

## Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work

In our first book, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), we stated the premise of that book in its opening sentence:

The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities. (p. xi)

Our conviction in the validity of that statement has not wavered; however, we now have much clearer insights regarding the most effective strategies for helping educators make the transition from traditional schools to professional learning communities (PLCs).

A number of factors have contributed to our new insights. First, we have had the pleasure and privilege of working with and sharing ideas with some of the most influential people in education: Roland Barth, Michael Fullan, Wayne Hulle, Larry Lezotte, Doug Reeves, Jonathon Saphier, Mike Schmoker, Dennis Sparks, Tom Sergiovanni, and Rick Stiggins. These respected colleagues and friends have enriched our lives. They have shared their expertise, responded to our questions, enabled us to understand the complexities of school improvement at a deeper level, and helped clarify our own thinking.

We have also benefited from our association with some of the leading school practitioners in North America, including Tom Many, Barbara Eason-Watkins, Anthony Muhammad, Peter Noonan, Mike Mattos, Matt Miller, Susan Sparks, Austin Buffum, Alan Addley, Tim Kanold, Janet Malone, Clara Sale-Davis, Dick Dewey, Bernice Cobbs, Janel Keating, Tim Brown, Chuck Hinman, Dennis King, Ken Williams, Regina Owens, Lillie Jessie, Charlie Coleman, Susan Huff, Tyrone Olverson, Eric Twadell, Brian Butler, Sam Ritchie, Cheryl O’Leary, Jack Balderman, and Terri Martin. They are what Fullan (2005a) has called “system thinkers in action”—people who have developed deep understanding of what it takes to improve schools by rolling up their sleeves and doing the work. They represent the power of learning by doing, a concept we will return to frequently in this book.

Our great friend and publisher, Jeff Jones, has made an enormous contribution to our work and our lives during the past 10 years. As the president of Solution Tree, he has transformed a once small publishing company into one of the most influential providers of meaningful professional development in North America. He has been tireless in his efforts to promote the PLC concept, and we consider his entry into our lives in 1998 as a key turning point in our work as authors and consultants.

Finally, our personal and professional partnership is entering its fourth decade. Without question, the most important development in our long relationship has been the addition of Becky DuFour to our team. Becky’s experience as a successful leader of a PLC, her skill as a presenter, and her empathy for educators have been instrumental both in establishing the credibility of the PLC concept and in extending the concept to others. Many of the new insights we introduce in this revised edition we attribute to her, and we are pleased to have her join us as a coauthor of this work.

## A Merger of Research and Practice

The primary objective of this book is to offer educators specific, practical recommendations for transforming their schools into PLCs so that their students may learn at higher levels and their profession becomes more rewarding, satisfying, and fulfilling. We have not, however, limited our study to research, practices, and standards in education. We also examine organizational development, change processes, leadership, and successful practices outside of education. We rely heavily on the work of Robert Marzano, Doug Reeves, Linda Darling-Hammond, Richard Elmore, Charlotte Danielson, Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, Milbrey McLaughlin, Larry Lezotte, Fred Newmann, Roland Barth, Seymour Sarason, Phil Schlechty, Mike Schmoker, Rick Stiggins, Paul Black, Dylan Wiliam, Dennis Sparks, Judith Warren Little, Karen Seashore Louis, and others who have offered powerful insights for improving public schools. But we also have sought out the lessons that can be found for educators in the work of Patrick Lencioni, Burt Nanus, Tom Peters, Barry Posner, Peter Senge, Robert Waterman, Ken Blanchard, Jim Collins, Jerry Porras, Jeffrey Pfeffer, Robert Sutton, Marcus Buckingham, Warren Bennis, James Champy, Stephen Covey, Terry Deal, Peter Drucker, John Gardner, Daniel Goleman, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, John Kotter, James Kouzes, Robert Kegan, Kerry Patterson, Howard Gardner, and others.

A learning organization is willing to learn from its external environment, and the most successful people in any area look outside their narrow field for fresh perspectives and new ideas (Kanter, 1997). We believe that school practitioners can and should learn from organizations outside of education that have struggled with some of the same issues public schools face today. The best of these organizations have struggled to find answers to questions such as these:

- How can we clarify and communicate the purpose, vision, values, and goals of our organization?
- How can we initiate, implement, and sustain a change process?
- How can we provide strong leadership while simultaneously empowering those closest to the action?
- How can we shape organizational culture and provide structures that support the culture we seek?
- How can we create collaborative processes that result in both individual and organizational learning?
- How can we foster an environment that is results-oriented yet encourages experimentation?
- How can we build ongoing learning and continuous improvement into our routine work practices?

