

# Professional Learning Communities at Work Plan Book

Since the mid-1990s, Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour have championed a professional learning communities (PLC) model for school improvement. A **professional learning community** is *educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve*. A PLC operates under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators.

Professional learning communities are characterized by shared mission, vision, values, and goals; collaborative teams focused on learning; collective inquiry into “best practice” and “current reality”; action orientation and experimentation; commitment to continuous improvement; and a focus on results.

A PLC places its emphasis on learning for all (students and adults), building a collaborative culture, and maintaining a constant focus on results. These factors are critical to the sustained and substantive school improvement process that characterizes professional learning communities at work.

## How This Planner Is Organized

Most plan books are designed to guide the individual classroom teacher in instructional decisions. They focus on, “What will I teach, when will I teach it, and how will I teach it?” The *Professional Learning Communities at Work Plan Book* is unique because it not only assists the individual teacher, but also guides the collaborative team planning and processes essential to schools that operate as PLCs. Most importantly, this plan book calls upon teachers to go far beyond the traditional questions of teaching to a relentless focus on *learning*—for both students and adults.

The first section of the *Professional Learning Communities at Work Plan Book* contains an overview of the three big ideas that shape a PLC, cultural shifts that are to be expected, and keys to building high-performing collaborative teams. It also includes forms to help you work with your team more effectively as well as the standard forms you need to collect and organize information about your students and your classes.

The 40 weeks of planning pages in the second section include text and activities to inform, inspire, and challenge you and your teammates as you take the professional learning community journey.

The third section provides references and resources for further study.

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## About the Authors

Since 2001, **Rebecca DuFour** has been featured in 3 video series on effective leaders and PLCs. She has co-authored 4 books and numerous articles and has consulted with educators throughout North America as they work to create PLCs in their schools and districts.

**Richard DuFour** is one of North America’s leading authorities on bringing PLC concepts to life in the real world of schools. He has co-authored 8 books, more than 50 articles, and 3 video series on PLC concepts, principles, and practices.

**Robert Eaker** has been cited as one of the nation’s leading experts in helping educators translate research into practice. He is the co-author of 7 books and numerous articles and has helped educators around the world implement PLC practices in their schools.

# What Is a “Professional Learning Community”?

*To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results.*

**By Richard DuFour**

The idea of improving schools by developing *professional learning communities* is currently in vogue. People use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education—a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, a national professional organization, and so on. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning.

The professional learning community model has now reached a critical juncture, one well known to those who have witnessed the fate of other well-intentioned school reform efforts. In this all-too-familiar cycle, initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative, followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform, and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative. Another reform movement has come and gone, reinforcing the conventional education wisdom that promises, “This too shall pass.”

The movement to develop professional learning communities can avoid this cycle, but only if educators reflect critically on the concept’s merits. What are the “big ideas” that represent the core principles of professional learning communities? How do these principles guide schools’ efforts to sustain the professional learning community model until it becomes deeply embedded in the culture of the school?

## **Big Idea #1: Ensuring That Students Learn**

The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift—from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning—has profound implications for schools.

School mission statements that promise “learning for all” have become a cliché. But when a school staff takes that statement literally—when teachers view it as a pledge to ensure the success of each student rather than as politically correct hyperbole—profound changes begin to take place. The school staff finds itself asking, “What school characteristics and practices have been most successful in helping all students achieve at high levels? How could we adopt those characteristics and practices in our own school? What commitments would we have to make to one another to create such a school? What indicators could we monitor to assess our progress?” When the staff has built shared knowledge and found common ground on these questions, the school has a solid foundation for moving forward with its improvement initiative.

As the school moves forward, every professional in the building must engage with colleagues in the ongoing exploration of four crucial questions that drive the work of those within a professional learning community:

1. What do we want each student to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?
4. How will we respond when a student already knows it?

The answer to the third question separates learning communities from traditional schools.

Here is a scenario that plays out daily in traditional schools. A teacher teaches a unit to the best of his or her ability, but at the conclusion of the unit some students have not mastered the essential outcomes. On the one hand, the teacher would like to take the time to help those students. On the other hand, the teacher feels compelled to move forward to “cover” the course content. If the teacher uses instructional time to assist students who have not learned, the progress of students who have mastered the content will suffer; if the teacher pushes on with new concepts, the struggling students will fall farther behind.

What typically happens in this situation? Almost invariably, the school leaves the solution to the discretion of individual teachers, who vary widely in the ways they respond. Some teachers conclude that the struggling students should transfer to a less rigorous course or should

be considered for special education. Some lower their expectations by adopting less challenging standards for subgroups of students within their classrooms. Some look for ways to assist the students before and after school. Some allow struggling students to fail.

When a school begins to function as a professional learning community, however, teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn. The staff addresses this discrepancy by designing strategies to ensure that struggling students receive additional time and support, no matter who their teacher is. In addition to being systematic and school-wide, the professional learning community’s response to students who experience difficulty is

- *Timely.* The school quickly identifies students who need additional time and support.
- *Based on intervention rather than remediation.* The plan provides students with help as soon as they experience difficulty rather than relying on summer school, retention, and remedial courses.
- *Directive.* Instead of *inviting* students to seek additional help, the systematic plan *requires* students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered the necessary concepts.

The systematic, timely, and directive intervention program operating at Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, provides an excellent example.

Every 3 weeks, every student receives a progress report. Within the first month of school, new students discover that if they are not doing well in a class, they will receive a wide array of immediate interventions. First, the teacher, counselor, and faculty advisor each talk with the student individually to help resolve the problem. The school also notifies the student’s parents about the concern. In addition, the school offers the struggling student a pass from study hall to a school tutoring center to get additional help in the course. An older student mentor, in conjunction with the struggling student’s advisor, helps the student with homework during the student’s daily advisory period.

