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INTRODUCTION

A question relevant to readers and writers alike is: “Who is the intended audience for this work?” A potential reader may frame the question a slightly different way: “Am I included in the intended audience?” or “Will reading this benefit me in some way?” A writer will ask: “Who am I attempting to influence?”

When a book is intended to appeal to a wide range of stakeholders, the challenge of answering the “Who am I attempting to influence?” question becomes considerably more daunting. In this introduction, we hope to clarify our intention to focus on the wider audience—both legislative and educational. We’ll examine the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) and explain why it must address the interests of a wider range of stakeholders rather than those of a particular interest group. This broader approach operates on the assumption that people in different parts of an organization can find common ground if they make it a priority to do so.

The Professional Learning Communities at Work™ (PLC) process has helped hundreds of schools and entire districts go from underperforming to high achieving, from good to great, and from great to greater (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016). (Visit www.allthingsplc.info/evidence to see numerous models of the PLC at Work process around the world.)

PLC schools and districts implement processes that drive continuous improvement throughout the organization. The educators within

the organization recognize that the key to improved learning for students is the ongoing, job-embedded learning of the adults who serve those students. Therefore, educators in a PLC no longer work in isolation (“my classroom,” “my students”) but rather work in collaborative teams. Collaborative team members take collective responsibility for ensuring that each student in their course, discipline, or grade learns at high levels—grade level or better—each year.

A PLC school’s master schedule is aligned to the number-one priority of the school: ensuring high levels of learning for all. Educators learn with and from each other because time is allocated each week for teams to work and learn together. Collaborative team members within a PLC school or district work collaboratively to:

- Agree on the most important skills, concepts, and dispositions every student must learn
- Monitor each student’s learning on a frequent basis using team-developed common assessments
- Analyze student-learning results to determine which students are struggling to learn and which students have demonstrated proficiency
- Share instructional practices with one another that proved to be effective, based on the student-learning results from their common assessments
- Use their joint analysis of evidence of student learning to set goals for continuous improvement

The school, rather than the individual classroom teacher, guarantees students receive extra time and support to learn beyond daily classroom instruction during a period of the school day specifically designated for extra support. When students struggle to learn, based on the results of team common assessments, the support is timely and targeted intervention. When students have demonstrated high levels of learning, the extra support is designed to extend their learning.

When the PLC process is implemented unit by unit in each course and grade level, students and educators continually learn at higher levels. The success of each student is impacted not by one teacher to whom

the student has been assigned but rather by a caring and skillful team of teachers who take collective responsibility for the learning of each student and each other.

A Rare Opportunity

Americans interested in public education in the United States have a rare opportunity. The passage of ESSA gives stakeholders in education the chance to redefine the purpose, priorities, and processes of schooling.

The key word in the preceding paragraph is *opportunity*, rather than *certainty*. In this book, we will demonstrate the following.

- The passage of ESSA represents a significant policy change from prior legislation and regulations.
- The authority of the U.S. Secretary of Education has been drastically diminished by the passage of ESSA. In fact, the legislation prohibits the secretary from making recommendations dealing with curriculum and instruction.
- States now have the ability to establish their own new and unique goals, standards, curriculum, evaluation processes, incentives, and punishments.
- One of the challenges at the state level is to determine whether state departments of education will use their increased authority to identify creative ways to improve schools and help more students learn at high levels, or whether they will continue to pursue the ill-advised, failed policies from 2001 through 2016: the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, enacted in 2001 and signed by President George W. Bush, and supported by majorities in both parties; and the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative established by President Barack Obama in 2009.
- Another challenge at the state level is communicating with more than fourteen thousand U.S. school districts (United

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States Census Bureau, n.d.) in a way that provides clarity of purpose and a shared common vision of schooling.

- At the local level, educators must come to a common understanding of how ESSA can impact their day-to-day work. Ultimately, we will call on them to build their collective capacity to embrace the following two key ideas.
 - a. All students can learn.
 - b. The entire staff shares a collective responsibility to support the academic success of every student.
- The most promising strategy for sustained and substantive school improvement is developing the capacity of the staff to function as members of high-performing teams in schools that are true professional learning communities.
- Local education leaders must explain changes in policy to parents and other stakeholders. Without such clear and consistent communication, parents can easily default to their own experience—the way school was when they were students.

The Audience

So, who is the audience for this book? In a perfect world, every state legislature would become deeply familiar with this book's contents. Lawmakers would be persuaded to move away from the punitive-based, sanction-driven reforms of the past and use this book to help clarify how states can improve student learning by embracing PLC principles. We will address the specifics of those principles. However, this is more than a manual for policymakers. The practical advice in the following pages will be useful for leaders at the district, school, and classroom levels.

