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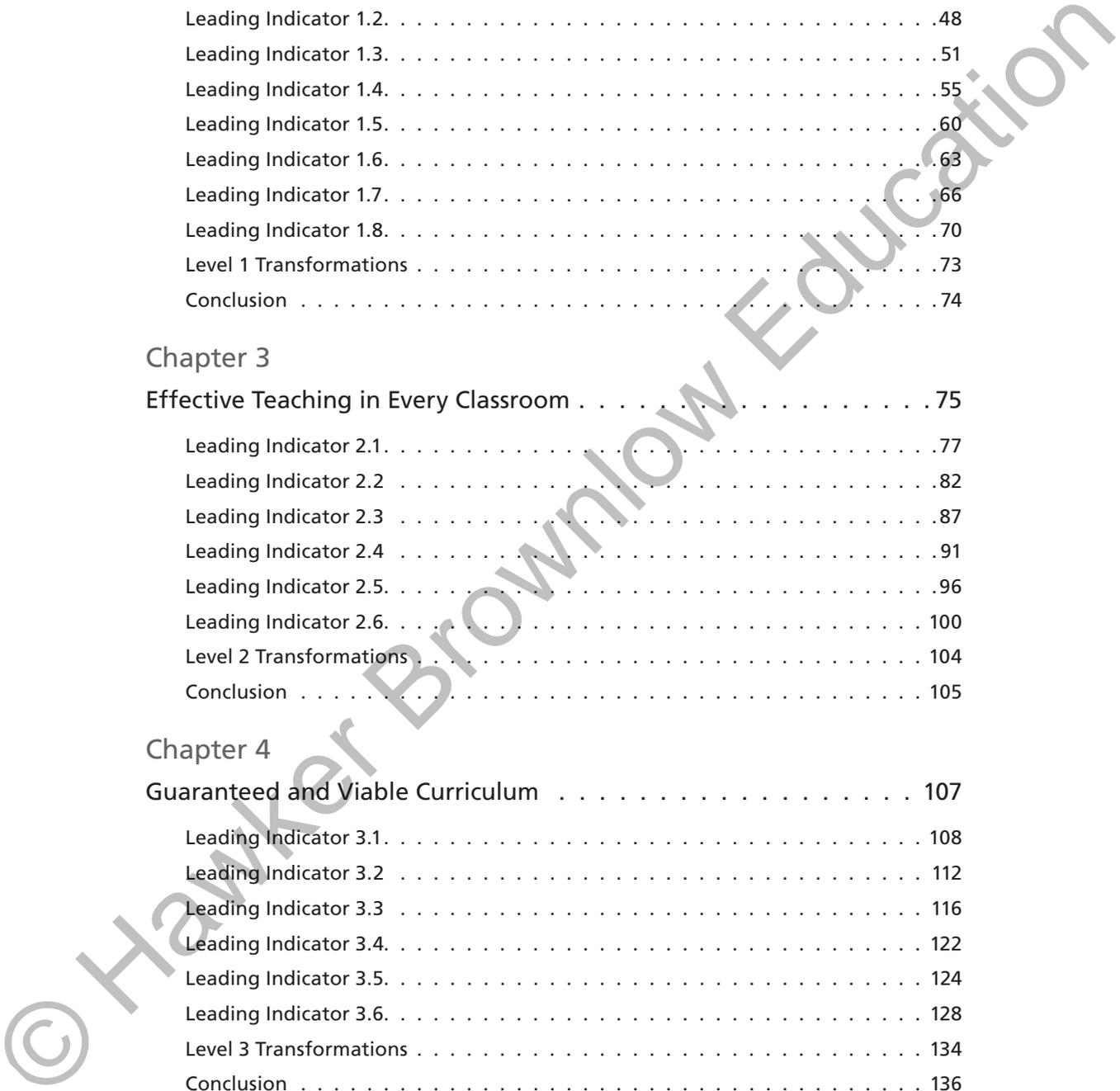
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Introduction

The Primacy of the PLC Process

By Richard DuFour



In the subtitle of his 1961 book, *Excellence*, John W. Gardner asks, “Can we be equal and excellent too?” Contemporary educators face the challenge of answering this question in the affirmative. Schools that strive for excellence must take steps to ensure that all students not only have equal access to but also acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will prepare them for their future. These institutions that were created to sort and select students based on their perceived abilities, socioeconomic status, and likely careers now are called on to ensure every student graduates from high school with the high levels of learning necessary for success in college or other avenues of postsecondary training. In short, a school cannot become excellent unless it commits to equity as well.

