



Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap:

Whatever It Takes

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever It Takes* by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Gayle Karhanek. *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap* reiterates, reinforces, and expands on the ideas in its prequel, *Whatever It Takes*, and provides even more examples of schools that have enriched the learning for *all* students.

This guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or by an entire team to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, assess conditions in a particular school or district, and

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suggest steps that might be taken to promote a school environment in which every student has access to the time and support necessary to achieve high levels of learning.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope this guide is a useful tool in your efforts to create a healthy culture in your school or district.

Introduction

1. Michael Fullan is noted as saying that improvement in individual schools can usually be attributed to serendipity or luck. As key leaders depart, the improvement initiative grinds to a halt, and the school returns to business as usual. In reviewing what has occurred in the four schools featured in *Whatever It Takes* since its publication in 2004, the authors find that although each of the schools has changed principals at least once, all of them have improved student achievement beyond the high levels that were occurring in 2004. How do some schools manage to sustain improvement despite changes in leadership?
2. Early PLC work has focused on how individual schools can implement the PLC concept. However, the focus on the role of the central office is growing. How can the central office help promote the PLC concept throughout the district? What role should it have in supporting and sustaining the process?
3. In *Whatever It Takes*, the authors stressed three critical questions:
 - What is it we want all students to learn?
 - How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
 - What happens in our schools when a student does not learn?After working with more schools and districts, however, they added a fourth:

- How will we enrich and extend the learning of students who are proficient?

Does your school or district have a process in place to consider this fourth question? If so, what is that process?

4. The authors contend that creating a system of intervention and enrichment is one important aspect of creating a PLC, but that it must be part of a larger cultural shift. How might educators in the wrong school culture view a system of intervention and enrichment as absolving them of responsibility for student learning rather than promoting a collective commitment to helping all students learn?
5. The authors contend that the Response to Intervention (RTI) component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act merely calls upon schools to do what effective PLCs have always done—provide students who struggle with increasing levels of additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, and systematic. Yet some schools approach RTI as a curriculum or program to purchase rather than a systematic process to assist students. How familiar is your staff with RTI? Do members of your staff understand the rationale behind RTI and what it should entail?
6. A PLC is guided by several “big ideas” serving as overriding principles that unite people in the pursuit of a shared purpose, common goals, and clear direction.

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What are these big ideas? Have you seen their effect in your own school or district? What big ideas have been driving your school up to this point?

Chapter 1

The Shifting Mission of Public Schooling: Establishing the Historical Context

1. The assumption that student backgrounds and social contexts limit academic ability has been challenged with research concluding that all students are capable of high levels of learning. Unfortunately, U.S. school systems were built around the initial premise that the purpose of schools was to sort students on the basis of their backgrounds, aptitudes, diligence, and probable roles in life. Do you see any evidence that your school continues to operate according to this assumption? Can you cite specific evidence of your school's commitment to helping all students learn at high levels?
2. After twenty-five unfruitful years of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, a commission convened by President George W. Bush presented three general recommendations for reforming special education. What were these recommendations, and how does the RTI three-tier framework help achieve them?
3. In the RTI framework, who is responsible for helping all students achieve at higher levels? What caveats do the authors see that must be addressed in order for RTI to work?

Chapter 2

Laying the Groundwork for Effective Intervention

1. In order for an intervention system to be effective, the authors insist that fundamental prerequisites must be in place. It cannot be approached as an addition to an already existing practice. Why should the question of how to respond when students do not learn result in a process rather than a program? What basic premises do educators have to acknowledge in order to achieve a functional intervention system?
2. A key component of a PLC is the team. Every team within a PLC must work to identify students who need assistance in a timely manner, use consistent standards and processes to identify those students, and pinpoint the specific skill each student has difficulty with. What are the six steps the authors outline to meet these challenges? Has your school or district achieved any of these steps? Have you struggled with any? If so, which ones and why?
3. According to the authors, the attempt to regard collaboration as the end itself, rather than as a means to an end, is one of the most common mistakes when implementing the PLC concept. What is the “right” collaborative work of teams that operate within a PLC? How can educators learn to focus on the right collaborative work? How can the four critical questions help?