During the first decade and a half of the 21st century, education leaders asked, "What does Washington want?" as they attempted to avoid the sanctions of No Child Left Behind and pursue the incentives of Race to the Top. But with the advent of ESSA, education leaders must ask, "What do the students in my system need?" The implementation of the PLC process and the other ideas in this book is not

merely a response to national legislation but rather an ethical imperative. These are the right things to do and not an exercise in compliance with higher authorities.

But ultimately, the impact of ESSA on student learning in the United States depends on the quality of educators students meet with each day. *Collective efficacy*—the belief that our combined efforts can have a positive impact in achieving our shared goals—is one of the strongest predictors of an improving school. The PLC process, when implemented well, is our best strategy for increasing teacher, administrator, and student efficacy.

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Out of Chaos Comes Order

To outside observers, the U.S. education system reflects chaos. It involves 14,000 independent school districts, 150,000 schools, and more than 48 million students—with no national agreement on what students should know at any given grade level, no comprehensive exam that assesses everything students should learn, and no consensus on what schools should do when students struggle to learn (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

If the U.S. education system is ever to operate as a true *system*, it must embrace clarity of purpose, a guaranteed and viable curriculum, careful monitoring of each student's learning, and a prompt intervention process that ensures the staff continues to provide struggling students extra time and support until they become proficient.

Educators and legislators who work together to create a true system of education in their districts and schools can offer action research to help others learn from their work. In short, the years to come can be the best of times for schooling in the United States *if our legislatures and districts fully commit to the PLC process*. But if lawmakers and educators cling to the failed

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policies of the past—policies that view teachers as problems to solve rather than resources to develop—ESSA will have little impact on student achievement.

In the Face of Uncertainty

Political uncertainty in every era pushes education leaders into one of two directions. The first, and most common, is the path of *paralysis*: “We can’t respond until we know what to do,” these leaders lament. This strikes us as curious, as the same leaders often express deep resentment of policy hierarchies that have, during the years 2001–2016, issued one directive after another. Most of these policy prescriptions, particularly those associated with accountability systems based on student test scores and Byzantine teacher evaluation systems (no offense intended to the Byzantine Empire), have been counterproductive. Time that could have been profitably devoted to teaching and learning has been diverted to test prep and mind-numbing documentation of teacher evaluation systems.

But now that schools, districts, and states have been liberated from these restrictions, education leaders following the first path remain paralyzed, waiting for one bureaucratic system to be replaced by another, as if toxic micromanagement from a national capital would magically be better displaced by the same policies from a state capital.

There is a better way, and that is the path this book suggests. Schools, districts, and states can pursue a new way—*accountability as a learning system*. They can focus on known best practices in teaching and learning, with collaborative work among teachers and administrators at every level. We believe that the fundamental purpose of educational accountability is improving student learning through improved teaching and leadership practices. This is in stark contrast to those who believe that the purpose of educational accountability is to rate, rank, evaluate, and humiliate schools and the teachers and administrators who work there.

While we know that schools should not be immune from criticism, we have seen no evidence that criticism, ratings, and rankings have led to improved student achievement. At the heart of the PLC process is a

continuous source of feedback that helps students, teachers, and administrators understand how to improve. Just as PLCs are a *learning system* for collaborative teams of teachers, our vision of accountability is that the PLC framework can help entire districts, states, and ultimately the world.

We write with a sense of urgency. As the following chapters demonstrate, education systems have an unprecedented opportunity to redefine in fundamental terms what the phrase *educational accountability* really means. Readers will discover the opportunity to engage in fundamental transformation, from accountability as a means for public humiliation, supported by dubious and opaque statistical systems, to accountability as a learning system, one that helps students, teachers, education leaders, and policymakers use the information from accountability systems to inform professional practice and policymaking in real time.

Education systems have an unprecedented opportunity to redefine in fundamental terms what the phrase educational accountability really means.

After considering the history of education oversight in the United States in chapter 1, we then examine ESSA and how states can respond to this legislation in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 4, we provide an example of how an individual school might respond to ESSA, elevating collaboration over a tradition of competitive private practice. In chapters 5 and 6, we consider how districts and states, respectively, can respond to ESSA. In these chapters, we offer a three-tiered accountability system in which districts and states consider accountability indicators that are common to all schools, such as safety and academic achievement, and illuminate these results with accountability indicators that are unique to the needs of each individual school. Our theme in these chapters is that accountability is more than a litany of test scores. Educational accountability becomes a learning system only when effects—student achievement—are linked to causes—specific actions of teachers, leaders, parents, and policymakers. Finally, in chapter 7, we consider the path ahead for ESSA.

Let us state at the outset that this is not the time for education leaders to wait and see what might happen in terms of state and federal