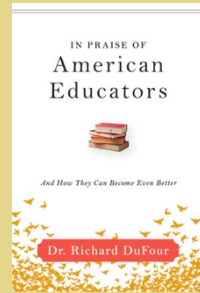# THE MAIN IDEA
current education book summaries

In Praise of American Educators:
And How They Can Become Even Better
By Dr. Richard DuFour (Solution Tree, 2015)

S.O.S. (A Summary of the Summary)

The main ideas of the book are:

> ~ The current tendency to blame teachers and schools is extremely misguided. In fact, educators have made unprecedented strides in student learning over the past three decades.
> ~ Implementing PLCs is the best way to give educators the support they need to continue to improve student learning, ensuring that *all* students are prepared to succeed in today's economy.

Why I chose this book:
In the introduction to this book, Rick DuFour announces that he has stage 4 lung cancer. I have been a huge fan of his since he introduced the concept of the PLC, and I have to say that I was deeply saddened by the thought of losing one of the best thinkers when it comes to teacher quality, student learning, and school culture. In what might be his last book, DuFour begins with an impassioned, research-based defense of American educators, who have made tremendous progress in the face of systematic obstacles and the current backlash against teachers.

However, as much as educators have already accomplished, it is not yet enough. In previous generations, students could fail at school and still have economically stable lives. Now *all* students must succeed in school. The second part of the book shows how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can help achieve this highly ambitious goal.

In PLC schools, adults and students are continuously learning and improving student achievement. These schools have experienced skyrocketing student achievement results, as well as many other improvements in staff morale, parent relations, and student behavior. With 34 years of public school experience, followed by decades implementing PLCs in every state, Rick DuFour is supremely qualified to help you implement this powerful collaborative process.

The Scoop (In this summary you will learn…)

✓ Why today's teachers represent "the greatest generation" of educators

✓ The benefits of PLCs: improved instruction, assessment, targeted interventions, increased effectiveness, and high morale

✓ The six essential elements of PLCs, and how to build each element at your school

✓ How to do "the right work" of PLCs and avoid the common mistakes of "PLC light"

✓ How teachers can create a powerful, integrated system of curriculum, assessment, and intervention

✓ The Main Idea's professional development suggestions to implement the ideas in this book

Chapters 1 & 2 – Educators Under Attack & The Phony Crisis

Over the past thirty years, politicians and the media have become increasingly critical of American schools. Newspaper headlines warn of a "crisis," and the government has addressed this apparent crisis with a series of federal laws from No Child Left Behind to Race to the Top. A number of these reforms have been used to punish failing schools and more recently to target individual "bad teachers." The media has jumped on the bandwagon and has also begun blaming teachers for the apparent crisis in American education. However, contrary to popular belief, recent statistics demonstrate that, far from failing, America's educators are helping students make greater progress than ever before by achieving:

> ✓ *Record-setting graduation rates*, reaching an all-time high of 80% in 2012
> ✓ *Success in rigorous courses*, with 20% of the 2014 graduating class scoring an honor grade (3 or higher) on an AP exam
> ✓ *Steadily improving test scores*, with dramatic drops in the percentage of students scoring "below basic" on the NAEP (From 50% of 4th graders in 1990 to 18% in 2011; from 48% of 8th graders in 1990 to 27% in 2011)

Overall, most parents and students are highly satisfied with their teachers. Three quarters of parents give their children's schools an A or B letter grade, and on an international survey, American teachers received higher-than-average scores from students in all areas.

The Rationale for Attacking Educators
What, then, are the reasons used to justify attacks on teachers? This section looks at several of the most commonly used rationales.

1. NCLB results: Some critics point to increasing numbers of schools that were designated as "failing" under No Child Left Behind, but under the law, unless all students in a school were "highly proficient," the school was eventually designated as failing.

2. NAEP results: The NAEP includes several scoring levels: *below basic*, *basic*, *proficient,* and *advanced*. According to the National Academy of Sciences and many other groups, those levels are inaccurate: a score of "basic" is the equivalent of a B or C grade, and therefore indicates proficiency.

3. International assessments: America has one of the highest poverty rates of industrialized countries. If international assessments only compared schools with similar rates of poverty, American students would rank first in the world. However, many American schools serve large numbers of students living in poverty, and test scores from those schools lower the U.S. average.

It's true that American schools are far from perfect and need to improve across several areas, including meeting the needs of low-income students. The question is *how* these improvements might best come about. The next chapter examines several failed approaches.

Chapter 3 – Ineffective Reform Efforts

Over the past few decades, lawmakers have passed policies to open charter schools, monitor educators' performance, and implement a system of rewards and punishments for schools and teachers. How effective were these reforms?

Charter Schools: Studies show that most charter schools do not surpass public schools in terms of student performance.

Using Tests to Monitor Teachers' Performance: Major research organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences advise against using student test scores to evaluate teachers because student tests cannot accurately measure teachers' performance. States that *have* implemented these measures have found wide variability in teachers' scores from year to year as well as extremely large margins of error. Furthermore, it is impossible to separate teacher quality from other factors such as school climate and past classes.

Punishments and Rewards: These measurements are supposed to reward effective teachers and punish ineffective ones. However, even though teachers are much more likely to be dismissed than their counterparts in other professions, this has led to no apparent positive effect on students. Furthermore, school systems that have implemented merit pay have seen *no* improvement in student achievement.

None of the policies above achieved their stated goal, which was to boost U.S. student performance on international measures. The policies also had negative effects, including decreased teacher morale, a drop in interest in teaching as a profession, and a narrowed curriculum.

Chapter 4 – Learning from High-Performing Countries

As the previous chapter demonstrated, recent education policies in the U.S. have not brought about the desired results. What, then, are the policies that have been proven to significantly improve schools? This chapter explores the successes of two consistently high-performing countries: Singapore and Finland, where policies focus on recruiting qualified teachers and supporting their work.