The Effective Schools research of the 1970s and 1980s established that some schools more effectively than others help students achieve the intended levels of proficiency. Schools, however, often overlook that student achievement differs significantly more *within* schools than *between* schools largely because of the variability in teacher effectiveness within the same school (Hattie, 2015).

This finding should come as no surprise given that the traditional schooling structure in a large portion of the world has involved individual teachers in isolated classrooms making decisions based on their experience, expertise, preferences, and interests. This structure has subjected students to an educational lottery in which what they learn, how much they learn, how they are assessed, and what happens when they struggle are almost entirely a function of their assigned teacher.

Those who hope to lead a high reliability school (HRS) must confront the challenge of reducing this variability so all students have access to good teaching, a guaranteed and viable curriculum, careful monitoring of their learning, systematic interventions when they struggle, and extension when they demonstrate high levels of proficiency. Their best hope for meeting this challenge lies in making the Professional Learning Communities at Work (PLC at Work) process the cornerstone of HRS creation. In doing so, educators will serve the cause of both excellence and equity.

The PLC at Work Process as the Cornerstone of High Reliability Schools

In order for the HRS model to drive a school toward excellence, educators in the school must know that the professional learning community process represents the foundation of their efforts. We recognize that although the term *PLC* has become ubiquitous, groups apply varying definitions. For our purposes, we want to distinguish among the terms *professional learning community*, *collaborative team*, and *professional learning community process*.

In many schools, educators refer to their collaborative teams as a *PLC*. We discourage this use of the term. A PLC is a school or district that is attempting to implement the PLC process. Many elements of the process require schoolwide coordination that goes beyond the work of a grade-level or course-specific team. The collaborative team, although not a PLC, is the fundamental structure of a PLC and the engine that drives the PLC process.

The PLC process calls for educators to work together collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. It operates under the assumption that purposeful, continuous, job-embedded learning for educators is the key to improved student learning. Before delving into the nuances of PLCs, let's consider a fundamental prerequisite to any effective school—providing a safe and orderly environment for both student and adult learning.

The Importance of a Safe and Orderly Environment

When Abraham Maslow (1943) created his hierarchy of needs, he cited *safety* and *orderliness* as fundamental needs second only to biological needs such as air, water, food, and so on. But he found that although addressing safety needs is vital for progressing to higher levels of self-actualization, it does not ensure that progression. The same is true of classrooms.

Every classroom teacher knows the importance of effective classroom management. Individuals with outstanding content knowledge will flounder as teachers if

they cannot maintain a safe and orderly classroom. But effective teachers go beyond classroom management to use strategies that engage learners and constantly monitor their learning. Classroom management is a necessary condition for effective teaching, but it is not sufficient on its own.

This same principle applies to schools. Maintaining a safe and orderly environment is important, but it is not nearly enough. Every school leader must ensure a safe and orderly environment for both student and adult learning. But if school leaders seek to create excellent schools, they must move beyond running a tight ship.

Given the significance of a safe and orderly environment, I find it striking how frequently staff members lack knowledge of specific indicators that could provide insight into how to enhance this important aspect of their school. I ask faculty:

- “How many of you know the number of discipline referrals that were written in your school last year?”
- “How many of you know the number-one cause of discipline referrals in your school?”
- “How many of you know the number of student suspensions that occurred in your school last year?”
- “Is there a time of day, day of the week, or place in the school that discipline problems are most likely to arise?”
- “Do students report feeling safe in your school?”
- “Do students report either being bullied or witnessing bullying in your school?”

In most instances, faculty members cannot answer these questions. If they don't have a clue about their current reality, they find it difficult to improve on that reality in any coordinated way. Therefore, school leaders should keep information about the school's environment at the forefront and frequently engage the staff in analyzing the information and identifying potential areas of need and strategies for improvement. One strategy is embracing the three big ideas driving the PLC process.