Any student who continues to fall short of expectations at the end of 6 weeks despite these interventions is required, rather than invited, to attend tutoring sessions during the study hall period. Counselors begin to make weekly checks on the struggling student's progress. If tutoring fails to bring about improvement within the next 6 weeks, the student is assigned to a daily guided study hall with 10 or fewer students. The guided study hall supervisor communicates with classroom teachers to learn exactly what homework each student needs to complete and monitors the completion of that homework. Parents attend a meeting at the school at which the student, parents, counselor, and classroom teacher must sign a contract clarifying what each party will do to help the student meet the standards for the course.

Stevenson High School serves more than 4,000 students. Yet this school has found a way to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis and to ensure that every student who experiences academic difficulty will receive extra time and support for learning.

Like Stevenson, schools that are truly committed to the concept of learning for each student will stop subjecting struggling students to a haphazard education lottery. These schools will guarantee that each student receives whatever additional support he or she needs.

## Big Idea #2: A Culture of Collaboration

Educators who are building a professional learning community recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all. Therefore, they create structures to promote a collaborative culture.

Despite compelling evidence indicating that working collaboratively represents best practice, teachers in many schools continue to work in isolation. Even in schools that endorse the idea of collaboration, the staff's willingness to collaborate often stops at the classroom door.

Some school staffs equate the term "collaboration" with congeniality and focus on building group camaraderie. Other staffs join forces to develop consensus on operational procedures, such as how they will respond to tardiness or supervise recess. Still others organize themselves into committees to oversee different facets of the school's operation, such as discipline, technology, and social climate. Although each of these activities can serve a useful purpose, none represents the kind of professional dialogue that can transform a school into a professional learning community.

The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.

### Collaborating for School Improvement

At Boones Mill Elementary School, a K–5 school serving 400 students in rural Franklin County, Virginia, the powerful collaboration of grade-level teams drives the school improvement process. The following scenario describes what Boones Mill staff members refer to as their *teaching-learning process*.

The school's five third-grade teachers study state and national standards, the district curriculum guide, and student achievement data to identify the essential knowledge and skills that all students should learn in an upcoming language arts unit. They also ask the fourth-grade teachers what they hope students will have mastered by the time they leave third grade. On the basis of the shared knowledge generated by this joint study, the third-grade team agrees on the critical outcomes that they will make sure each student achieves during the unit.

Next, the team turns its attention to developing common formative assessments to monitor each student's mastery of the essential outcomes. Team members discuss the most authentic and valid ways to assess student mastery. They set the standard for each skill or concept that each student must achieve to be deemed proficient. They agree on the criteria by which they will judge the quality of student work, and they practice applying those criteria until they can do so consistently. Finally, they decide when they will administer the assessments.

After each teacher has examined the results of the common formative assessment for his or her students, the team analyzes how all third graders performed. Team members identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning and begin to discuss how they can build on the strengths and address the weaknesses. The entire team gains new insights into what is working and what is not, and members discuss new strategies that they can implement in their classrooms to raise student achievement.

At Boones Mill, collaborative conversations happen routinely throughout the year. Teachers use frequent formative assessments to investigate the questions, "Are students learning what they need to learn?" and "Who needs additional time and support to learn?" rather than relying solely on

summative assessments that ask, "Which students learned what was intended and which students did not?"

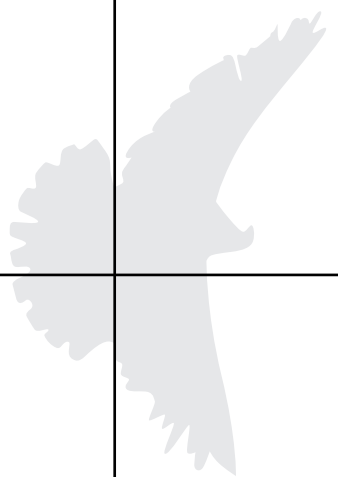






Collaborative conversations call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private—goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers—individually and collectively.

For teachers to participate in such a powerful process, the school must ensure that everyone belongs to a team that focuses on student learning. Each team must have time to meet during the workday and throughout the school year. Teams must focus their efforts on crucial questions related to learning and generate products that reflect that focus, such as lists of essential outcomes, different kinds of assessment, analyses of student achievement, and strategies for improving results. Teams must develop norms or protocols to clarify expectations regarding roles, responsibilities, and relationships among team members. Teams must adopt student achievement goals linked with school and district goals.

### Removing Barriers to Success

For meaningful collaboration to occur, a number of things must also stop happening. Schools must stop pretending that merely presenting teachers with state standards or district curriculum guides will guarantee that all students have access to a common curriculum. Even school districts that devote tremendous time and energy to designing the *intended* curriculum often pay little attention to the *implemented* curriculum (what teachers actually teach) and even less to the *attained* curriculum (what students learn) (Marzano, 2003). Schools must also give teachers time to analyze and discuss state and district curriculum documents.

More important, teacher conversations must quickly move beyond "What are we expected to teach?" to "How will we know when each student has learned?" In addition, faculties must stop making excuses for failing to collaborate. Few educators publicly assert that working in isolation is the best strategy for improving schools. Instead, they give reasons why it is impossible for them to work together: "We just can't find the time." "Not everyone on the staff has endorsed the idea." "We need more training in collaboration." But the number of schools that have created truly collaborative cultures proves that such barriers are not insurmountable. As Roland Barth (1991) wrote,

FRIDAY	THURSDAY	WEDNESDAY	TUESDAY	MONDAY
				
				
				

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