regardless of the student population they served. Kids were learning in Steve’s buildings, and he was incredibly proud of that.

“Allen Jenkins—the principal at Central Middle School—is retiring next year,” continued Superintendent Tines. “I’m sure you know that Central Middle has been one of the flagship schools in Seneca Township since it opened ten years ago. In many ways, it is the heart of our community. . . . I’d like you to be Central’s principal, Steve, and I’d like you to begin building a professional learning community from the ground up. What do you think?”

Steve knew immediately that this was an opportunity he would never pass up. He loved his current faculty—they had turned around a struggling building together in the span of four short years—but Central Middle’s visibility would make this position one of the most challenging he had ever considered, and Steve loved a good challenge. He accepted without hesitation. “I’m honored that you’d think of me, Pat. Leading Central Middle is the dream of any principal in our district. Count me in!”

Dreaming would not guarantee Central Middle’s success, though. Like any high-performing school, Central Middle would need a collection of determined teachers willing to learn from

each other, to perfect their craft, and—most importantly—to work tirelessly on behalf of children. Steve understood that in most buildings, untapped power rested in the hearts and minds of teachers working collaboratively. He had seen it happen time after time in small pockets of every school that he had ever led: the elective teachers who found new ways to integrate reading into their classrooms, the math teachers who identified a handful of skills central to student success, the social studies teachers who engaged in research with one another, studying the impact that their practices had on different groups of students.

While Steve had tried to spread the pockets of practice across his entire building in the past, his efforts always felt somewhat scattered. Instead of creating the conditions that would make such collective action a part of the very fabric of his schools, Steve found himself reacting to what he learned: seeing something impressive, introducing it to influential teachers, and then hoping change would stick. “Central Middle School is going to be different,” Steve thought to himself. “We’re going to get schoolwide collaboration right this time, finding a way for every teacher to be a leader and a learner.”

Catching his breath, Steve made his first decision as Central Middle School’s new principal: he picked up the phone and called Michael, an old friend and one of Central Middle’s most talented, motivated, and influential teachers. “Hey, Michael,” said Steve, “What would you think about helping me build a professional learning community?”

## Getting Started

What a fantastic opportunity! Superintendent Tines gave Steve the chance to take all of his previous efforts at supporting collaboration and make them the cornerstone of his new building.

But how exactly is that done? How can administrators and motivated teachers take the promise of a professional learning community (PLC) and turn it into reality? Whether starting in a new building or working with the same colleagues from the past fifteen years, how can school leaders transform theories of collaboration into highly effective nuts-and-bolts practices? This book is designed as a guide for accomplishing that difficult task, chronicling the efforts of Steve and his teachers to build a true PLC at Central Middle School and focusing on the successes and challenges inherent in the process.

The lessons in *Building a Professional Learning Community at Work* are drawn from our own experiences working in a variety of roles as practitioners—as teachers, building administrators, consultants, and coaches—at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. From those experiences, we have learned that powerful collaboration can happen anywhere, but it requires hard work, purposeful steps, and a deep understanding of the PLC model. The tools in this book have been tested time and again by our own teachers and our own teams, and our suggestions have helped to improve practices in our own schools. We hope this book serves as an effective introduction to the kinds of steps you can take to polish professional learning in your own buildings.

Each chapter includes these four elements:

1. **An Opening Story**—This book, at its core, is the story of Steve and his teachers, so each chapter starts with a narrative highlighting an important event in their growth together as a learning community. One question you might ask is, “Are the stories true?”

As an answer, consider the range of movies that attempt to portray true stories. At one end of the spectrum are documentaries, which try to record real events exactly as they happen and real people exactly as they are. At the other end of the spectrum are movies “inspired by real events.” (In other words, somebody somewhere did something that is sort of like one of the events in this story, but almost everything that you see here is complete fiction.)

In between are movies “based on true events”—the stories and people are real, but changes have been made to create a clear narrative. Maybe the traits and actions of several people were combined together into one character, or words that were said at different times are put together into one monologue.

This is what we have tried to do in *Building a PLC at Work*: create a series of stories that are based on true events from the schools in which we have worked. We have rearranged some characters and added some dialogue, but each of these stories represents the real-life experiences of actual teachers and administrators going through the difficult work of creating PLCs.