Chapter 3

Confronting the Brutal Facts:

The Traditional Response to Students Who Do Not Learn

1. The authors argue that the traditional response to students who struggle in school has been left to the individual teacher to determine, leading to a disjointed and uncoordinated response that is akin to an educational lottery. Why are educators seemingly untroubled by a system that is so obviously inequitable? Do you see the education lottery at work in your school or district?
2. Often teachers are left to their own devising when trying to differentiate instruction for their students. While the authors agree that differentiated instruction is an important skill, and one all teachers should develop, what do they suggest schools and districts should do to extend the concept of differentiation beyond the individual classroom? How should schools and districts handle the fact that students learn in different ways and at different speeds? Who should be responsible for student learning?
3. Many examples are offered to illustrate what schools can accomplish when everyone works together in systematic ways to improve student achievement. Why then is it important to remember that the stories featured in this book are not intended as models for other schools to transplant?

4. While a key idea to transforming school culture is ensuring that every student having difficulty receives additional time and support, the authors stress that no system of intervention will ever compensate for bad teaching. Schools that focus only on responding to students who are having difficulty will fail to become a PLC. In light of this information, what, then, is the most important resource in every school? How can schools better utilize this resource?

Chapter 4

Sustaining Excellence: A Return to Adlai Stevenson High School

1. This chapter describes how the staff at Adlai Stevenson High School addressed some of the barriers they confronted when attempting to provide students with timely, directive, systematic interventions. List some of the barriers you will confront, or are confronting, in your school or district.

2. One of the goals of Stevenson was to become more proactive in identifying the students who would need additional time and support. Several programs and procedures were started. What kind of program or procedure does your school or district have in place to identify and support the students who need you most? Describe any initiatives you would like to see to strengthen your ability to respond to students proactively.

3. In the beginning stages of growth, Stevenson had a difficult time effectively monitoring student progress and keeping parents informed. What changes did they make? How did they utilize technology in a way to better involve the parents in the education of their children?

4. Stevenson quickly realized that all their other improvement efforts would not amount to much if they didn't find a way to respond to students having difficulty

in a timely manner. Their answer was the Stevenson Pyramid of Interventions.

What is the premise behind the pyramid. What are the elements of this pyramid?

How might such a concept help your school or district?

5. Originally, Stevenson categorized students into ability groups, allowing only 10 percent of incoming students to be placed in the most rigorous track, and automatically relegating 25 percent to the two remedial tracks. What was wrong with this system and how did Stevenson fix it? Describe the system your school or district uses to assign students to curriculum and brainstorm ways to improve that system.
6. The key to Stevenson's success is the fact that rather than settling with their new-found reputation for excellence, they continue to improve. What significant steps has the school taken to strengthen their pyramid of interventions since *Whatever It Takes* was published?

Chapter 5

Hand in Hand We All Learn: A Return to Boones Mill Elementary School

1. Boones Mill Elementary School began its process of creating a school-wide system of time and support by building shared knowledge of the current reality in terms of how the school responded when a student was not learning. Its staff demonstrated the discipline to confront the brutal facts of that reality. What is your current reality? What happens in your school when kids don't learn?
2. In an effort to provide students with additional support during the school day, a floating tutor was hired and schedules were rearranged to provide the necessary time. What needs did this tutor fill? How did the school arrange the schedule and student groups so that all students could benefit from this resource?
3. Once Boones Mill was able to create a time each day when students in a particular grade level were available for additional support, staff members were able to identify a variety of ways to enlist the assistance of others in giving students personal attention. What additional human resources could you enlist in the effort to help all students learn at high levels?
4. Prior to implementing the PLC model, Boones Mill relied on two special education teachers—one who had to pull students out of class in order to work

with them, causing students to have to miss portions of their regular instruction, the other who managed a self-contained classroom with students of more profound need. How did Boones Mill redesign the special education program so that those students were no longer sequestered, but instead experienced a more connected curriculum?

5. The willingness of Boones Mill staff to align their practice with the mission of high levels of learning for all students has made the school one of the most recognized and celebrated in Virginia. That transition did not come easy, and yet the school continues to improve. What are some of the ways that Boones Mill has enhanced its effectiveness? How might your school learn from their redistribution of time and resources?

