

Solutions for Professional Learning Communities

How to Leverage PLCs for School Improvement



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Introduction

Since 2001, the focus of school reform in the United States has been about turning around failing schools. The nation has not lacked for opinions, journal articles, media pundits, sponsored university research, state initiatives, and federal government approaches, or a never-ending list of things failing schools *should* do. All these areas focus on draconian accountability demands on teachers and principals. I would contend that the focus of these efforts is misguided.

U.S. Grant High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, offers a different example. Grant's story begins and ends with students. Labeled a failing school for more than seven years by the state, Grant's turnaround is, at its heart, a story about what happens when students believe they *can* and *will* learn. Their story can be yours.

The culture and media surrounding Grant have been historically negative. The school has been called a “dropout factory” and “ground zero of education reform in Oklahoma” (The Oklahoman Editorial Board, 2012). According to the Oklahoma City Police Department, five of the six known gangs in Oklahoma City reside within the school-district boundaries. At the start of the 2011–2012 school year, 206 seniors (80 percent) had not met the state-testing requirements for graduation. Grant was placed on the Oklahoma State Department of Education's needs-improvement list for seven years in a row. The staff spent its time focusing on compliance, order, and safety instead of student achievement. During a 2010 board meeting, the Oklahoma City Public School Board designated Grant a Turnaround School and allocated additional funding through a school-improvement grant.

The School

U.S. Grant High School is the largest high school in Oklahoma City Public Schools, a multicultural district serving approximately forty-three thousand students. The following is a snapshot of Grant's demographic information.

- 123 teachers
- 1,640 students
- 98 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch

- 30 percent of students have limited English proficiency
- 15 percent of students are special education
- 12 percent are African American
- 70 percent are Hispanic
- 1 percent is Asian / Pacific Islander
- 10 percent are White
- 7 percent are Native American

A culture of failure existed that perpetuated itself year after year, fostering drop-out after dropout. Under the leadership of principal Tamie Sanders, Grant began its journey of continuous improvement. She believed that creating a culture of success starts with believing it's possible. Any achievements in an organization are the results of the combined efforts of each individual. This includes the efforts of the students, teachers, administrators, and community supporters. Grant's situation was an opportunity to harness the power within.

A Reason to Celebrate

The State of Oklahoma administers seven end-of-instruction (EOI) exams that—along with course credits—determine eligibility for graduation. The exams occur in algebra 1 and 2, geometry, English 2 and 3, U.S. history, and biology. Students must pass algebra 1 and English 2 and at least two of the other tested courses. Prior to the 2011 school year, the pass rate for algebra 1 was zero percent since the school did not even test enough of the students to qualify. The new pass rate for algebra 1 was 91 percent in 2013. The other courses' pass rates have also increased dramatically. Table I.1 demonstrates the increase in the pass rate from 2012 to 2013 and then the cumulative pass rate over the three-year period from 2010 to 2013.

At the start of the 2011–2012 school year, 206 seniors (80 percent) had not met the state-testing requirements for graduation. By the end of the next school year, only four seniors (1.5 percent) had not met the state-testing requirements.

Other Indicators of Success

These impressive results are not the only indicators of success. According to Oklahoma's A–F Accountability System, U.S. Grant High School has moved from the bottom of the Fs to a B+, one point away from earning an A! Based on these results, National Math + Science Initiative (NMSI), Boeing, and the state's department of education awarded Grant \$495,000 to offer advanced placement (AP)

courses in mathematics, science, and English. Grant increased AP offerings in all core subject areas. Thirteen of the fifteen AP government students had qualifying scores on the test the first year the course was offered.

Table I.1: 2012–2013 and Overall Comparisons—Percent of Increase in Pass Rate

Course	2012 to 2013	2010 to 2013
English 2	+8 percent	+55 percent
English 3	+27 percent	+89 percent
Algebra 1	+12 percent	+295 percent
Geometry	+42 percent	+107 percent
Algebra 2	+145 percent	+523 percent
Biology	–41 percent	+82 percent
U.S. History	+38 percent	+116 percent

Principals and teachers might wonder, “Are there any other examples of schools that have improved and made a real difference for the students they serve?” The good news is yes! U.S. Grant High School is not unique. Other school districts demonstrating remarkable sustained improvement are Cartwright School District Number 83 in Arizona and Sanger Unified School District in California. Visit All Things PLC (www.allthingsplc.info) to read about these districts and to access additional examples of school turnaround from across the United States. Each of these schools has demonstrated effectiveness in improving student achievement using the professional learning community (PLC) model. The schools and districts described on All Things PLC vary in size, demographics, and poverty level. The one thing that they all have in common is that they made a commitment to learning for all and were willing to do whatever it takes to reach high levels of learning for all students. These improved achievement results were not just obtained for a single year but maintained over time. Each school and district approached this work as continuous improvement and has evidence over time that the PLC model is the right journey.

