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# Introduction

In September 2013, I was the principal of Desert View Elementary School (DVES) in Hermiston, Oregon. As a school, we were making the often-difficult shift to a meaningful, accountable professional learning community (PLC) from what Richard DuFour and Douglas Reeves (2016) call *PLC Lite*:

Educators rename their traditional faculty or department meetings as PLC meetings, engage in book studies that result in no action, or devote collaborative time to topics that have no effect on student achievement—all in the name of the PLC process. These activities fail to embrace the central tenets of the PLC process and won't lead to higher levels of learning for students or adults. (p. 69)

During this transition, grade-level teams worked hard to create common formative assessments. Using those assessments to reflect on and adjust teacher behaviors and instructional practices proved harder than previous efforts, but sorting students across each grade level into groups by proficiency level proved an easier task. Identifying, agreeing on, and building interventions around essential concepts and skills for student success took DVES staff the better part of a year.

After reaching these agreements, we were confronted with reams of data. We found that, like oil, student data is abundant if you know where to look, but useless in its raw form. Only when refined is it useful. So, we focused on student data specifically to support adult learning because as Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas Many, and Mike Mattos (2016) state, “the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators” (p. 10). We refined our data into specific, useful parts to tell us not only which students were succeeding and which were struggling on essential standards but also which standards students had mastered, which were giving them the

most difficulty, and which adult behaviors were most successful in teaching these standards. The refined data would eventually allow us to emphasize professional practices that yielded the highest number of students achieving beyond the proficient level. These data would also tell us which ineffective practices we needed to abandon to free up invaluable teaching time. But this was a journey; it did not happen overnight.

To drive our quest for high levels of learning for all students, we sought to answer the four critical questions of PLCs at Work<sup>®</sup>:

1. What is it we want our students to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know if each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn it?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency? (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 59)

At all points along the journey, we could access any number of resources to support the learning of DVES teachers and administrators. We could overcome almost any roadblock by sharing an article or chapter from any number of books about effectively answering PLC critical question 1, 2, or 3. However, we struggled to find support in building effective extensions for students who demonstrated proficiency. Answering critical question 4 in a meaningful, systematic way proved difficult because the staff had few resources to learn from. In addition, administrators and teachers often saw students who were already proficient as successful in school—and thus not in dire need of help to learn at high levels and stay engaged in school. When collaborative meetings ran long, it was question 4 that teams dropped from their discussion. On more than a few occasions, they did not even include question 4 on the meeting agenda.

As a result, well-meaning, caring teachers gave these already proficient students tasks that not only *did not* help the proficient students learn but were also often detrimental to their academic and social growth. Some so-called extensions they offered, such as giving the proficient students ten more mathematics problems or placing them on a self-paced computer program—so the teacher needed to do little more than a quick check on the student once in a while—did not keep the students engaged. Another “extension” allowed students to quietly read a book after they completed an assignment. This practice encouraged students to hurry through their work and accomplish the bare minimum to attain proficiency so

they could then move on to something they found much more interesting, as opposed to working thoughtfully at a deep cognitive level over an extended period of time.

Still other extensions did not help proficient students socially. For example, teachers used proficient students as ad hoc aides circulating through the class to help fellow students who were struggling. However, because these students received no training in supporting peers' learning, this practice often led to frustration for all involved. The proficient students could not understand why the struggling student did not get it as quickly as they did, and the nonproficient students would often become frustrated with the "know-it-all" students and their overly complicated explanations.

In a worst-case scenario, proficient students became isolated from social learning opportunities as well as instructional support from the teacher. A highly proficient fourth-grade student was assigned mathematics extension work on a self-paced program on a computer facing the wall in the back of the classroom. The work required significantly deeper mathematical thinking than he had ever done, and he received little to no adult support. To exacerbate matters, mathematics was not this student's favorite subject, and the computer he spent large portions of the day using was placed against the back wall, so his back was to all of his fellow students. While his classmates worked in groups, he was facing drywall. The unintended message he received was he did not really belong with his peers.

In short, by neglecting the learning needs of students who demonstrated proficiency—referred to as *question 4 students* going forward—we were not supporting high levels of learning for *all* students and keeping them engaged.

This should not have happened at a school I led. Before I became a principal, support for students identified as talented and gifted was one of my areas of keen interest. I had discovered the work of Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis. Renzulli's original enrichment triad model, developed in 1977, focused on extending student learning in three major ways: Type I pushes students to discover and inspire their interests, Type II features getting students to hone working and thinking skills, and Type III pushes students to investigate areas of intense personal interest. In 1994, Renzulli and Reis worked together to make the model more flexible for students and practitioners (for the most recent version, see Renzulli & Reis, 2014).