Chapter 6

Embracing Systematic Intervention: Prairie Star Middle School

1. The authors point out that middle schools have typically been structured to support teachers working together rather than in isolation. However, some critics of the middle school concept maintain that the model is inattentive to academic achievement and unaccountable for results. What is your reaction to that criticism?
2. After being labeled one of the lower-performing schools in the district, Prairie Star Middle School turned itself around to become a Governor's Achievement Award winner for academic excellence. They based their structural changes around the four critical questions. List some of these changes. How might your school or district implement a new structure based on the four critical questions?
3. In addition to creating a pyramid of interventions for the students, Prairie Star also realized that fundamental changes were needed to improve professional practice. How did the school implement these changes? Are any of these changes apparent in your school or district? How would such a structure impact your professional community, or if one is already in place, what shifts in thinking have you witnessed?

Chapter 7

Success and Triumph in a Worthy Endeavor: Lakeridge Junior High School

1. In 2002, Lakeridge Junior High School staff attributed the school's low performance to students, many of whom were from low-income families, had limited English proficiency, or were simply unmotivated. The school leaders recognized that assumptions about student achievement had to be dealt with before structural changes could be put in place. What questions did they ask themselves? How would you answer these questions in regard to your school or district?
2. After realizing that the after-school intervention efforts were not working, Lakeridge decided to make significant schedule changes to take advantage of time during the school day. How did they rearrange their schedule to be more effective? Describe your school's daily schedule. How could it be adapted to allow for intervention time?
3. Despite implementing new intervention strategies, Lakeridge still had intentional nonlearners. Describe how they dealt with these learners. What are your thoughts on this version of the pyramid of interventions?

4. Lakeridge also made becoming a PLC a priority by rearranging the weekly schedule to allow time for teacher collaboration and discussion. How does protecting this time affect the sustainability of the PLC effort? What advice does Principal Peterson offer to those interested in using the school day more efficiently?

Chapter 8

From State Sanctions to National Recognition: Highland Elementary School

1. As Michael Fullan notes, prescriptive fixes may help schools move from “awful to adequate,” but they neglect to build the necessary capacity for continuous improvement. How does the Professional Learning Community concept address this issue? Define *loose-tight leadership*. Consider how you might apply the concept of simultaneous loose-tight leadership in your school.
2. To standardize the system of intervention, specifically for reading, Highland uses a decision-making tree, which helps instructors determine what a student is struggling with and how to help that student. Why is it important to define standard procedures and set high expectations for both students and teachers?
3. At Highland, student intervention is fluid due to ongoing assessment, which means everyone on a team, including those who provide interventions, need to be aware of what students are to learn, when key concepts will be taught, and how students will demonstrate that they have learned. Have the members of your collaborative teams addressed these issues? Have you established strong channels of communication in your school or district to ensure clarity regarding the response to each issue? List ways to ensure effective communication between all parties.

Chapter 9

Building Toward the F.U.T.U.R.E.: Cinco Ranch High School

1. Cinco Ranch High School understands the importance of freshman year. Each school year begins with Fish Camp, a freshman orientation day that introduces new students to the school, to the four critical questions, and to cocurricular activities. The school also provides time during the school day to support freshmen throughout the year. How has your school demonstrated its commitment to assist incoming students in this vital year of transition?
2. Cinco Ranch made a point to set aside time for team collaboration, as well as to provide various levels of additional time and support for unsuccessful students. By creating an atmosphere where intervention and assessment are the norm for both teachers and students, what is Cinco Ranch saying about its priorities? What are your school's priorities? How do you know?
3. Recognizing that technology is a means to an end rather than the end itself, Cinco Ranch has used technology to accelerate momentum toward high levels of achievement for all students. How did technology contribute to their school improvement effort? Describe how your school uses technology. Is it an effective use?

4. The Cinco Ranch website proudly proclaims the school is helping to create a new F.U.T.U.R.E. What does this acronym stand for? How can your school also work toward these goals?