The Overwhelming Challenge

Everyone engaged in school improvement would agree that despite all the state and federal funding, education experiences, time, and energy, turning around a school is difficult work, and most schools lack the basic information needed to achieve success. No one disputes the challenges and high stakes of failing to improve. The question is always, How do schools and districts turn around? Principals and teachers are hardworking, dedicated individuals. It is not about hard work or lack of effort. It is about doing the right work that will result in learning for all students. School improvement really requires a commitment to learning for all students.

Why Should We Commit to Learning for All?

We must prepare students for their future, not our past. The students seated in the classrooms today are preparing for jobs and careers that have not been invented or imagined yet. Those students who have not learned how to learn will be left behind in the economy. As a nation in a global economy, we need to sustain access to the American Dream as the land of opportunity and social mobility. The gap in standardized test scores between affluent and low-income students has grown about 40 percent since the 1960s (Reardon, 2011). The imbalance between rich and poor students in college completion, the single most important predictor of success in the workforce, has grown 50 percent since the late 1980s. Education is the most powerful tool for helping students of poverty (Greenstone, Looney, Patashnik, & Yu, 2013). It is increasingly evident that the United States is falling behind the rest of the world. The United States dropped from first in the world in percentage of high school graduates to number twenty-two of twenty-seven advanced economies (The Broad Foundation, n.d.).

It is clear that our current systems and reform efforts are not working. Thirty percent of students who enter high school will drop out. Potential dropouts can be predicted as early as first grade and identified with accuracy by third grade (American Psychological Association, 2012; Sparks, 2013). Most importantly, there are serious implications for those who fail.

The implications for students who are unsuccessful in school are severe and life altering. U.S. dropouts are three times more likely to be unemployed and therefore more likely to live in poverty with an estimated annual salary of \$20,241 (Breslow, 2012). They will earn thirty-three cents for every dollar a college graduate earns, and that constitutes the highest discrepancy in the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009; United States Census Bureau, 2006). Dropouts are more prone to ill health and are four times more likely to be uninsured. The most astonishing statistic is that the life expectancy for dropouts is

an average of 10.5 fewer years for women and 13 years for men than those with a high school diploma (Tavernise, 2012). Dropouts are sixty-three times more likely to be incarcerated at a cost of \$292,000 over their lifetime (Breslow, 2012).

The most important reason to commit to learning for all is because teachers want to be the best they can for the students they serve. Students count on them, and they step up every day to meet those expectations. Educators understand the moral imperative they have to provide the same quality education for their students that they would want for their own children, grandchildren, and other family members. School improvement is, at its heart, a story about what happens when teachers and principals help students believe they *can* and *will* learn. This student-centered approach is exactly what improves schools.

Finally, a school or district must commit to learning for all to improve student achievement. Without a focused, laser-sharp commitment to learning for all students, a school or district will make small gains at best. In the worst-case scenario, teachers and administrators work extremely hard to find that student achievement actually regresses. School improvement is not only about working hard. The schools, districts, and teacher teams must work on the *right work*.

About This Book

The question is, What is the right work? This book demonstrates how leveraging the power of professional learning communities is the right work. Specific challenges to school improvement are the focus with solutions and strategies. School improvement requires shifts in current practices, specifically a shift to a culture of collaboration, a shift to determining and addressing the specific needs of each student, and a shift to leadership for learning. Each section ends with reflection questions and implications for schools. The challenges to school improvement are summarized in the epilogue, and schools are encouraged to create a Start Doing–Stop Doing list (figure E.1, page 58) that captures key points and obstacles to school improvement that must be addressed to move their improvement process forward.

Tamie Sanders, principal of U.S. Grant High School, hung a sign in the office as the school began its PLC journey. It read: How hard can it be? Later she wrote: Really, really hard! As that year progressed, a teacher came by and wrote: But so worth it!