Assumptions Driving the PLC Process

Three big ideas drive the PLC process (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016). The extent to which educators consider and embrace these ideas has a significant impact on that process's outcomes in a district or school. These three big ideas include (1) a focus on learning, (2) a collaborative culture, and (3) a results orientation.

A Focus on Learning

The first and biggest of the big ideas states that a school's fundamental purpose is to ensure all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will

enable them to continue learning beyond the K–12 system. This represents a radical departure from the traditional premise that school’s purpose is merely to give students the opportunity to learn. The mantra of “The teacher’s job is to teach, and the student’s job is to learn” supports this traditional premise. The relevant question for this premise asks, Was the content taught, or was the curriculum *covered*? If, however, a school’s fundamental purpose is to ensure that teachers do not merely teach students but expect them to learn, the relevant question becomes, Did the student learn? Did the student acquire the intended knowledge, skills, and dispositions of this course, unit, or lesson?

In our work with schools in implementing the PLC process, my colleagues and I have found that we can shift thinking on the purpose of school by addressing the four pillars that serve as the foundation of the PLC process: (1) mission, (2) vision, (3) collective commitments, and (4) goals (DuFour et al., 2016).

1. **Mission:** Why does the school exist? What is the fundamental purpose of our school? What have we come together to accomplish?
2. **Vision:** What must we become as a school in order to better fulfill our fundamental purpose? Can we describe the school we hope to become in the next five years? What policies, practices, procedures, and culture align best with a mission of learning for all?
3. **Collective commitments:** How must we behave? What commitments must we make and honor in order to become the school in our vision so we can better fulfill our fundamental purpose? Do our commitments describe in specific terms the behaviors we should demonstrate today to help move our school forward?
4. **Goals:** Which steps will we take and when? What targets and timelines will we establish to mark our progress in becoming the school we have described in our vision? How will we know if our collective efforts are making a difference?

Schools often prefer to avoid these foundational questions and get right to the nuts and bolts of the PLC process. Doing so is a mistake. A school will struggle in its PLC implementation efforts if a faculty persists in believing that its job is to teach rather than to help all students learn, and if staff members have no idea where the school wants to go in its improvement efforts. It will struggle if educators refuse to articulate the commitments they hope will characterize their school and if they have no benchmarks to monitor progress. Therefore, we highly recommend that leaders engage the staff in considering the questions posed in the PLC foundation.

Marcus Buckingham (2005), a global researcher and thought leader, contends that, above all else, leaders of any effective organization must know the importance of clarity. Having clarity means communicating consistently in words and actions the organization’s purpose, the future the organization will attempt to create, the

specific actions members can immediately take to achieve its goals, and the progress indicators it will track. Engaging the staff in considering the four pillars of the PLC foundation is the key to establishing that clarity.

However, leaders must do more than simply invite people to share opinions. A fundamental prerequisite in decision making in a PLC is building shared knowledge about the most promising practices. In other words, staff members must learn together about the research base and evidence that can help them intelligently answer the PLC foundation questions. Uninformed people make uninformed decisions. Therefore, in building consensus in a PLC, leaders must take responsibility for providing staff with the information they need to make good decisions at all points in the process.

A Collaborative Culture

The second big idea driving the PLC process is that for a school to help all students learn, it must build a collaborative culture in which members take collective responsibility for all students. The traditional mantra of “These are *my* students” gives way to “These are *our* students, and we share the responsibility to ensure their learning.” Here again, the issue of equity comes to the fore. What to teach, content sequencing, appropriate pacing, assessment, intervention, extension, and instructional strategies have traditionally come under the individual classroom teacher’s purview, which, as previously mentioned, makes equity virtually impossible.

The PLC process calls on collaborative team members to make these decisions collectively rather than in isolation. The entire team decides what students must know and be able to do for the entire course and for each unit within the course. It establishes the content’s sequencing and the appropriate pacing for each unit. The team develops common formative assessments for each unit and agrees on the criteria it will use in judging the quality of student work. The team identifies students who need intervention or extension, and the school creates the systems to ensure students receive this additional support in a timely manner. It analyzes transparent evidence of student learning in order to inform and improve its practice. None of this will occur without effective leadership that ensures it puts structures and supports in place to foster effective collaboration. We will address the elements of that leadership later in this introduction.

