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INTRODUCTION

The investment of time and expertise by schools and districts to make the transformation into an effective Professional Learning Community (PLC) at Work is about to pay off once again. The adoption of the Common Core State Standards for English language arts (CCSS ELA) represents a significant change in how the education profession looks at curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In addition, the implications for implementation of the CCSS ELA will have ramifications for years to come. As new research on best practices related to the Common Core State Standards is conducted and disseminated, educators will need to interpret these results and determine how best to put them into practice. The PLC process offers an ideal foundational system for doing so. This process provides the necessary conditions and support to accomplish the work of ensuring continuous improvement. Ongoing professional development is embedded into the process, because teachers work as members of high-performing collaborative teams. Becoming a PLC is a process of reculturing a school; the concept is not just another meeting (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009). Effective districtwide or schoolwide PLCs have the following six characteristics (DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010).

1. **Shared mission, vision, values, and goals all focused on student learning:** The *mission* defines why the organization exists; the *vision* defines what the organization can become in the future; the *values* consist of demonstrated attitudes and behaviors that further the vision; and the *goals* are markers used to determine results and assess progress. A thriving PLC immerses itself in the behaviors necessary to the development of these concepts.
2. **A collaborative culture with a focus on learning:** *Collaboration*, an essential ingredient in the PLC process, enables people to work interdependently to improve teaching and learning.
3. **Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality:** *Collective inquiry* is the process through which PLC educators strive to build shared knowledge about research and what works in their classrooms.

4. **Action orientation:** An *action orientation* is characteristic of successful PLCs that learn by doing and recognize the significance and necessity of actions that engage their members in planning learning tasks, implementing them, and evaluating results.
5. **A commitment to continuous improvement:** *Continuous improvement* is a cyclical process that PLCs use to plan, implement, and check to determine the effectiveness of their efforts to improve teaching and learning.
6. **Results orientation:** *Results* are what count for PLCs; they are the measurable outcomes that reveal the success of the collaborative efforts to improve teaching and learning. Results outweigh intentions.

Visit www.allthingsplc.info for a glossary of PLC terms.

These six characteristics must be woven into the fabric of the school; they have to become part of the air that teachers, parents, students, and administrators breathe. In creating this culture, PLCs must reach agreement on fundamental issues, including (DuFour et al., 2008):

- What content students should learn
- What common and coherent assessments to develop and use to determine if students have learned the agreed-on curriculum
- How to respond when students do or don't learn the agreed-on curriculum

To accomplish these three tasks, teachers need adequate time to collaborate with their colleagues. We are not suggesting that scheduling time for teachers to collaborate is easy, but without dedicated time, teams will not develop the collaborative structures needed to support student learning, especially if teachers are going to address the Common Core State Standards in grades 3–5. As part of their collaborative team time, teachers in PLCs engage in inquiry into student learning. The following four critical questions of a PLC highlight and provide a foundation for the work of collaborative planning teams (DuFour et al., 2008).

1. What do we want our students to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students don't learn?
4. How will we extend and enrich the learning for students who are already proficient?

Professional Development and Professional Learning Communities

Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) summarizes the research on effective professional development as follows:

Effective professional development is sustained, ongoing, content-focused, and embedded in professional learning communities where teachers work overtime on problems of practice with other teachers in their subject area or school. Furthermore, it focuses on concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection, looking at how students learn specific content in particular contexts. . . . It is often useful for teachers to be put in the position of studying the very material that they intend to teach to their own students. (pp. 226–227)

In other words, effective professional development is often the opposite of what most teachers receive—it is sustained and embedded within the work of professional learning communities and focused on the actual tasks of teaching using the material teachers use with students. Professional development practices have moved beyond stand-alone workshops to ones that are tied to a school's chosen area of focus. Through the work of researchers like Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (1983) and others, educators began to understand that professional development could be linked to the change process. In particular, the value of an agreed-on focus, the need for continued support after the session, and a plan for measuring success have become expected elements of any school's professional development plan. To succeed as a high-performance school, professional development should be part of a teacher's overall involvement in a learning community.

The link between professional development and school change has been further strengthened through PLCs (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). PLCs recognize that teacher collaboration lies at the heart of learning and change. Collaborative planning teams within PLCs are able to bridge theory to practice as they convene regularly to examine student performance data, discuss student progress, develop and implement curricula, and coach one another through meaningful collaborative work between meetings.

The evidence of PLC effectiveness is mounting. A study of elementary teachers in PLCs identifies a strong statistical correlation between their participation in professional learning communities, their classroom cultures, and their use of formative assessments to advance learning (Birenbaum, Kimron, & Shilton, 2011). Robert Bullough and Steven Baugh (2008) find that the conditions created to foster a schoolwide PLC in turn deepened a school-university partnership. In an analysis of nearly four hundred schools as PLCs, Louise Stoll, Ray Bolam, Agnes McMahon, Mike Wallace, and Sally Thomas (2006) note a positive relationship between student achievement, adoption of innovative practices, and healthy learning communities. In fact, Robert Marzano notes that school and district-level PLCs are “probably the most influential movement with regards to actually changing practices in schools” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. x).