2. **Lessons From the Front Line**—This second section of each chapter explores what you can learn from the choices Steve and his teachers made. Like a postgame locker-room conversation between a coach and his athletes, this section spotlights the successful decisions and common mistakes made by the characters in the opening narrative. You get a firsthand look into our minds because we lived each of these experiences. We hope our insights help you when you are faced with similar situations.

The value in “Lessons From the Front Line” is in the process of learning from any story: you have the opportunity to work through imaginative rehearsals, mentally practicing responses to real events. The chances are good that you will experience many of the same challenges that Steve and his Central Middle School colleagues tackled as you push to become a PLC. Taking the time to think through your own decisions and to see how they compare to the decisions made by our fictional characters will leave you better prepared to lead when the time is right.

3. **Relevant Theory and Research**—Change in schools depends on one of the most challenging tasks faced by leaders in any profession: changing behaviors. It is not enough for school leaders—whether they be principals or teachers working on learning teams—to identify new instructional materials or to find faster ways to get students through lunchroom assembly lines. Instead, school leaders have to actively manage the complexity of human organizations in order to succeed. Questions like, “How can I ensure that all teachers are pulling in the same direction?” “What

organization. Once the core team is established, it is important that administrators spend time with the core team, encouraging conversations throughout the group and creating opportunities for participants to discuss and debate the building's central principles, translating them into practical ideas and statements. At this point in the process, school leaders must be open to additions or revisions to their original principles. It is particularly important for doubting members of a building's core team to have opportunities to share their reservations. A leader's willingness to respect the voice of supporters and skeptics alike will build trust and commitment between administration and influential teachers. Core team members are experts with a deep understanding of the dynamics of human relationships within a building; effective leaders allow this knowledge to shape the central principles of a learning community without compromising their nonnegotiables.

The materials at the end of this chapter can help school leaders to carefully plan their core teams. Included are a brainstorming tool, *Who Are the Personalities in Your Organization?* (page 40), that can be used to identify potential core team members and a tracking tool, *Balancing the Core Team* (pages 41–42), that can help to ensure that the teachers you are identifying as leaders have influence across your entire building.

### **Ensure a Collective Process**

For the leader pushing a new vision, there is an important fact that has to be accepted: at a certain point, it's no longer the leader's vision, but rather a collective vision.

As long as everyone on the team commits to a central set of principles, the details will work themselves out—even when the details feel like the most important thing in the world and heated disagreements result over simple challenges. When the principles underlying the decision-making process are pervasive throughout a school—if the best interests of students are the goal *despite* the conflict over details—then the organization can be successful and move forward in the face of any challenge.

For leaders, this means being willing to let go of details while reinforcing principles. For participants in the process, this means being willing to compromise, recognizing that mistakes and frustrations are a natural part of the organizational learning process. As DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) argue, “Educators can clarify a general sense of direction at the outset of an improvement initiative, but a shared vision emerges over time as a result of action, reflection, and collective meaning based on collective experiences” (p. 145).

Both of these behaviors—letting go of details and being willing to compromise—are facilitated by opportunities for ongoing conversations focused on a building's core principles. The handout *Creating Opportunities for Dialogue* (page 43) can help you to systematically create these opportunities for your faculty.

### **Value Relationships**

When establishing a core team, it is important to develop professional and intellectual connections, but it is equally important to establish congenial relationships. Once

## Balancing the Core Team

To guarantee that ideas spread across an entire building, it is also essential that core teams include members who are influential in every grade level and department in a school. Use the following tracking table to ensure that your core team has the kind of broad representation to ensure success.

Department Name	Potential Core Team Member	Personality Type	Is Person Considered Influential by His or Her Peers?	
		<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship Builder <input type="checkbox"/> System Thinker <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solver <input type="checkbox"/> Innovator	Yes	No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship Builder <input type="checkbox"/> System Thinker <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solver <input type="checkbox"/> Innovator	Yes	No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship Builder <input type="checkbox"/> System Thinker <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solver <input type="checkbox"/> Innovator	Yes	No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship Builder <input type="checkbox"/> System Thinker <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solver <input type="checkbox"/> Innovator	Yes	No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship Builder <input type="checkbox"/> System Thinker <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solver <input type="checkbox"/> Innovator	Yes	No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Relationship Builder <input type="checkbox"/> System Thinker <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solver <input type="checkbox"/> Innovator	Yes	No