How do these countries attract qualified candidates? According to the National Center of Education and the Economy, three factors determine the quality of the teacher applicant pool: the status of teaching as a profession, relative compensation for teachers, and working conditions. For each of these factors, there is a sharp contrast between the U.S. and high-performing nations, as shown below:

	Singapore	*Finland*	*U.S.*
1. Professional Status	*Only 1/8 of applicants are accepted to training programs * Public polls: teachers make a greater contribution to society than any other professionals	*Only 1/10 of applicants are accepted to training programs * Teaching is top career choice for Finns	*Many non-competitive programs and alternative certification routes
2. Compensation	Above OECD average	Above average salary for college graduates	* 20% lower than OECD average * Lower than average salary for college graduates
3. Working Conditions	* Professional Learning Communities * *4/5 of teachers remain in profession after 6 years*	* High levels of autonomy with curriculum, strategies, etc. * *90% of teachers remain in profession for their entire career*	* Inadequate time for collaboration * Lots of monitoring, low autonomy * *Half of all teachers leave profession within six years*

<u>More Effective Policies</u>
To successfully compete with high-performing countries, the U.S. might consider these reforms:

1. Change the Scope, Frequency, and Purpose of Testing: High-performing countries test their students much less frequently than we do, but the tests they do use account for high-level skills. Because they only test students two or three times during K-12, other countries can afford to include and score long responses, multi-step problems, and other questions that provide rich information on student learning. They then use that information to provide support to schools that need it.

2. Recruit Strong Students and Fund Their Teacher Preparation: The U.S. should raise the bar for entry into the teaching profession, accepting only the top 25% of high school graduates, and use an interview process to assess candidates' classroom potential. To make teaching an attractive option for bright students, the U.S. should also fund the education of those who meet the entry requirements and agree to teach for five years.

3. Establish Career Ladders Increasing Responsibilities and Compensation for Teachers: Our current "step" system, which provides additional compensation for years of service and training, has little effect on student achievement or teacher retention. Instead, we should tie pay increases to additional responsibilities, such as mentoring, leadership and consulting in high-need schools.

4. Stipulate That Teachers are Provided With Time for Collaboration: U.S. teachers spend more time in the classroom and less time in collaboration than those in high-performing countries, where teachers spend 15-20 hours per week looking at student learning, preparing lessons, and planning interventions. When Delaware increased collaborative time to 90 minutes per day, it experienced dramatic improvements in student achievement in reading and math.

Chapter 5 – Teacher Unions

Much of the current criticism of public schools blames unions for low student achievement. However, in reality, student achievement is much higher in unionized states than in nonunionized ones: nine of the ten highest-scoring U.S. states have strong unions. Unions seem to be a generally *positive* influence on teacher quality and professionalism. However, there are a few instances in which unions stand in the way of school improvement, and union leaders should consider supporting the policies below.

• *Professionalizing Tenure***:** The majority of teachers believe that tenure should only be awarded after success over five or more years, not two or three, as is often the case. Raising the number of years will link tenure more closely to teacher competence, thus helping to increase the public confidence in tenured teachers.

• *Using Teacher Performance as a Factor in Retention*: Policies that retain low-performing, long-serving teachers over more qualified colleagues are not in the best interests of students. Performance should have greater weight than seniority in retention decisions.

• *Supporting Professional Learning Communities*: PLCs increase teacher satisfaction and student learning, and are endorsed by national teachers' unions. However, unions' commitment to the status quo often creates unnecessary obstacles to reforms like PLCs.

If unions use their power to advocate effective policies like these, they will restore the public's trust in them.

# Chapter 6 – Laying the Foundation of a Professional Learning Community

Although American educators have made some impressive achievements, our schools are not yet up to the task of preparing students for the new, global economy, in which the majority of jobs require post-secondary education and higher-order thinking skills. Implementing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is one of the best ways to reach this goal. In a PLC, teams of teachers work collaboratively to improve student achievement. A PLC includes all of the following six essential elements:

1. The fundamental school structure is the **collaborative team**, built around common goals and mutual accountability
2. Educators make and follow **agreements** about how they will collaborate
3. Teacher teams establish a guaranteed and **viable curriculum**
4. Teacher teams develop **common formative assessments** of student learning
5. Teacher teams use formative assessment **results** to improve instructional practices
6. The school implements a systematic and effective approach to **intervention** for struggling students

To create (or strengthen) a PLC, rather than planning for what educators must *do* to achieve the above six elements, it is far more effective to focus on what staff *think* – that is, the mindset of the educators, or their assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and commitments. The primary challenge in setting up a PLC is changing the mindsets of the educators who work there. In a PLC, staff must *believe* the following three ideas:

1. Learning is the fundamental purpose of our school.
2. We will build a collaborative culture focused on improving student learning.
3. We will assess our effectiveness based on student results.