That work, combined with Carol Ann Tomlinson's (2001) work emphasizing delivering differentiated instruction to improve student engagement creates a foundation for extending students' learning and keeping them engaged in school. When we really began studying the data from our most proficient students as part of our refinement process, we did not see the level of growth we should have. We reacted by applying these two key pieces of research to the four critical questions and three big ideas of a PLC as set forth by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many (2010) to change the school from an environment where students simply achieved proficiency to an environment where all students learned at high levels. This work serves as a model for the processes described throughout this book. By sharing the hard-learned lessons we, as a school, trudged through to become an accountable PLC, I hope to help guide staffs, both teachers and administrators, on their journey to ensure high levels of learning and engagement in school for all students.

## About This Book

Tomlinson's (2001) work on differentiation and Renzulli's (1977) enrichment triad model and his work with Reis (Renzulli & Reis, 2014), combined with fundamental PLC concepts, provide the foundation for the work described in this book. I will propose three distinct extension types to apply with all students demonstrating proficiency.

1. **Skill extensions:** In skill extensions, students work to add new skills to their skillset. Examples include creative writing, oral defense of an idea, or an artistic or musical style or technique.
2. **Interest extensions:** Interest extensions are exactly what they sound like. Teachers access a student's area of intense personal interest, tie that interest to a standard, and guide the student to deeper learning.
3. **Social extensions:** Social extensions push learning while putting the student in situations that also enable them to grow their social skills. By working in social settings, proficient students will deepen their own understanding while making connections with peers and learning to appreciate classmates' work and thoughts.

Because students needing extension have already shown proficiency on the essential standards a team identifies, each extension should utilize related

nonessential standards. While teams assign a lower priority to these standards, they are still standards that provide rich learning opportunities. Nonessential standards will push proficient students' learning forward, but lack of exposure to these standards will not be detrimental to their academic future.

When educators use these broad extension types, question 4 and the proficient students associated with it will become less of an afterthought and instead be included in the vital collaborative process as originally intended.

### *Audience*

This book supports collaborative teams in the urgent mission of pushing question 4 students to higher levels of learning. Because extension for proficient students is so important, this book has been designed for applicability with a variety of team types, including grade-level teams, subject-specific secondary teams, and cross-disciplinary teams as well as singletons. The scenarios that appear throughout the book reflect this range of team types.

Administrators do not get a pass when it comes to serving proficient students. Administrators at both the district and school levels will find this book helpful as it reminds them that students who are proficient upon preassessment still need to be challenged. By using this book, administrators can ensure question 4 students come up in collaborative conversations and teams intentionally plan for their learning. I will build a case that these students need extensions to stay engaged in school. This book will also be a handy resource for moving collaborative teams to the next level of reflection, discussion, and execution of the collaborative culture that serves as a cornerstone of a PLC.

### *Chapter Contents*

The first chapter establishes the argument that question 4 is the least answered of the four critical questions of a PLC. The text challenges collaborative teams to include those students who have demonstrated proficiency early in a lesson, or even before the lesson has begun, in their collaborative conversations and their plans to continue to push those students' learning to high levels. Chapter 2 supports the intentional planning and execution of extensions. This chapter includes reproducible forms for selecting essential standards and writing lesson plans that will help collaborative teams intentionally plan their extensions. Chapter 3 helps educators in planning skill extensions, chapter 4 focuses on accessing students' areas of high interest to draw them into interest extensions, and chapter 5

provides ideas on drawing socially isolated students into school by using social extensions. Chapter 6 supports singleton planning of extensions with and without collaborative team support.

### *Features*

Each chapter begins with a vignette describing a different question 4 challenge. After each vignette, I provide the research behind an extension teams can use to respond to this challenge. Next, I explain possible solutions educators could apply to respond to the challenge described, each of which is a fictionalized version of an extension I have either participated in or seen executed by a collaborative team. The names of those involved have been changed, and in some cases, minor details have been altered, but the students' reactions are real. After describing these possible solutions, I provide planning examples of similar extensions for a variety of grade bands throughout K–12.

To support teams struggling with how to build and find time for extensions, chapters 3 through 6 feature an extension planning template, with several completed examples featuring various content areas and grade bands. Educators will notice that the extension examples provided can draw *all* students in and raise the engagement of everyone in a given class. However, while the examples provided will not be particularly effective for filling in holes in nonproficient students' learning, students who are proficient in the skills required to succeed on the standard in question will be able to take these lessons and run with them.

Each chapter concludes with a summary of key points and a list of questions for collaborative team reflection. Teams can use these questions to jump-start collaborative conversations about, and ultimately the planning of, extensions. These questions will help interdependent collaborative teams, as well as groups of teachers striving to become a team, plan their extensions and determine which type will best support their question 4 students.

This book is intended to be a resource to support communities and collaborative teams in truly answering the fourth critical question of a PLC. Educators ask and discuss this question the least out of the four critical questions. But question 4 students are at risk if their learning needs are not addressed, and we, as educators, cannot afford to lose some of our brightest and most prepared students simply because we ran out of time or because we lacked the tools to effectively provide extensions.