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Introduction

An Unprecedented Challenge

“Change in schools is much more urgently needed than most teachers and school administrators seem to realize. Indeed, I believe that if schools are not changed in dramatic ways very soon, public schools will not be a vital component of America’s system of education in the 21st Century.”

—Phil Schlechty, 1997, p. xi

“Quality teaching requires strong professional learning communities. Collegial interchange, not isolation, must become the norm for teachers. Communities of learning can no longer be considered utopian; they must become the building blocks that establish a new foundation for America’s schools.”

—National Commission on Teaching, 2003, p. 17

Public school educators in the United States are now required to do something they have never before been asked to accomplish: ensure high levels of learning for

all students. This mandate is not only unprecedented; it is at odds with the original goal of schools. The notion of all students learning at high levels would have been inconceivable to the pioneers of public education. If contemporary educators are to make significant progress in meeting this new challenge, they must first recognize that the institutions in which they work were not designed to accomplish the task of learning for all. They must then acknowledge the need to make fundamental changes in both the practices of their schools and the assumptions that drive those practices.

Professional Learning Communities: A Quick Review

Our earlier works present the premise that the Professional Learning Community (PLC) offers the most powerful conceptual model for transforming schools to meet their new challenges. We suggested that PLCs differ from more traditional schools in the following substantive ways:

Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

Educators in PLCs embrace the notion that the fundamental purpose of school is learning, not teaching—an enormous distinction. This emphasis on learning leads those within the school to concentrate their effort and energy on three critical questions:

1. What is it we want all students to learn—by grade level, by course, and by unit of instruction?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the intended knowledge and skills?

3. How will we respond when students experience initial difficulty so that we can improve upon current levels of learning?

Educators in PLCs examine the practices and procedures of their schools to ensure alignment with this fundamental purpose of learning for all students, and they maintain an unrelenting focus on student learning. They develop a shared sense of the school they hope to become to better fulfill the purpose of learning for all. They articulate the collective commitments they are prepared to make to move the school toward their shared vision. They establish specific, measurable goals to serve as targets and timelines on their journey. This shared understanding of mission, vision, values, and goals represents the very foundation of a PLC and is embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school.

Collaborative Teams

The basic structure of the PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work *interdependently* to achieve *common goals*. The team is the engine that drives the PLC effort. Some organizations base their improvement strategies on efforts to enhance the knowledge and skills of individuals. Although individual growth is essential for organizational growth to take place, it does not guarantee organizational growth. Building a school's capacity to learn is a collective rather than an individual task. People who engage in collaborative team learning are able to learn from one another and thus create momentum to fuel continued improvement. It is difficult to overstate the importance of collaborative teams in the improvement process.