Chapter 10

From Good to Great: Implementation of PLC Concepts in Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96

1. Although District 96 was already considered a strong district, educators there continued to examine their practices in order to improve. After the district decided on a mission, a vision, and values and then set goals, Superintendent Many concluded there were three keys to realizing their ambitious aspirations. What are those keys? Do you see them expressed at work in your school or district? Provide examples.
2. In a PLC, everyone needs to be on the same page in order for communication and collaboration to be effective. As District 96 educators built shared knowledge about the PLC process, they recognized it would be a mistake to move forward with systematic interventions until they took certain preliminary steps to achieve this collective understanding. Describe those steps. Why are they important?
3. While representatives from each school in the district participated in establishing criteria for intervention, the specifics were left up to the local faculty. The district named the overarching criteria for intervention the “SPEED Intervention Criteria.” What does SPEED stand for? What is the purpose of allowing each group to decide how these criteria will be implemented?

4. A principal's priorities are made clear by what he or she pays attention to.

Principals within District 96 were confronted if they failed to respond to the district's PLC process. What are the priorities in your school? How do you know? How does the district respond to these priorities? How should the district respond?

Chapter 11

Whatever It Takes—Staying the Course: Whittier Union High School District

1. When beginning the PLC process in the Whittier Union District, Superintendent Thorstenson urged her school leaders to close the *knowing-doing gap*. Define the knowing-doing gap. What three expectations did Thorstenson list for all Whittier Union schools?
2. Leadership within the PLC process was taken very seriously; all principals were required to visit Adlai Stevenson High School to see for themselves how a PLC should look. How did job descriptions within the Whittier Union District change as the PLC formed? How did these leaders model the behavior they wanted to see from all teachers in the district?
3. The Whittier Union District operates under the premise that the initial focus of a school must be on prevention rather than intervention. What does this mean? What preventative measures are in place in your district?
4. The district allowed each school to come up with its own way of implementing intervention. How would your school rearrange the schedule to allow time for intervention and teacher collaboration within the school day?

Chapter 12

Under No Circumstances Blame the Kids: Sanger Unified School District

1. To avoid harsh sanctions and finally achieve high learning for all students, Superintendent Johnson realized his district needed to become a PLC. In the beginning stages, they were forced to face the reality of their practices. What were these realizations? Are there facts in your district that are currently being ignored? What four points became Sanger's mantra?
2. In an effort to increase leadership capacity and build community, Sanger instituted what are known as Sanger Summits. At these summits, principals report their progress as a PLC, inform others in their district as to what is working and what is not, and present a comprehensive look at evidence of student learning in their schools. What specifically does Superintendent Johnson ask of these principals? In what ways does this conversation keep everyone accountable? How does the Summit illustrate the balance between pressure and support that is needed to move an organization forward?
3. Each year Sanger principals are evaluated on how well they executed the directives listed on the Statement of Administrative Expectations that Superintendent Johnson provides at the administrative retreat. What are the benefits of having clearly articulated expectations? Was Superintendent Johnson guilty of top-down leadership?

4. One of the goals of the Sanger school board is to “strengthen the culture of collaboration.” How does the analogy of a sequoia grove illustrate this sense of community?

Chapter 13

“Yah, but. . .”: Considering Challenges to Systematic Intervention

1. Most of the challenges to the system of interventions will focus on implementation problems rather than on philosophical concerns. Objections are likely to take the form of “we don’t have enough ‘fill in the blank’ (time, money, resources, space, consensus, kids who will comply).” What are some strategies for addressing these concerns? Which excuses have you heard in your own school or district?

2. Some schools see a system of interventions as enabling students to be irresponsible. The authors contend a system of interventions is actually the opposite of enabling as compared to a system where failure is always an option for any student willing to choose it. Which system does your school currently subscribe to? What is your default option? How might you adjust the default option to keep students from making bad decisions?

3. One view of the PLC concept is that it is just another version of special education where students who can’t cut it are provided with different resources. How would you respond to this view?

4. One of the challenges leaders will face is how to build shared knowledge with those who oppose systems of interventions. How would you propose to meet this challenge?