The best way to help staff adopt these ideas about teaching and learning is to build consensus around four essential pillars of a PLC: 1) mission, 2) vision, 3) commitments, and 4) goals. In reaching consensus in these four areas, your school will end up with the four results in the bottom of the chart below:
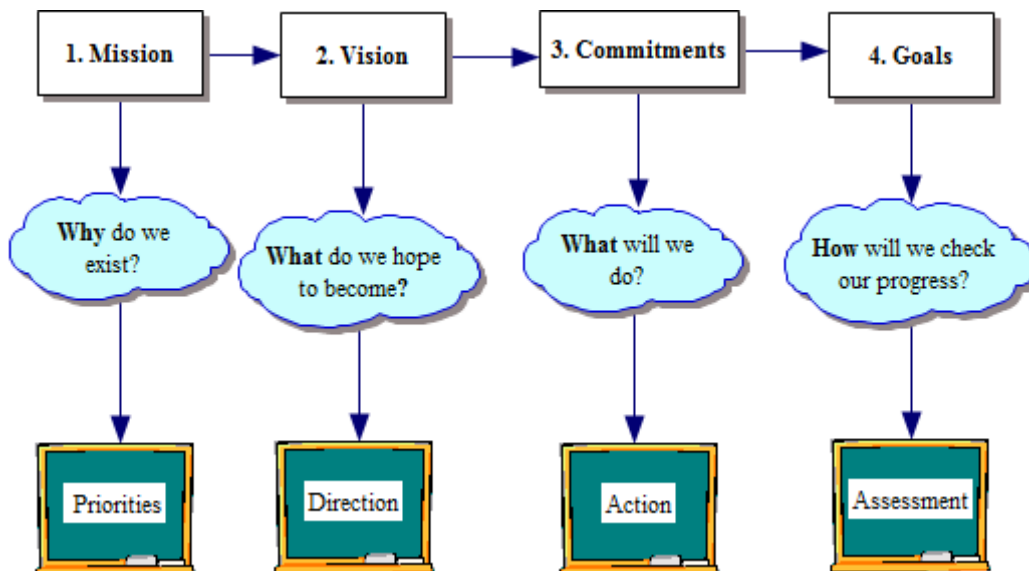
1. Mission: Why do we exist?
Of course, many schools already have mission statements with language about all students learning. However, the number of schools that actually live that mission is quite small. Therefore, for many schools, the first step is a matter of checking whether the mission aligns with actual behaviors. It may be helpful to pose the question: "Are we here to *teach*, or to ensure that students *learn*?"

Why should a school adopt the latter, more challenging goal? To do otherwise is to condemn some students to the poverty that is an almost inevitable result of academic failure: high school dropouts earn 35% of what college graduates make.

2. Vision: What must we become?
The vision is a further specification of the mission: stakeholders imagine what a school truly committed to learning for *all* might look like. To create this pillar, educators ask, "What do we hope our school may become?" Once there is consensus around a vision for the school, team members can refer to it in making decisions: "Will this program bring us closer to our vision?"

3. Collective Commitments: What will we do?

In this step, leaders, staff members, and other stakeholders ask, "How will we collaborate to achieve our vision?" and answer the question by coming to a series of agreements, or *commitments*, within their PLC teams. These commitments help teams work optimally: members know what is expected of them, treat one another with respect, and hold each other accountable. The three types of commitments teams must make are detailed in the chart below.

Commitment	Key Question	Sample Topics
A. Procedural	How will we work together?	Preparation, division of labor, follow-through
B. Behavioral	How will we communicate?	Handling disagreements, providing feedback
C. Protocols	How will we hold each other accountable?	Supporting commitments, handling violations

4. Goals: How Will We Check Our Progress?

Goals play an important role in motivating teachers to honor their commitments so a school can fulfill its purpose of learning for *all*. For this step, team members ask, "How will we be able to tell whether we are making progress toward our vision?" and set two types of performance goals:

    A. Short-Term: Attainable over short periods of time, these goals create a sense of positive momentum and build staff confidence.
    B. Stretch: These ambitious, long-term goals help educators change their mindsets about students' potential and implement new strategies. For example, if a school's stretch goal is 0% dropout rate, teachers may begin tutoring struggling students.

Laying the foundation for a Professional Learning Community does not have to be a time-consuming process: with focused effort, schools can complete the four steps over two months. Districts, too, can follow the steps outlined in this chapter. Finally, when planning a school or district's approach to creating the four pillars, keep in mind that you need to involve *all* the teachers: each of the pieces is only as powerful as their commitment to it.

Chapter 7 – Creating a Collaborative Culture

This chapter outlines three early steps to take when establishing a PLC: 1) Assigning people to meaningful teams, 2) Providing time for collaboration, and 3) Facilitating productive collaborations.

1. Assigning People to Meaningful Teams

Loosely connected groups that meet – like grade-level or department groups – are *not* necessarily teams. The act of meeting together does not define a team. In a PLC, the word *team* has a specific meaning: Members of a team work *interdependently* to achieve *common goals* for which members are *mutually accountable*. Each of those elements is essential.

A quick and effective way to group staff members is by common content, with grade-level teams at the elementary level, and subject-area teams at the secondary level. This grouping is powerful because team members already have a basis for setting common goals and exploring strategies related to teaching their particular subject or level. Other groupings are also possible, but may require more work to define common goals.

Since the fundamental purpose of a PLC is to ensure high levels of learning, each team should start by setting a challenging goal for student learning. If the goal does not focus on student learning, then teams may drift into more superficial conversations. It is vital that these goals are *results* oriented not *activity* oriented. Furthermore, the teams themselves must set the goals so that they own them and feel more committed to them. The following SMART acronym will help teams set goals:

    S: *Strategic and specific* -- Aligned with school and district goals
    M: *Measurable* -- Quantifiable using local, state, national or global indicators
    A: *Attainable* -- The team believes the goal is attainable, based on an examination of past results and planned improvements
    R: *Results oriented* -- The desired end is a measurable improvement in student learning
    T: *Time bound* -- The team has determined a specific period of time for accomplishing the goal

Teams should use the SMART acronym to design and assess their goals prior to implementation. Examples of appropriate goals are:
• Last year, 73% of our students scored "Proficient" on the state reading exam. This year, 80% of our students will meet the standard.
• Last year, 78% of our students were able to solve algebraic equations on the unit test. This year, that percentage will increase to 83%.

After setting goals, team members will decide on the commitments they need to make in order to meet the goals. These commitments are specific and individual: "I will arrive to all meetings on time," not "Promptness is important to our group." Teams also need to plan how they will address missed commitments. Once the commitments are set, teams should review them at the beginning and end of each meeting during the early phase of the process; that will help members internalize them. Teams that are clear about their goals and commitments are much more effective and find their group participation more rewarding than those who overlook these two vital aspects of high-performing teams.