In the final analysis, however, while we have become students of research inside and outside of education, our work has been grounded in our experiences in schools and districts throughout North America. We have observed and struggled with the perplexities of school improvement, confronted the obstacles that must be overcome, and gained valuable insights into the practices that enable a school or district to function as a PLC. We have benefited immensely from our association with schools and districts across the continent and our many opportunities to observe educators in a wide variety of settings work their way through the challenges of becoming a PLC. We have tremendous respect and appreciation both for their efforts and for the role they have played in our own learning. We hope this book will provide insights into that learning and encourage educators to undertake the challenging but rewarding process of building their collective capacity to create schools and districts that operate as high-performing PLCs.

## Chapter 1: New Insights Into Professional Learning Communities at Work

This book begins with a review of six characteristics of a PLC and three big ideas that drive the PLC concept. It then identifies 12 new learnings that have emerged as a result of our work with schools and districts as they have attempted to bring the PLC concept to life in their organizations.

## Chapter 2: The Rise and Fall of School Reform

While this book strives to describe a better future for public schools, this chapter offers a look at the past. Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the origins of public education in the United States. The chapter then examines the reform efforts of the past quarter century with an extensive discussion of the impact of the most ambitious school reform initiative in American history—the No Child Left Behind Act. It examines some of the reasons past school reform efforts have failed to accomplish their intended objectives. The chapter makes the case that in many ways, public education has been remarkably successful; however, the need to provide the best education possible has never been more imperative than it is today because the consequences of poor schooling have never weighed heavier on the future of our children.

## Chapter 3: Making the Case for Professional Learning Communities

This chapter demonstrates the extent to which the PLC concept has been endorsed by educational researchers and professional organizations serving educators. The challenge of improving schools does not depend upon educators discovering new ideas; it depends upon their willingness to implement what is already known regarding best practices for student and adult learning. This chapter begins to examine some of the cultural conditions that interfere with the implementation of PLC practices and offers a story to illustrate the concept at work in a school.

## Chapter 4: The Challenge of Cultural Change

This chapter emphatically asserts that creating a PLC requires, and is tantamount to, reshaping the traditional culture of schools and districts. It draws a distinction between structural and cultural change and stresses that changing the structure of any organization is not sufficient to change its culture—the assumptions, behaviors, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for the organization. Chapter 4 explores the nature of a substantive improvement process, obstacles to be overcome, and whether the best path for results-oriented change comes from the top down, or from the bottom up. It introduces the ideal of a culture that is simultaneously loose and tight, a concept that we will reference often throughout the book. Finally, it makes the case that transforming traditional school cultures to support the PLC concept is indeed difficult, but very doable.

## Chapter 5: Clear Mission and Shared Vision

Shared mission, vision, values, and goals are the four building blocks that comprise the foundation of a PLC. Chapter 5 examines the first two blocks: mission and vision. The mission building block answers the question, “What is our purpose?” to which schools often provide a trite and superficial response. This chapter suggests how the issue can be examined in a way that serves as a catalyst for improvement. The vision building block answers the question, “What do we hope to become?” The chapter offers strategies for developing a shared vision, examines common questions related to articulating a vision, provides summaries of research that can be used to inform the process, and suggests criteria for assessing a vision statement. Most importantly, this chapter suggests some of the very specific actions and activities the members of a community would engage in as they move mission and vision from rhetoric to reality.

## Chapter 6: Shared Values (Collective Commitments) and Common Goals

Chapter 6 examines the third and fourth building blocks of a PLC: values, or collective commitments, and common goals. The values building block answers the question, “How must we behave, what commitments must we make and honor, in order to make our shared vision a reality?” Value statements articulate the collective commitments members of a PLC agree to put into action to create the school they desire. This chapter offers suggestions for developing such statements.

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the goals building block, which clarifies the indicators of progress the school will monitor and the timetable of the specific steps that will be taken to move the school toward its vision. The chapter stresses that SMART goals are essential to a results orientation, effective teams, and continuous improvement, and are a key factor in the accumulation of small wins necessary to sustain the improvement initiative. The chapter identifies common mistakes that schools make in developing goals, and it presents criteria for assessing goals.

