Table of Contents

chapter four
Aligning to a Collaborative Culture

chapter five
Aligning to a Results Orientation

Foreword

By Michael Fullan

When professional learning communities (PLCs) first became popular, there were two problems. One was that the term was used superficially, with the result that PLCs became hard to define in practice. The other was that they were confined to single schools. Thanks to the DuFours and their colleagues, we have moved forward on both fronts. The three big ideas began to anchor PLCs: ensuring that all students can learn, building a collaborative culture, and establishing a focus on results. PLCs have become a districtwide phenomenon. The culture of the whole district has now become the focus.

Aligning School Districts as PLCs takes us deeply into districtwide reform. Its three authors have been steeped in the doing of change, but they have also been reflective practitioners. Hence, their insights are specific and thorough. Unlike others who have written on district reform, Van Clay, Soldwedel, and Many show us both sides of how to implement PLCs: they illustrate clearly and painfully what can go wrong, but equally clearly, they tell us how easily these problems can be avoided or addressed.

First, they offer a strong framework—not only the three big ideas, but also a process framework consisting of strategic, tactical, and operational dimensions. This three-part frame is used throughout the book, and for the careful reader will become a new habit and a guide to systemic thinking about all aspects of districtwide PLC reform. It represents just enough theory to cover all key components of policy and implementation, and just the right amount of practical insight to sort out what should be done, and what could go wrong.

What is particularly brilliant about the book is that in each chapter they present a grounded, hypothetical case of a composite district called "Nirvana," and trace how its leaders go about introducing PLCs. The entire cast is represented: school board members, parents and community, the superintendent and other district leaders, principals, teachers, and students. One sees things go wrong despite the fact that certain issues are attended to well, because others are neglected. You see a superintendent do a superb job of selling the board on collaboration yet fail to do the same for schools. You see the development of a data assessment system that, while sophisticated, ends up being detached from its larger purpose, and from daily usability.

Once the authors present and apply their framework, it is easy to see the solutions. I love the way they dissect what occurred at Nirvana—first by describing what was done right, and then by showing what was done wrong. By the time they have taken us

through this process a few times, we begin to understand more deeply and more practically how PLCs should be introduced.

Two things especially stick with me. One is that we see just how easy it is to go wrong with a great idea. But then we also come to see how easy it is to go "right." While it is easy to make mistakes along the way, it is not all that difficult to implement PLCs once you know what you are doing. This is always the beauty of informed practitioners. They make powerful reform more understandable and more doable.

I was struck by the similarities between district and system change. I have borrowed the term *simplexity* to capture this strategic knowledge (Fullan, 2010). The simple part is that there are a small number of key components that you need to attend to. These are not difficult to grasp, and they are small enough in number so as not to be overwhelming. The complex part concerns how to make these components jell in combination: we must deal with the social complexity of working with groups, the political complexity of linking different levels and interests, and the logistical complexity of having to make decisions in highly charged and rapidly moving change processes.

The ideas in this book will stick with you. You will remember the mistakes made in Nirvana, understand clearly how they could have been made, and realize (in retrospect) how obviously consequential they were. But more deeply, you will see the decisions and actions that should have been taken. You will be much smarter about districtwide reform after reading this book.

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Fullan, M. (2010) *Motion leadership: The skinny on becoming change savvy.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Introduction

This book is about how a school district can purposefully align its efforts toward becoming a professional learning community (PLC). In particular, it examines how districts can align themselves to the three big ideas of PLCs: (1) ensuring a focus on learning, (2) building a collaborative culture, and (3) establishing a results orientation.

Professional learning communities have profoundly changed how teachers and principals approach the work of schooling. Yet many districts fail to consistently support PLC efforts. While PLCs have clearly identified the classroom essentials necessary for continually improved student learning, districts have not always created the supportive structures to make that happen, even when being a PLC is their intent.

The result? It is much harder to establish and sustain a districtwide PLC than it needs to be. The missing ingredient is an understanding of alignment and how it affects all efforts within a district.

We arrived at this conclusion by combining our own experiences with the insights of six renowned educators to whom we are deeply indebted. Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker (2008) have spent more than a decade eloquently defining and developing professional learning communities. In particular, they have made a compelling case for looking at classroom teachers as part of grade-level or department teams, rather than as independent contractors working in isolation. Their book *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*™ seeks to show how school and district work should similarly extend from the work of PLC teams.

We also draw on the work of Michael Fullan, who has spent much of the last decade writing about "capacity building" (2005), defined as the effort of districts (as well as regional, state, and federal agencies) to support classroom efforts to continuously improve student learning. Fullan has spoken eloquently about the powerful impact that aligning policies, practices, and procedures across multiple systems has on success. Here we focus on how to align policies, practices, and procedures across a district to maximize results.

Finally, Robert Marzano and Tim Waters (2009) have provided insights into three related areas: (1) the importance of identifying certain key concepts as districtwide "givens" or non-negotiables, (2) the positive impact of effective school and district-level leadership on student achievement, and (3) the need for aligning board of education actions to provide required district resources. We borrow from their insights in our descriptions of alignment districtwide.

To this powerful body of educational theory and research we add two additional concepts from our own experiences. First, we define three distinct organizational roles found within every district—the strategic, the tactical, and the operational—and explore how these roles interact with the notion of alignment. Second, we identify a variety of data-based reporting strategies in an attempt to demonstrate the importance of aligning data across all district levels.

We therefore borrow from many elements of theory, research, and practice to present a practical approach to successfully aligning professional learning communities, from the classroom to the board of education. The key to this approach is in recognizing the power of districtwide alignment.