2. Making Time for Collaboration

Teams within a PLC can *not* be effective unless the school sets aside structured time for them to collaborate. Schools can select from among a number of workable approaches to providing regular, dedicated times for teams to meet. Some principals schedule common preparation times for teacher teams; others allocate staff development hours to team work. Other, less common, solutions include:

- *Adjusted Start and End Times*: On one day of the week, teachers spend part of first period in teams while other staff members supervise students in non-instructional activities such as gym, study hall, breakfast, etc.
- *Shared Classes*: Students are combined across two grade levels or classes, enabling one team of teachers to meet while the other team teaches the combined classes. Some schools combine grade levels and have older students mentor their younger peers.
- *Banked Time*: Instructional time is added to certain school days, and that time is "banked" for teams. For example, if teachers add 10 instructional minutes per school day, after 9 days, they will have "banked" 90 minutes, which can be used for teams on the 10th day.

One counter-intuitive idea to free up time for teams to meet is for the district to increase class sizes. There is little evidence to show that a smaller class size positively impacts student performance beyond the primary grades. By slightly increasing class sizes at the secondary level, districts can decrease the number of individual classes and free up time for teams.

3. Doing the "Right Work" of Collaborative Teams

Too often, teams avoid the "right work" of high-performing teams and instead settle for "collaboration lite," using team time to coordinate administrative tasks, complain about students, and make small talk. This frequently stems from a result of a lack of clarity about what teachers are meant to be doing during their meetings. Instead, the "right work" of collaborative teams involves student and adult learning: developing curriculum and assessments, analyzing evidence of student learning, and engaging in action research on new practices. These activities are associated with dramatic learning gains and high levels of teacher satisfaction. Upcoming chapters will provide the information you need to support the "right work" of collaborative teams.

Chapter 8 – Creating a Prioritized, Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum

Once a PLC has built its fundamental elements, it can focus on the first kind of "right work" to improve student learning: the creation of a *prioritized*, *guaranteed* and *viable* curriculum. A *prioritized* curriculum is one in which the most important standards have been identified. Most school and district curriculums do not adequately address the skills students need to succeed in today's economy, such as critical thinking, self-directed learning and complex problem solving. Instead, curriculums require teachers to cover vast amounts of information, which students may or may not learn. Curriculums in high-performing countries do the exact opposite, emphasizing depth over breadth, which enables teachers to ensure that all students learn the most important content.

A *guaranteed* curriculum provides continuity through grade and course levels, and across subjects and schools. A *viable* curriculum provides sufficient time for students to learn the content and meet the standards.

Who should create this prioritized, guaranteed and viable curriculum? Teachers *must* be the ones to do it. Teachers have the knowledge of student needs and logistical limitations necessary for prioritizing standards and ensuring viability. Furthermore, only teachers can guarantee the curriculum -- commit to teaching it as written -- something that is much more likely to happen if they have created the curriculum themselves. Finally, the process of creating a curriculum is an invaluable opportunity to build professional knowledge and induct new teachers. In a PLC, teams of teachers who teach the same grade or same subject are responsible for creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Teams engage in a collaborative process to:

- Study the intended standards together
- Agree on priorities within the standards
- Translate the standards into knowledge, skills and dispositions to teach
- Establish what proficient work looks like
- Develop pacing guides for delivering the curriculum
- Commit to one another that they will, in fact, teach the agreed-on curriculum, unit by unit

How do teams organize to create the curriculum? At the school level, teams, organized by grade or subject area, can do the work during scheduled collaborative time. If the district is leading the curriculum revision, then teams of district specialists and representative teachers can work together at a central location, with the representative teachers soliciting opinions and contributions from their colleagues in the schools. Or, school-based teams can come to preliminary decisions on curriculums, and then participate in a district-wide sharing and consensus building process, perhaps using an online platform.

Once assembled, teams can begin by reviewing standards. The goal is to identify the absolutely essential skills and concepts students need to learn before going on to the next grade level or course. This short list of standards will not encompass everything that students may be learning, but will represent the most important standards, to be taught to all students in the grade or class.

Teams will need the following materials:
- Relevant state or federal standards
- A district curriculum guide
- A "wish list" from teachers of the next grade level, representing the 3-4 skills students will need to succeed at that level

Over two or three days, team members will build their shared knowledge of the standards, analyzing each one in turn. To prioritize the standards, they should ask these questions:
1. Does the standard have **endurance**? Is this skill or knowledge something that students will draw upon in the future?
2. Does it have **leverage**? Will students be able to apply what they have learned to other academic subjects?
3. Does it build **readiness**? Is this knowledge or skill necessary for success in the next unit or grade level?

Then, teams should present their findings to colleagues teaching directly above and below their grade or course levels. The teams can work together to add needed elements and eliminate redundancies among the prioritized standards.

Creating a prioritized, guaranteed and viable curriculum is not a one-time event but a never-ending process. Every year, teacher teams should meet to review and revise the standards. That will create a continuous cycle of improvement for the curriculum, and provide a structure for new teachers to learn about it.

Although the curriculum review process can be complex, it is rewarding. In districts that implement it, teachers report greater clarity, more consistency across grades and subjects, and increased confidence in their ability to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need.