Purpose of This Book

We hope we have made the case, however, briefly, that a PLC at the school or district level is vital to school change. Furthermore, collaborative planning teams functioning within the school's PLC provide embedded professional development that sustains change.

In fact, chances are good that you are interested in this book because it promises to link an important change—implementing the Common Core State Standards in English language arts—with a process you already know to be powerful: professional learning communities. The remainder of this book provides collaborative teacher teams with information about the *what* and the *how* of teaching students to master these standards, including how to develop effective formative assessment and respond when students fail to make progress. We expand the Common Core standards so that you and your team can examine them in detail. You will find that each chapter begins with questions for your team to consider, and we invite you to return to these after you examine the standards to discuss implications for instruction, curriculum, assessment, and intervention.

Organization of This Book

This book has been crafted with your collaborative team in mind. Use it as a workbook—mark it up, dog-ear the pages, highlight passages that resonate, underline the ones that raise a question. In the same way that the Common Core ELA standards focus our collective attention on the practices of close reading and argumentation, we hope to contribute to a similar process for your team. The conversation begins in chapter 1 with an overview of the CCSS and the major shifts in our practices as these relate to informational texts, the role of speaking and listening in learning, the development of academic language and vocabulary, and the importance of argumentation in writing. Later in chapter 1, we explain how the standards are organized, so that the thirty-three-page original document and its three appendices become a bit less bewildering. We also discuss what the standards don't say: about English learners, students with disabilities, and those who struggle with literacy. The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers (NGA & CCSSO), developers of the CCSS, provide some general guidelines for students learning English and those who struggle in school, but these are brief summaries and will likely generate a great deal of additional ideas for implementation over the next several years (for more information visit www.corestandards.org/the-standards for the documents “Application of the Standards for English Language Learners” and “Application to Students With Disabilities”). Importantly, these gaps highlight why PLCs are so important. In the words of the NGA and CCSSO (2010a):

While the Standards focus on what is most essential, they do not describe all that can or should be taught. A great deal is left to the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers. The aim of the Standards is to articulate the fundamentals, not to set out an exhaustive list or a set of restrictions that limits what can be taught beyond what is specified herein. (p. 6)

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 form the heart of this book because they each focus on a specific *strand* addressed in the CCSS. Reading is the subject of chapter 2: each and every standard is examined as it applies to literary and informational texts, as well as the important reading foundational skills of phonics, word recognition, and fluency that are critical in the development of readers in grades 3–5. Chapter 3 turns the spotlight to the Writing standards and similarly reviews each standard as it applies to the major text types students produce: narrative, informational, and persuasive. In chapter 4, we discuss the two sets of Common Core standards that are integral to what we teach and how students learn—through speaking and listening and by understanding and producing academic language and vocabulary.

Chapter 5 returns to the subject of student consideration in the CCSS, including discussion on using formative assessment processes and summative assessment instruments informatively, and designing and implementing interventions for students who are not performing at expected levels.

Know that this book has been designed with you in mind. All of the research cited is specific to grades 3–5. In addition, we’ve designed scenarios written from the perspective of teachers and students in grades 3–5 to illuminate the standards.

These scenarios are fictionalized accounts of our personal teaching activities and our collective experience working with teachers across grade levels in schools with diverse populations. We have developed these scenarios as a way to make the ELA standards come alive for you, not just in language arts but also in science, mathematics, and social studies. We want you to personalize this experience as you and your collaborative team plan for implementation of the Common Core for English language arts. To begin this process, we encourage you to reflect on and discuss with your colleagues the following questions.

1. What is the status of collaborative teams at your school? Acknowledging the reality of your school’s commitment to an effective PLC process is a critical first step that can establish the future direction for collaborative professional growth. Recall the six characteristics of effective PLCs (page 1–2) and consider the extent to which your PLC embodies these characteristics. If you want to delve deeper into your school’s PLC status, you can explore where your school would place on the PLC continuum: preinitiating, initiating, implementing, developing, or sustaining (DuFour et al., 2010). Visit www.allthingsplc.info and search the Tools & Resources section for helpful PLC reproducibles, such as the PLC continuum reproducible “Laying the Foundation” from *Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2010).
2. How are your students performing? Are there areas of need in terms of curriculum development? Are there areas of need in terms of instruction? Are there areas of need in terms of assessment? These questions address key topics for your PLC to consider as you focus on the current status of your school’s language arts programs in relation to the expectations of the Common Core ELA standards. Discussions with your collaborative team will enable you

to gain insight into *where you are* and *where you need to go* to support and advance your students' language development.

We've designed this book to guide the conversations that are necessary to fully implement the Common Core State Standards. As such, it should serve as a resource that you return to regularly to consider the ways in which student learning can be improved. The anchor standards and the grade-level expectations are the outcomes expected of us as teachers. *Common Core English Language Arts in a PLC at Work, Grades 3–5* provides the process to get there.

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