## Chapter 7: Teaching in a Professional Learning Community

This chapter identifies the single biggest barrier educators must overcome if they are to create PLCs in their schools and districts: the long tradition of teachers working in isolation. The chapter asserts that the common practice of teachers continuing to work in isolation today despite all that is known about the benefits of a collaborative school culture is a classic example of the “knowing-doing gap”—not doing what we know we should do. The chapter also challenges educators to avoid the half-truths of pseudo-teams rather than real teams and “coblaboration” rather than collaboration. It suggests the topics teachers would collaborate about if their focus was on student learning and describes the work of a collaborative team in an elementary school to illustrate. The chapter concludes with the story of a team of teachers who worked collaboratively and collectively to raise achievement for their students.

## Chapter 8: Assessment in a Professional Learning Community

This chapter points out that historically the goal of assessment in education in the United States was to assist schools in what was universally accepted as their fundamental task: sorting, ranking, and selecting students. It argues that if schools are to fulfill a new purpose—high levels of learning for all students—assessment must take on a different purpose. The chapter draws a distinction between summative and formative assessments and asserts the latter are vital to schools that function as PLCs. While acknowledging that good teachers are constantly assessing student learning through multiple and varied checks for understanding as a part of each day’s lesson, the chapter also calls upon collaborative teams of teachers to work together to create a series of common formative assessments as one of the tools they use in their more formal investigations of student understanding. Educators are urged to use assessment not merely to monitor student learning or diagnosis problems in that learning, but also, more importantly, to inform and impact their instruction to improve student learning. The chapter explains the significance and benefits of such assessments and presents a brief overview of some of the principles of good assessments.

## Chapter 9: A Tale of Excellence in Assessment

Chapter 8 examines the technical aspects of assessment in a PLC. In chapter 9, we illustrate the potential power of effective assessment practices through the oldest teaching vehicle known to man—a story. Good stories teach us. They convey not only how something should be done, but more importantly, why it should be done. They communicate priorities and clarify what is significant, valued, and appreciated. Chapter 9 tells a story of excellence in assessment in a PLC. The protagonist of the

story is a high-school teacher, but the message applies equally and with little revision to middle and elementary schools as well.

## Chapter 10: Intervention and Enrichment in a Professional Learning Community

This chapter explores the question, “What happens when a student does not learn despite the best efforts of his or her classroom teacher?” It asserts that the honest answer to that question in most schools is, “It will depend on his or her teacher.” The chapter argues that schools committed to high levels of all learning will ensure students who have initial difficulty receive additional time and support for learning in a timely, directive, and systematic way. It highlights nine schools across the United States that have achieved extraordinary results through comprehensive improvement efforts that have included such systems of interventions. The chapter also addresses how schools are using this concept of differentiation of time and support to bring proficient students to higher levels of learning. It asks educators to accept responsibility for creating schedules that allow this differentiation, and concludes with a story of a school that has done so.

## Chapter 11: The Classroom as a Learning Community

Although this book is devoted primarily to implementing the PLC concept across schools and districts, this chapter explains how individual teachers can apply the concept to create classrooms that function as learning communities. It explains how teachers are using norms to create collective commitments between students, establishing specific learning targets in kid-friendly language, training students to apply clearly defined criteria for assessing the quality of their work, and using effective cooperative learning strategies to create classrooms of community rather than competition. It argues that since the ability to work cooperatively and collaboratively has been established as an essential workplace skill for the 21st century, teachers should model those skills and create conditions in their classrooms that help students develop the skills. The chapter ends with a story of how a team of high school calculus teachers has used this strategy to create one of the most effective Advanced Placement programs in the United States.

## Chapter 12: The Role of the Principal in a Professional Learning Community

This chapter begins with a review of the research on the importance of the principalship and continues with recommendations from researchers and professional organizations in an effort to help those in the position function most effectively. The chapter attempts to simplify the principal’s complex role with three specific recommendations:

1. Principals must recognize their primary job is to create the conditions that help the adults in their building continually improve upon their collective capacity to ensure all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success.
2. Principals must disperse leadership throughout the school because their responsibilities are far too extensive for any single person to fulfill.
3. Principals must bring coherence to the complexities of schooling by aligning the structure and culture of the school to its fundamental purpose of high levels of learning for all students.

The chapter offers specific recommendations for each of the three areas and concludes with advice from principals from across the country who have been highly effective in leading PLCs.