Chapter 9 – Common Formative Assessments to Improve Teaching and Learning

Historically, teachers would teach a unit, administer a summative assessment, assign each student a grade, and move on, *even* if large numbers of students failed to demonstrate mastery. Teachers would blame the problem on student effort or motivation rather than any weakness in their instruction. Today we know better. Now we know the power of using *common formative assessments* to:

- Provide students with information about the progress of their learning
- Respond to the individual needs of students (for both intervention and enrichment)
- Improve the practice of teachers

In every documented case of significant school improvement, teachers have implemented *common formative assessments*: assessments of learning in progress created collaboratively by teacher teams. Why? Common formative assessments provide a powerful catalyst for school improvement because they persuade educators to *change their professional practice.* The key challenge in any improvement effort is getting people to *change* long-standing behaviors. When teachers give the *same* assessment and they see the students in the next classroom achieve higher levels of mastery than their own students, this sparks curiosity and motivation. Most educators don't want to let down their students or their colleagues. According to research, the most powerful way to motivate professionals to improve is to show them *concrete evidence of irrefutably better results*. Common formative assessments provide that evidence. Furthermore, in addition to experiencing this *positive peer pressure*, because teams work collaboratively toward an interdependent common goal, teachers also get the *support* they need from *each other* to change their practice as well. This support comes from *learning* from colleagues' successes as the team analyzes assessment results.

Common Formative Assessments in Action
At the beginning of the assessment process, a team of teachers decides on the essential standards for a unit of instruction. The team then collaboratively creates a formative assessment to measure students' progress with the standards. After teaching the unit, and administering the same assessment, the team meets to analyze results. The team uses a data analysis protocol that asks members to identify struggling students, standards with which students struggled, and successful strategies for teaching those standards (a reproducible copy of the full protocol is available at go.solution-tree.com/PLCbooks):

1. Which students need additional time and support to attain the standards?
2. How will we extend learning for students who are already highly proficient in the standards?
3. What is a standard that my students struggled to meet?
4. What strategies were used by teammates whose students succeeded with the standard?
5. Which standard was the most difficult for students in all the team's classes? What do we think is the cause of the difficulty? How will we help students meet the standard?

For example, in analyzing the results of an assessment, a team might discover that 40 out of 100 students were unable to meet the second standard. That large number suggests that the overall teaching of that standard needs improvement and it needs to be re-taught. The teachers decide to research instructional strategies and split up the work: one member will ask a district expert, another member will speak to other teachers at the school, and a third will search for videos on The Teaching Channel and LearnZillion, etc. They will meet again to select new instructional strategies, re-teach the standard, and then re-assess students' progress.

The team might also note that nine students did not meet the third standard. As this is a relatively small number of students, that small group would receive intervention (a scheduled block of time for extra support) and then take an alternative assessment. (Interventions are discussed in detail in Chapter 10.) If it turns out that seven of these nine students who struggled were in *one* teacher's classroom, then the other teachers on the team would share instructional strategies for that standard with the teacher. That teacher might also schedule an observation of a class that successfully attained the standard.

The following year, the team would begin their work on the unit by looking at past results and asking:
1. Which standard(s) did students struggle to meet?
2. What seems to be the main reason for their struggle?
3. What will we do to help students meet the standard?
4. What is our SMART goal for the standard this year?

Since students struggled with the second and third standards for this unit, the teachers identify promising instructional strategies and set a high, but realistic goal for initial attainment; e.g., a rate of 80% if 69% of students attained the standard the previous year.

Overcoming Obstacles to Common Formative Assessments
To help teachers create common formative assessments, leaders must address obstacles such as inadequate time, training and support. However, the most important obstacle to common formative assessments is a traditional teaching mindset. A traditional teaching mindset regards assessments as sorting mechanisms; instead, teachers need to use assessments to help *all* students meet standards. When students do poorly, teachers with a traditional teaching mindset will look for whom or what to blame; instead, teachers need to see poor results as a call to action. The principal must model a new *learning mindset*, focused on supporting the learning of all students and teachers, and implementing the PLC model with fidelity. The chart below outlines some key cultural shifts you will need to lead and model:

Traditional Teaching Mindset	Learning Mindset
From working in isolation….	…*to* working in collaborative teams
From a focus on curriculum coverage…	…*to* a focus on helping all students meet essential standards
From using assessments primarily to assign grades…	…*to* using assessments primarily to identify and assist struggling students

Schools may be tempted to opt for "PLC lite," purchasing mass-market assessments instead of creating them in teacher teams. However, there are several reasons that teachers must create the assessments themselves. The first is that teacher-developed assessments are likely to be much more effective than store-bought alternatives, as they target the specific standards the team has identified. Furthermore, it is the *process* of exploring the question of how to gather the best evidence of student learning that leads to dramatic improvements in adult learning, instruction, and, ultimately, student performance. Finally, if teachers create the assessments themselves, they are unlikely to blame the assessments for poor results -- instead, they will focus on helping students reach the standards they initially failed to attain.

The greatest obstacle to the process is perhaps the most harmful: teachers' reluctance to share assessment results. Sharing results is the most crucial part of the PLC process, toward which all the other steps have been leading. Common formative assessments give teachers invaluable information: accessible and accurate representations of student learning. If they do not analyze that information, and use it to improve instruction, then most of the benefits of the process are lost.

To empower teachers to overcome this obstacle, the principal must model and encourage a *learning orientation*, treating missteps as opportunities for learning, and refraining from blaming, ranking, rewarding or punishing teachers based on assessment results. Rather, if a teacher is struggling, a principal should ask: "How can we build this teacher's capacity?"

Chapter 10 – Ensuring Every Student Succeeds

Schools were not set up to serve *all* students. Because of this, there have always been groups of students who struggle. Whether they got the support they needed to succeed depended on the whims of the particular teachers to whom they were assigned. *If* the teacher felt like coming in early, staying late, or giving up lunch to provide extra help, then struggling students might have received assistance. Overall, for the past half century, most schools traditionally have *not* provided a schoolwide, systematic plan to provide struggling students with additional time and support. As long as interventions continue to be treated as an appendage to the school's program rather than an integral part of the school's effort to ensure that *every* student succeeds, these interventions will be ineffective.

Even in a school with well-functioning teams, some students will be unable to initially meet the standards on formative assessments. That is to be expected, since students learn differently, and at different rates. The best way to help all students attain the key standards is to develop *highly effective, systematic interventions* to provide students with additional time and support.

