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Preface

WELCOME TO OUR LEARNING COMMUNITY, where we will explore the status of education as a profession, the development of a professional consciousness, and the relationship between professionalism and working in a professional learning community (PLC). We will examine the development of professionalism in education, as well as the role that PLCs now command in educators' lives.

Most everyone recognizes that the reason, or the purpose, for which we have schools is *student learning*. They also agree that the factor that is most influential in impacting student learning is *quality teaching*. To increase, expand, or improve quality teaching, *continuous professional learning* is the key. The operative word here is *learning*, and the PLC is learning's most powerful context.

In this book, we hope to provide steps and tools for dedicated educators to develop a truly professional approach to their work through continuous learning and authentic collaboration. The book will address how educators working and learning in community (authentic PLCs) play a significant role in moving from a profession driven by test scores and fear of accountability sanctions to a profession committed to students and dedicated to working and learning together.

The goal of these communities of learners is to increase the knowledge, skills, and capacity of education professionals. When this goal is successful, teachers will be on the pathway to professionalism, and all our students in all our schools will be provided a powerful school experience that results in improved student learning outcomes.

Our intention is to describe the current state of teaching in the United States and how we arrived at our current situation where teachers are being told what to do by so many entities that they're not sure who to listen to. It's hard to feel like and act like a professional when so many people are giving you directives about how to do your job. Once the stage is set, the pathway to professionalism in teaching will be lit by research and current practices that can help teachers take control of their world and work, and reduce the need for multiple levels of supervision to ensure

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quality. Professional teachers take responsibility for the profession.

Introduction

Here, we state the purpose of this book and how we came to think about professionalism as a topic worthy of exploration. It has not been an easy task to address the issue of the professionalization of the profession, but it is one about which we have a profound concern and regard.

We hope that our words, ideas, thoughts, and frameworks for advancing the profession may stimulate you to consider your own ideas and challenge you to action.

Chapter 1: What Is a Profession?
What Does It Mean to Be a Professional?

In this chapter, we lay the groundwork for the readers' understanding of the generic term *professional* as society has come to define it. We do this through reviewing the literature and common practice. We explore whether teaching fits the generally accepted definition of a profession or whether it is, as some have called it, a semi-profession. We also begin to link the concept of professional learning communities to advancing the practice of teaching as a profession. The insights gained from these inquiries provide a base from which to move forward, looking at creating a pathway to professionalism.

Chapter 2: Evolution and Development
of the Professional Learning Community

This chapter focuses on the evolution of teaching in the United States and traces the PLC concept from its early inception through its development and focus on continuous adult learning and its relationship to increased student performance.

In the early years of this country, students of all ages and capabilities typically attended school in a one-room schoolhouse with a single teacher serving all. Here, the teacher worked, with little preparation, as well as s/he knew. Even when schools became multiple classroom entities with college-trained teachers frequently using district or other recommended curriculum, the teacher struggled to meet the needs of all students. The publication of Susan Rosenholz's book (1989) on the impact of teachers' workplace on their performance revealed how teachers meeting and working together influenced their work and their service for students. At this same general time, Peter Senge's book on the learning organization (1990) lent weight to the productivity of employees coming together to plan and work collaboratively.

These publications stimulated researchers to look into this new professional development structure of collaborative learning and its possibilities.

Chapter 3: Influences on the Profession

An array of organizations—their politics and policies—have impacted educators and the expectations for what educators will do, and for the esteem or lack thereof by the public and by the profession itself. We explore the impact that four such influences have had:

- National/state/district policy (e.g., the impact of Sputnik, *A Nation at Risk*, and the No Child Left Behind legislation);
- Teacher and administrator organizations (e.g., American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association);
- Research on professional learning (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002); and
- Professional organizations (e.g., Learning Forward [formerly National Staff Development Council], Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards).

These four influences are examined for the challenges they represent as well as their contributions to the current regard in which education is held.

Chapter 4: Beyond the Catchphrase . . .

Like any new idea, strategy, or approach, PLCs have been defined and operationalized in multiple ways by well-meaning practitioners, some of whom are consistently looking for the next new innovation. In these cases we have accessed a great deal of information about what teachers and leaders are doing when they are "doing it." Here, we explore the problems of an "innovation du jour" and how becoming a popular idea in education often relegates an effective strategy to the vast graveyard of failed reforms, as Seymour Sarason suggests in *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* (1993).