A Results Orientation

The third big idea that drives the PLC process states that educators must assess their effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions. Project-based goals such as “We will integrate technology into our language arts program” and “We will develop six new common assessments” give way to SMART goals that ask

educators to focus on how their projects and efforts will impact student achievement. The *SMART* goal acronym helps educators focus on evidence of student learning (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2014). A SMART goal is:

- **Strategic**—The goal aligns with a school or district goal. A team that achieves its SMART goal contributes to the school or district goal.
- **Measurable**—The goal provides a basis of comparison to determine whether evidence of student learning indicates improvement or decline.
- **Attainable**—The goal is realistic enough that team members believe they can achieve it through their collective efforts.
- **Results oriented**—The goal focuses on results rather than activities or intentions. In order to achieve a SMART goal, a team must typically help more students learn at higher levels than in the past.
- **Time bound**—The goal specifies when the team expects to achieve its goal.

Teams can and should create SMART goals for the entire school year and for every unit they teach during the year.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of collective inquiry and open dialogue about the three big ideas for successful implementation of the PLC process. More rigorous standards and more informative assessments cannot, by themselves, improve a school. If educators convince themselves that they fulfill their responsibility simply when they present content, that they work best in isolation, and that they need to use evidence of student learning only to assign grades—rather than to inform professional practice to better meet student needs—even well-designed structures and processes have little impact on student learning. School transformation requires significant changes in the culture of schooling, which, in turn, requires educators to engage in meaningful and informed dialogue about the assumptions, beliefs, and expectations that should drive their work.

Critical Questions for Team and School Consideration

It stands to reason that any school that claims it is committed to helping all students learn must engage collaborative teams in collectively considering certain critical questions. The four critical questions of learning in the PLC process include (DuFour et al., 2016):

1. **What is it we want students to learn?**—What knowledge, skills, and dispositions do we expect each student to acquire at the end of this instructional unit, course, or grade level?
2. **How will we know if students are learning?**—How will we monitor each student’s learning during daily instruction and during the unit?

3. **How will we respond when students don't learn?**—What systems do we have in place to provide students who struggle with additional time and support for acquiring essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions?
4. **How will we extend learning for students who are highly proficient?**—What systems do we have in place to extend learning for students who have already learned the essential standards?

In *Collaborative Teams That Transform Schools*, Robert Marzano, Tammy Heflebower, Jan K. Hoegh, Phil Warrick, and Gavin Grift (2016) recommend two additional questions that educators in a high reliability school should consider.

5. **How will we increase our instructional competence?**—What systems are in place to help teachers improve their pedagogical skills?
6. **How will we coordinate our efforts as a school?**—How will we ensure that all initiatives in the school are operating in a cohesive and coherent manner?

Let's compare and contrast how a traditional school and a PLC would attempt to address these six questions.

What Is It We Want Students to Learn?

Marzano's (2003) research in *What Works in Schools* has made the term *guaranteed and viable curriculum* part of the educational lexicon. Thanks to his work, two general understandings persist: (1) effective schools provide students with access to the same curriculum content in a specific course and at a specific grade level, regardless of their assigned teacher; and (2) teachers can teach this curriculum in the amount of instructional time provided. (Chapter 4, page 107, elaborates on the importance of a guaranteed and viable curriculum.)

Traditionally, districts have addressed this key element of effective schooling by creating district curriculum and pacing guides and distributing the appropriate guide to each teacher based on his or her grade level or course. This practice often creates the illusion of a guaranteed and viable curriculum because, theoretically, teachers of the same content work from the same document. Too often, however, the mere distribution of documents has little impact on what actually happens in the classroom. We cannot assume that individual teachers will read the documents, interpret them consistently, apply the same priorities to each curricular standard, devote similar amounts of time to the various standards, and have the ability to teach each standard well. Furthermore, simply distributing documents to teachers does not result in either the teacher clarity or the teacher commitment essential to provide students with a guaranteed and viable curriculum.