> *Interventions* – Anything a school does above and beyond the core instruction that all students receive to help everyone succeed
> *Systematic* – Every learner who needs the help receives it, regardless of his or her assigned teachers
> *Effective* – Interventions are proven to be successful and target the individual needs of students

This chapter details the essential elements of a system of highly effective interventions.

As every educator knows, students enter school with vastly different learning styles, skills, levels of family support, etc. However, to succeed in the today's economy, they all need to leave high school prepared for rigorous postsecondary training and educational environments. No single teacher can possibly meet all of her students' needs during class periods. That is why schools need to implement a systematic program of leveled supports, or Response to Intervention (RTI).

The premise of RTI is that schools should be proactive in helping students when they first begin to struggle, providing timely, targeted interventions that enable *all* students to meet standards. According to research, when done *well*, RTI has significant positive effects on student learning, raising achievement at all levels. Different kinds of interventions are organized into tiers, with the greatest number of students in the first tier, and the fewest in Tier 3:
- *Tier 1*: All students receive quality classroom instruction
- *Tier 2*: Some students struggling with particular standards receive targeted support until they attain the standards
- *Tier 3*: A few students who lack fundamental grade-level skills receive comprehensive support until they attain grade level

To meet the needs of all students, however, a school has to commit to implementing the essential elements of *highly effective, systematic interventions*, detailed below.

Necessary Elements of Effective Intervention Systems
For an intervention system to be effective, it should include a block of time *during the school day* to provide struggling students with additional time and support while stronger students have time for acceleration. Furthermore, interventions must be taught by the most qualified teachers at the school, using best practices, and be mandatory for all students who need them.

1. *Effective Initial Teaching*: There are many different approaches to effective instruction, but what they all have in common is that teachers 1) use best practices and 2) adjust instruction as needed. Collaborative teacher teams support both those behaviors: teachers collaborate on identifying effective instructional approaches, assess students' learning, and use the results to improve instruction.

2. *Systematic and Timely Monitoring*: The following methods help ensure that the school accurately identifies all the students who require interventions:
    a) Team-developed formative assessments identify struggling students and the standards they initially fail to attain.
    b) Teacher recommendations identify the reasons *why* students may be struggling, including non-academic factors (like displaying aggressive behavior). Leaders should create a simple system to frequently and regularly (about every three weeks) collect recommendations of who needs interventions from all the teachers in the building.
    c) Universal screening identifies students who need support *before* they enter school. Many schools use exams, but simple phone calls to students' previous schools, asking "Which of your students will need us the most?" can be extremely helpful.

3. Targeted Interventions: The best interventions are specific to the *student*, the particular *standard* he is trying to meet, and the *reasons* he has not already met it. Students who received the same low score on an assessment may have received those scores for very different reasons, encompassing academic and non-academic factors. Before placing students in interventions, schools must determine the causes behind the low scores, asking, "Why didn't the student attain the standard taught in class?" and then grouping the students accordingly.

4. *Interventions for High-Achieving Students:* Interventions are not reserved for students struggling to meet essential standards. Schools that implement interventions to help high-achieving students succeed with rigorous curricula increase their success rates.

5. *Interventions by Trained Professionals:* To conduct interventions, select the teachers with the greatest expertise in the standards students need to learn, and be willing to bypass customs based on seniority.

6. *Mandatory Interventions*: Students who need help must receive it, or they risk academic failure and severely diminished life options. In contrast to what some educators believe, letting students fail does not teach responsibility. Students learn to be responsible when their schools insist that they complete their work. Schools cannot allow students to choose to fail; interventions must be *mandatory* for all.

7. *Interventions scheduled during school hours, not during non-core instruction*: Struggling students need core instruction *and* interventions, so schools should schedule interventions during students' non-core classes, preferably during a separate block of time set aside for intervention when the most qualified teachers can serve them. It may be daunting to add an intervention block to your schedule, but it can be done. See the sample schedules on allthingsplc.com.

Chapter 11 – The Principal as Lead Learner

Principals have a dauntingly complex and demanding job. No single person has the energy or the expertise to fulfill all aspects of the job successfully. PLCs provide a way to streamline some of that complexity by creating systems and governance that allow everyone to share in the responsibility for the most important task: learning.

Dispersing Leadership
A distributed leadership model can help a school meet the demands placed on it, and PLCs provide many opportunities for distributing leadership. Each member of a team within a PLC is empowered to make critical decisions about what to teach, how to teach, how to pace content, and how to gather evidence of student learning. As another strategy to promote shared leadership, each team offers opportunities for teachers to serve as team leaders. The principal can work with these team leaders to streamline the process of ensuring each team is successful. For example, if the principal of a K-5 school wants to make sure each team has an effective SMART goal to guide their efforts, rather than work with the entire faculty, the principal can work with the six grade-level team leaders to train them to lead that process.

In addition to teacher teams, principals should create a *guiding coalition* composed of influential staff members who can champion new initiatives and processes (some schools call this a *leadership team*). Also, temporary schoolwide teams, or *task forces*, can take on short-term challenges, such as creating a schedule with time for both collaboration and intervention.

Creating Clarity and Coherence
One of the most important responsibilities of the principal in leading a PLC is to ensure that all staff members are *clear* on the nature of the work to be done. This keeps faculty members focused on the mission of helping *all* students learn and on the *right work* of collaborative teams.

To dramatically improve learning, school leaders not only need to ensure that they have the six elements of a PLC in place (introduced in Chapter 6), but they need to make sure that everyone is absolutely clear about what these six elements mean (What does it mean to work in a collaborative team? To be results-oriented? Etc.) They create clarity and coherence around these elements with frequent and enthusiastic communications, and, even more importantly, with systems, procedures and policies that support the PLC process.