Although some of these approaches may result in their desired ends, the research has informed us of what effective PLCs look like and how they act. We have cast our "bets" and rested our case on the descriptions of PLCs from this research. These descriptions come from studies whose findings are grounded in robust and rigorous explorations. From these findings, we set forth an operational definition of PLCs, supported by images of what teachers and their administrators do when

participating in a PLC and what leaders at the school and district level do to initiate, promote, develop, and support PLCs. These images have been translated into an Innovation Configuration Map. This tool describes precisely what individuals do as they work together in communities of professional learning.

Within the identification of challenges in the previous chapter that inhibit the development of true learning communities, and the promising policies that are beginning to promote the idea, we develop a case for more consistently and intentionally linking continuous adult learning and student learning. This case is grounded in the benefits of effective or high-functioning PLCs to both staff and students. Such benefits include:

- Increased staff learning that accesses deep content knowledge and a repertoire of instructional strategies that result in more effective classroom instruction;
- A shift in thinking, for teachers and administrators, as they become continuous reflective practitioners, always exploring alternatives for increased teaching performance;
- Enhanced, enriched, improved student performance;
- Greater respect, efficacy, and professional identity of the staff members for themselves, their colleagues, and the profession.

Chapter 5: What Educators *Do* in a Professional Learning Community

Three stories of PLCs in action provide a clear picture of the steps taken by three schools as they have developed into communities of professional learners. Even though the path was different for each school, we feel that they each exemplify what individuals actually do when they come together as learners in a community of professionals. The teachers in the three schools are on their way of becoming true professionals who need less direct monitoring to perform their job well. Principals in these schools act more like servant leaders and instructional colleagues than supervisors. Teachers hold one another accountable and take mutual responsibility for all teachers' learning and the learning of all students.

Chapter 6: Turning the Finger Around

Returning to the characteristics of professionals cited in Chapter 1, we celebrate the current attention focused on PLCs and the opportunity this focus provides for the continuous professional learning of all educators. One of the characteristics of a professional person is the continuous study of his/her field's content knowledge and the skills or behaviors expected of professionals in this "line" of work.

In their practice, communities of professional learners express the shift in the culture of their school from isolation to collaborative learning and work. Further, these educators work and learn together to continuously improve their practice, and to add knowledge to the field of education that benefits others—this adds weight to the image of the educational professional. Once this ethic of continuous improvement becomes the norm for teaching, teachers are well-situated to take greater control over the work they do and define the expectations for members of the profession.

Chapter 7: Structures, Schedules, and Other Necessary Stuff: Creating or Reframing Professional Learning Communities

The requirements for launching and developing PLCs—in order to improve the staff's effectiveness and enhance their professional status—begin with logistical/structural factors: time and locations to meet for study and learning; material resources for learning (books, journals, videos, and so forth); and human resources (conference fees, travel funds to visit other schools, fees for consultants and coaches). This chapter focuses on the development and use of organizational structures, protocols, and tools that help teachers remain focused on the real purpose of professional learning communities: improvement of instruction through ongoing reflection on what students need to know and be able to do; best practices for teaching that knowledge; and those skills, assessment of student learning, and the needed modifications when students have not met learning expectations.

Chapter 8: Relationships: The Soul of Professional Learning Communities

Although the structural factors are vital—how can community learning be conducted without the time for staff to convene, without a clear purpose, and without a place to do it—the personal or relational variables are imperative. Supporting the staff in developing high regard, respect, and trust for one another requires modeling, development, and patience. Stories of schools that have been successful in these endeavors provide the reader with real-world examples.

Chapter 9: And Yet . . . Becoming a True Professional

There is the potential that teachers meet in PLCs on a regular basis, have conversations about teaching and learning, use some ideas from those conversations in their classroom practice, and still are not meeting the expectations that are set for the profession. We will recommend a set of steps to be taken to reduce the need for

high-stakes evaluation that teachers are currently facing. That degree of supervision has the tendency to de-professionalize teaching by ensuring that teachers follow expectations set by others, not by themselves as professionals.

A substantial amount of time and patience, coupled with persistence, will be required to promote the status of education as a profession. When this goal has been achieved, high regard from the general public will reflect its success. Elevating the teaching profession to the high levels experienced by medicine and law will not be easy (individuals working in medicine and law could not be in that position without a firm grasp of the necessary content and skills, and a commitment to continuously improving the capabilities demanded of those professions), but readers are encouraged to use the ideas and professional tools presented in this book to make the incremental changes in attitude and practice needed to achieve the true professional status of educators.