Chapter 14

Finding Common Ground:

The Shared Practices of Highly Effective Schools and Districts

1. The schools and districts featured in the pages of this book were chosen because of their differences. However, closer examination reveals many important similarities. What are these similarities? Does your school or district share any of these characteristics?
2. Most schools or districts would consider themselves “action oriented” due to the constant flow of new initiatives and directives from the central office. What, then, is the difference between true action orientation and simple busyness? What role does coherence play?
3. The schools featured first in *Whatever It Takes*, and again in *Raising the Bar*, all have a commitment to continuous improvement. They did not stop when they demonstrated initial success; they continued to push for higher levels of student achievement. What elements contribute to a culture of continuous improvement? What challenges does your school or district face when trying to foster continuous improvement?

4. The schools and districts featured here resolved the dilemma of top-down versus bottom-up initiatives in a very consistent way. Describe the benefits of simultaneous loose-tight leadership. What should leaders be tight about, and what should they be loose about? What is tight in your school or district? How do people know it is tight?

Chapter 15

Whatever It Takes: How Effective Schools and Districts Overcome Barriers to Systematic Intervention and Enrichment

1. Stevenson High School faced definite challenges in the lack of funding for new staff to assume the roles of advisors and tutors, as well as concerns from the teachers union. Rather than saying, “We can’t,” what creative solutions did they come up with? How was collaboration incorporated into decision making?
2. When the Lakeridge Junior High School administration proposed a modified block schedule, they had to address parental concerns. What role did the community council play in transforming the school’s culture?
3. Many of the schools and districts described here faced contractual implications as they implemented their systems of time and support. Compare and contrast the various ways this challenge was dealt with. What other solutions can you think of?
4. The one common obstacle that *every* school and district confronted as they implemented the PLC concept was the unwillingness of and lack of support from some staff. What four points do the authors make in regard to this challenge? How does building communication and shared knowledge help?

5. Principal Peterson reported that a critical juncture in the PLC journey of Lakeridge Junior High School came when the staff acknowledged that they had the power to take control of time during the school day. Has your staff acknowledged this power or does it blame failure to act on “the schedule”?

Chapter 16

Changing the Culture of Schooling to Embrace Effort-Based Enrichment

1. Throughout the book, the authors stress that simply adding on programs to traditional school practices is neither significant nor lasting. Why does this approach not work? What needs to be done instead? List the cultural shifts that still need to take place in your school or district.
2. The traditional public school system is based on the assumption that student learning is almost exclusively a function of ability. This is referred to as a *fixed mindset*. What is the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset? Do the practices of your school communicate the fixed or the growth mindset to students? How can a school switch from one to the other?
3. A consistent message coming from students is that their schools fail to challenge them. Students of all ability levels, including those who are already proficient, need to be pushed beyond their comfort zone. What techniques are available to differentiate instruction to enrich and enhance the learning of *all* students? How do these approaches help schools continue their path of improvement?
4. What is your answer to the question raised by Ron Edmonds in 1978: how many effective schools would you need to see before you would acknowledge that the

staffs of some schools are able to create the conditions that dramatically improve their collective ability to help all students learn? This book has presented evidence from thirty-eight schools—urban, suburban, and rural; high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools; big schools and small schools; resource-rich and resource-starved schools. In every instance, however, the educators of those schools were able to create the structures and culture that promoted higher levels of learning for both students and adults. Is your staff devoting its effort and energy into creating those conditions or into explaining why they cannot be established in your unique setting? Most importantly, will you accept personal responsibility for working with your colleagues to begin to align your practices with what we have acknowledged is the purpose of our profession—helping *all* students to learn?

Chapter 17

Moving Forward: Planning for Effective Intervention

1. Explain the concept of an “undersupported” student and how it differs from other approaches to students who struggle.
2. The authors list nine questions to help you begin building your version of a pyramid of interventions to facilitate reaching those undersupported students. Which of these questions has your school or district answered? Which areas still need work? How do you plan to address these areas?
3. A key strategy to implement the PLC concept is translating the journey into small steps and celebrating the attainment of each step. If you were called upon to build a system of interventions to assist students with their learning, what is a short-term win you could plan to achieve in the first three months and how would you celebrate that win?
4. It is quite easy to stretch out the planning stage in order to avoid the doing stage. However, *doing* allows the opportunity to learn what works, what doesn’t, and what can be improved. What can you borrow from your own experience to prove this point? How might you get started?