Servant Leadership: Setting Up Teams for Success
The PLC model asks teachers to commit to collaborating and ensuring learning for all. It is essential, then, that school leaders see their role as providing teams with whatever it is they need to conduct this challenging work. Rather than imposing their own will, servant leaders work to meet the needs of others and constantly ask, "What support will enable our staff to move forward with the PLC process?"

One excellent way to support teachers is to anticipate the questions and challenges that may arise *before* implementing new elements of the PLC model. For example, before beginning the common formative assessment process, the principal and guiding coalition meet to discuss questions that may arise:
1. *Why questions:* Why should we develop our own assessments? What is the evidence this will improve teaching and learning?
2. *What questions:* What are common formative assessments? Can you provide resources, templates and examples for our work?
3. *How questions:* How do we proceed? Is there a set of steps to follow? How will we know when we have a good assessment?

Leaders then plan responses to the questions, creating timelines, identifying helpful resources, etc. Once teams have met and begun to work, the principal and guiding coalition monitor timelines and products, providing additional support as needed.

Monitoring the Work of Teams
Servant leaders can't provide support to collaborative teams unless they are aware of the obstacles and challenges each team is facing. In order to know how each team is functioning, leaders must have a process to monitor the work of teacher teams. Some leaders try to micromanage the work of teams while others take a completely laissez-faire approach. To avoid either of these extremes, principals can work with team leaders to clarify:

1. The products teams will produce as a result of their work
2. Timelines for when those products will be completed

The principal does not dictate the products and timelines, but rather works collaboratively to determine what these will be. A sample timeline for products might look like this:

> 1. After two meetings, present the team's collective commitments.
> 2. After three meetings, present the team's SMART goal.
> 3. After five meetings, present the essential outcomes for the unit you are about to teach.
> 4. After seven meetings, present your team-developed common formative assessment for the unit.
> 5. After nine meetings, present your analysis of student achievement for that unit, your insights as to what worked and what didn't, and your strategies for improving effectiveness in teaching.

Building Consensus and Responding to Resistance

Consensus is important to a PLC, but consensus does not necessarily equal unanimity. Waiting for complete support for a decision often leads to paralysis. To build consensus around PLC implementation, the principal and guiding coalition should:
1. *Build shared knowledge* about the school's current realities, the elements of the PLC process, and the research behind PLCs
2. *Engage in dialogue*, encouraging concerns, questions, and dissenting opinions, and identifying areas of agreement
3. *Be willing to compromise* non-essential elements of PLCs and make adjustments in the implementation

After this, rather than waiting for *universal* support for a decision, DuFour recommends the following two steps for moving forward:
1. All points of view have not only been heard, but solicited.
2. The will of the group is evident even to those who most oppose it.

When the above two criteria have been met, it is time to begin actively building PLCs. The deepest understanding about the PLC process will come about when people begin doing the work, and some members who initially hesitate may become enthusiastic once they experience the positive effects of the process.

Other staff members will try to avoid participating in the PLC process. It is crucial to confront them – not only because you may change their behaviors, but also to demonstrate that the school is committed to PLCs. Furthermore, the entire PLC process depends on collective responsibility and commitments and if staff members do not fulfill their responsibilities, the principal *must* be prepared to confront these individuals. The meeting should occur in private and should focus on clearly defined behaviors. Remind the staff member of agreements ("You and your team members agreed to teach these essential learning standards"), insist on specific behaviors and follow up with a written directive.

Celebrate Small Victories

Knowledge workers, such as teachers, are most motivated by successes in meaningful work. Therefore, to motivate teachers around PLCs, plan to frequently and publicly celebrate all the small successes that further student learning and the PLC process. Rather than *hoping* for short-term wins, effective leaders actually *plan* for them.

When should you celebrate? As often as possible. Rather than waiting for monumental accomplishments, translate the PLC process into small, doable steps and celebrate these: the completion of team agreements, SMART goals, etc. Celebrate when teams tackle a difficult task, such as identifying an instructional problem and creating an action plan. Identify as many "winners" as possible. During the celebrations:

1. *Explicitly state the purpose of celebration*: Explain that celebrations reinforce core values and motivation on the PLC journey
2. *Make celebration everyone's responsibility*: Have teachers participate in nominating "winners" and planning events
3. *Link the celebration to actions you'd like to reinforce*: Describe the teachers' actions and connect them to your school's mission

As the first chapters of the book established, American educators are already helping many students succeed; however, today's schools must help *all* students meet essential learning goals. To fulfill that mission, schools need to change in fundamental ways, and so do the people working in schools. Teachers, principals and district leaders need to embrace the goal of learning for all and commit to collaboration as the key to reaching that goal. The necessary changes are difficult, but not impossible, for educators with passion, purpose and commitment to doing the right work.

I. Good News in Education and Ways to Improve

A. Identifying Positive Achievements
Much of the conversation about and within schools is focused on problems in education, yet schools are already doing many things well. Identifying positive aspects of U.S. schools in general, and of your school in particular, will build staff morale and motivation.

Share some promising recent achievements in U.S. education:
- ✔ *Record-setting graduation rates*, reaching an all-time high of 80% in 2012
- ✔ *Success in rigorous courses*, with 20% of the 2014 graduating class scoring an honor grade (3 or higher) on an AP exam
- ✔ *Steadily improving test scores, with dramatic drops in the percentage of students scoring "below basic" on the NAEP each decade (From 50% of 4th graders in 1990 to 18% in 2011; from 48% of 8th graders in 1990 to 27% in 2011)*

Then, ask staff members to brainstorm recent achievements at your school, working in small groups and sharing their responses. Finally, ask staff members to journal and pair-share about recent successes in their classrooms. Explain that teachers can identify small successes: a particular student reading at a higher level, a project group negotiating a disagreement, etc. Ask participants to share their partner's successes with the larger group and lead a round of applause once several examples have been described.