As a metaphor for alignment, think of a compass. Just as the compass, which points to true north, helps travelers stay on course during long journeys over vast distances, so aligning the activities of everyone in a district toward the big ideas of a PLC helps districts stay on course toward the common goal of high levels of learning for all.

We three joined forces for this book to extol the virtues of alignment as applied to professional learning communities. It represents the perfect nexus between Perry and Mark's systems orientations and Tom's professional learning communities expertise and experiences. It also represents an opportunity for Tom and Mark to team once again—something they have been waiting to do since their doctoral work together many years ago. We found our own alignment through our collaboration and benefited from each other's perspectives as lifelong educators with differing but complementary skills. Each of us learned from this experience as much as we gave.

It is our intention to provide leaders at all levels of a district with an instrument that is both theoretically sound and practically useful. To that end, *Aligning School Districts as PLCs* offers accessible and easily replicable observations and examples.

Chapter 1 establishes the notion of alignment by using brief "sound bites" from the perspectives of the three district roles. These examples illustrate the difficulty of aligning a district's policies, practices, and procedures at all levels, even when there are shared beliefs that supposedly link them in common cause. Chapter 1 also introduces the three "big ideas" of PLCs. If alignment is seen as a guiding compass, then the three big ideas represent the destination that compass is leading them toward.

Chapter 2 focuses on four essentials needed for district alignment: (1) district roles, (2) communication through data, (3) loose and tight leadership, and (4) what we refer to as *alignment constants*—non-negotiable actions that are the same across all of the big ideas. These four alignment constants must be in place in order for a district's alignment efforts to be successful. Applications of each of them are presented and discussed.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 show aligned PLC practices. This is accomplished by identifying role-based responsibilities that address the non-negotiables for each of the big ideas. We also look at how the alignment constants apply to each big idea. Finally, we tell a story

in each of these chapters that illustrates a *lack* of alignment and the changes an aligned approach would make to that story. Each of these three chapters focuses on one of the big ideas.

Chapter 6 presents two tools to help a district answer the questions, How are we doing in successfully aligning ourselves? How can we objectively tell?

The appendix (page 135) contains reproducible big idea appraisal tools (also found online at **go.solution-tree.com/plcbooks**) that schools can use to determine how far along they are with respect to implementation. Readers may want to consult these tools as they work through the book.

The positive impact of professional learning communities on children and teachers and in classrooms is irrefutable. But how much greater an impact might PLCs demonstrate if we could change not just one classroom, department, or team at a time, but an entire district at a time! We believe attention to alignment at a districtwide level can significantly contribute to that outcome.

Mark Van Clay

Perry Soldwedel

Thomas Many

The Case for Districtwide Alignment

> He who loves practice without theory is like a sailor who boards a ship without a rudder and a compass and never knows where he may cast.
>
> —Leonardo da Vinci

The notion of alignment assumes a coordinated effort that results in successfully melding various parts of a system. When these parts are aligned, the outcomes are more predictable, more efficiently attained, and more likely to be the result that was desired.

Some districts, however, are like a highly trained athlete who suffers an injury. If the athlete continues to perform by trying to compensate for the injury, other injuries inevitably develop in other parts of his body. A pitcher who injures a knee will often develop a sore shoulder or elbow.

In a similar fashion, efforts break down when different levels within the district are not functioning in mutually supportive and connected ways. Since each level is tethered to the other levels, a problem in one affects all of them.

Clearly, those who teach the children represent the most critical level around which to align. But those who don't teach still need to provide the resources, vision, foci, learning environment, accountability structures, and common messages required to support those who do.

How can all parts interrelate and interconnect in ways that allow a district to best deliver its full potential as a professional learning community?

We define *districtwide alignment* as *the intentional linkage of the work of schools and the school district to the work of collaborative teams in order to achieve a districtwide professional learning community.*

For public schools, alignment is the bridge between theory and practice; alignment is about how to successfully approach the challenge of having *all* levels of the district support what will actually work with real children in real classroom settings.

It's Not Easy

This alignment business is not easy to do. School districts are multilayered structures in which many roles and responsibilities operate simultaneously. Students, classroom teachers, support teachers, teacher aides, nonteaching staff, department heads, school administrators, district administrators, union leaders, and boards of education each make their own contributions—not to mention influences outside of the district such as parents, community interests, politicians, policymakers, state and federal education bodies, educational publishers, and university schools of education.

Yet the thought of all of these moving parts acting in ballet-like coordination seems daunting when considering how complex the interactions among the different levels of a district can become. Let's explore these interactions by looking at the fictional Nirvana School District. Here, a message to set rigorous, districtwide achievement targets for students is interpreted differently by the school board, the superintendent, the high school principal, and the teachers association president.

The School Board's Perspective

> The board's new goals were tied to two rigorous student achievement targets that computer programmer and board member George Bell had crafted. These targets were: (1) to be at the top of the list of in-state student achievement scores for demographically similar schools and (2) to be at the 75th percentile compared to a list of high-achieving exemplar schools. The two comparisons would be made for each Nirvana school, followed by a ranking of all the Nirvana schools in terms of how they compared to each other.
>
> It was the board's intent to devote a full meeting to this presentation, so the public could be well informed. Board president Fran Ackers thought, with satisfaction, that these outcome measures would define the district's progress and increase academic rigor. And since they had started with some easy practice targets last year to get everyone used to the idea, real targets, she reasoned, shouldn't be scary to anyone now.

The board, as you can see, is justifiably proud of its efforts to set more rigorous student achievement goals and targets. It is committed to improving the achievement of its students and has taken initiative to do so. Since the staff had used practice targets that were not publicized last year, the board believed its newest action represented the first tangible step in seriously addressing academic rigor.