B. The Mission of Learning for All
Materials: School mission statement and school or district manual

To begin, share a statistic about the current stakes for students in schools: High school dropouts earn 35% of what college graduates make. Explain that new economic realities, with most well-paying jobs requiring high school graduation, high-level thinking, and communication skills, have led some schools to reconsider their fundamental mission.

Next, reread the school's mission statement with teachers. Then, lead a discussion about the school's fundamental mission: "Are we here to ensure students are *taught*, or are we here to ensure that our students *learn*?" First, discuss the differences in meaning of the two goals, providing and soliciting concrete examples. Two clarifying examples to provide are:

   1. If the goal is to ensure that students are *taught*, educators will closely monitor teaching, with classroom observations and lesson plan reviews. The key question will be: *Are teachers teaching the specified concepts in the specified order, using the specified methods?*
   2. If the goal is to ensure that students *learn*, educators will closely monitor learning, looking at student data across exams, student work, and classroom performance. The key question will be: *Are students learning what we want them to learn?*

Next, ask teachers to discuss the potential benefits, drawbacks, and implementation challenges of each goal, considering the effects upon different aspects of the school such as:
- Student motivation
- Student performance
- Family engagement
- School culture
- Staff motivation
- Staff morale

After discussing the potential effects on student motivation as a group, ask staff members to form small groups or pairs, each focusing on a different element. Have the subgroups present their thoughts to the larger group, and follow the presentations with a general discussion. During that second discussion, ask teachers, "What will it mean for our school to focus on the goal of true learning for all?"

Once teachers come together around the mission to help *all* students learn, ask them to examine that goal in light of current school realities. What are the ways we currently support that goal in our school? What are the ways we can better meet that goal?

II. Is the PLC Process Right for our School?

Begin a conversation about whether creating more opportunities to collaborate might help your school or district to improve: "Is the PLC process right for our school?" Below is some information about PLCs to share with teachers. To begin, you might first present some of the evidence about the effects of collaboration from page 2:

> U.S. teachers spend more time in the classroom and less time in collaboration than those in high-performing countries such as Finland and Japan, where teachers spend 15-20 hours per week looking at student learning, preparing lessons, and planning interventions. When Delaware increased collaborative time to 90 minutes per day, it experienced dramatic improvements in student achievement in reading and math.

Also share the "big ideas" about PLCs to give teachers a sense of what this kind of collaboration entails. To create a PLC, school staff members must agree that:
1. Learning is the fundamental purpose of our school
2. We will build a collaborative culture focused on improving student learning
3. We will assess our effectiveness based on student results

Finally, share the ways a traditional teaching mindset differs from the mindset of educators in a PLC:

Traditional Teaching Mindset	Mindset in a PLC
From a focus on teaching…	to a focus on learning
From an emphasis on what was taught…	to a fixation on what students learned
From infrequent summative assessments…	to frequent common formative assessments
From individual teachers responding to students who fail…	to a systematic response that ensures support for every student
From isolation…	to collaboration
From each teacher clarifying what students must learn…	to collaborative teams building shared knowledge about essential learning

Then, ask the teachers to turn to investigating PLCs on the macro and micro levels. "Big idea" and "numbers" people can examine statistics on PLCs at: http://www.allthingsplc.info/evidence/. Staff members who prefer stories can read: www.allthingsplc.info/stories

Have each group select a few key points to share and discuss with the larger group. After the presentations, solicit members' responses to the idea of PLCs -- are they interested, worried, eager to learn more, etc.?

III. Beginning to Work in PLCs

Establishing PLCs is a long, complex process, but the right kind of PD can prepare teachers to smoothly navigate each step. Before launching each new phase of the PLC process, bring teachers together to learn about it and prepare for the work they will undertake as they:
1. Lay the foundation of a PLC, OR make agreements about work, communication and goals within collaborative teams
2. Create a guaranteed and viable curriculum
3. Create common formative assessments
4. Use assessment results to improve instructional practices and identify struggling students
5. Create and leverage a systematic and effective approach to intervention

Before they begin each phase above, meet with teachers and guide them through the reiterative process below:
1. *Learn* about the new phase by reading examples, viewing videos of teachers engaged in the work, and having discussions
2. *Plan* for their own team's work during the phase, identifying initial questions and members' responsibilities
3. *Role-play* to practice the communication strategies they will be using for the work

For example, to establish commitments for working in collaborative teams, teachers will:
1) *Learn*: Teachers read and discuss examples of teams' commitment documents, watch and respond to videos of collaboration in PLCs, and take part in a discussion about the purpose of team commitments. The principal explains that these commitments help teams work optimally: members know what is expected of them, treat one another with respect, and hold each other accountable. The principal then leads a discussion of the three types of commitments in the chart below:

Commitment	Key Question	Sample Topics
A. Procedural	How will we work together?	Preparation, division of labor, follow-through
B. Behavioral	How will we communicate?	Handling disagreements, providing feedback
C. Protocols	How will we hold each other accountable?	Supporting commitments, handling violations

2) *Plan*: Teachers re-read the key questions in the chart above, and generate additional questions to guide their discussions of commitments. Teachers also divide up their responsibilities for the work:
• A leader, to ensure the team creates commitments and meets timelines
• A facilitator, to lead the discussion and make sure everyone contributes
• A note-taker, to record and distribute notes on key ideas and decisions
• A researcher, to find answers to questions that arise during the discussion, etc.

3) *Role-play*: Teachers practice the active listening techniques they learned in Step 1. After the role-plays, teachers talk about potential communication challenges and brainstorm several approaches they will use.

Following this cycle, teachers will begin the work of drafting and finalizing their commitments. Once that work is completed, the principal will once again bring all the staff members together to prepare teacher teams for the next phase: the creation of a guaranteed and viable curriculum. The PD cycle for this phase will follow the three steps above: *1) learning, 2) planning, and 3) role-playing*.