



LEADERS of LEARNING: How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement By Richard DuFour and Robert J. Marzano (Solution Tree Press, 2011)

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

The main ideas of the book are:

- ~ No single person can improve student achievement in an entire district, school, or classroom.
- ~ Instead, if we organize teachers into collaborative teams, working interdependently, to take responsibility for the learning of their students, then this will improve teacher practice and student learning *if* these practices are supported by and further developed by school and district leaders.

Why I chose this book:

This book brings together two insightful educational thinkers to show you how to truly impact student learning. No single person can accomplish this task. Instead, district leaders, school leaders, and teacher leaders must all work collaboratively, apply research-based practices, and continuously improve their practice in order to meet student needs. While much of the book focuses on professional learning communities (PLCs), you don't need to have this structure in place to learn a tremendous amount about the power of shared leadership to boost student achievement.

If you do want to learn more about PLCs, you can download a summary of the following book on my website:

Learning By Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many or purchase other books by Rick DuFour.

The Scoop (In this summary you will learn...)

- √ *Why school improvement really means people improvement*
- √ *How the district can more effectively support schools and the characteristics of effective district leaders*
- √ *How to shift the principal's role so principals can maximize their influence over teachers*
- √ *How to narrow the gap between the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum*
- √ *How schools can respond systematically when students don't learn*
- √ *Discussion questions a district or school leader can use with a leadership team to explore issues from the book*

Chapter 1 –School Improvement Means People Improvement

Educators are facing one of the most challenging times in the history of education in the United States. Not only do we have the highest academic standards ever (with the Common Core) but we need to ensure that *every* child meets these standards, eliminate the achievement gap, and do all of this while education budgets are being slashed.

At the same time, our schools are failing. The US has 30 percent of its students dropping out of high school and has one of the highest college dropout rates in the world! Recent education reform efforts have included increased accountability, increased sanctions for schools, increased numbers of charter schools, NCLB, “Race to the Top” and other reforms, all of which have *not* produced substantial improvement in the American educational system. The authors point to the assumptions behind some of the strategies attempted in the late 20th and early 21st centuries:

- We need to pry educators from their lethargy by offering charter schools as options to compete with the public school monopoly
- We need to hold educators more accountable by designating certain schools as failures
- We need to offer financial incentives for performance pay for individual teachers based on student achievement

However, the authors believe that the reason the recent reform efforts have failed is that these are *flawed assumptions*. The unspoken assumption is that all along, teachers have had the ability to help all students succeed but simply lacked the motivation to put in the effort. If this were the case, then instituting sanctions and incentives might work. However, the authors do not believe that teachers have been *unwilling* to work hard. Instead, they believe that teachers have lacked the *collective capacity to help all students learn* in the existing structures and cultures where they work.

School Improvement Means People Improvement

If we truly want to improve education, we need to improve the quality of teaching. A school can only be as good as the quality of its teachers. School improvement means people improvement. Rather than doling out sanctions and punishments, we need to develop the capacity of our educators to become more effective. Achieving student success across an *entire* school or an *entire* district will require a *collective* effort on the part of teachers rather than a series of individual efforts. Furthermore, to meet the challenges they face, educators will need new structures and cultures in which they can continuously and collaboratively improve their practice with the goal of focusing on improved results. The best strategy for building teachers’ collective capacity to improve student results is the **professional learning community (PLC)**. This strategy is based on the idea that if students are to learn at high levels then structures must be in place so that the educators who serve them have ongoing, job-embedded professional learning time dedicated to ensuring that this goal succeeds. While the term “PLC” has become widespread, the underlying concepts may still be unclear. It is *not* a meeting (“We do PLCs on Wednesdays from 9am to 11am”) or a program. Below is a summary of the three big ideas that comprise the PLC concept:

Big Idea One – To ensure all students learn at high levels, educators must work together to clarify:

- What do we want students to know?
- How will we know if our students are learning?
- How will we respond when students do not learn?
- How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?

Big Idea Two – To help all students learn, educators must work collaboratively. This means:

- Educators are organized into meaningful teams and work interdependently toward common goals.
- Regular collaborative time is embedded into the school day.
- Educators are clear about the purpose and priorities of their work and stay focused on these goals.
- School and district leaders provide necessary training, resources, and support for PLC process.

Big Idea Three – Educators must have a “results orientation,” that is, they must be focused on student results

- Everyone works collaboratively toward SMART goals
(strategically aligned to school and district goals, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time bound)
- Everyone collaboratively gathers and analyzes student evidence to *inform* individual and collective practice.
- Evidence of student learning is regularly used to identify specific needs of individual students.
- Every policy, procedure, program, and practice is assessed based on its impact on student learning.

Essentially, school reform is about changing people, and creating PLCs is an effective way to attain this goal.

Chapter 2 – The District’s Role in Supporting the PLC Process

In the late 1970s and early 1980s research showed that some schools had significantly more impact on students than other schools. This was known as the “Effective Schools Research.” However, this research focused on individual schools and ignored the district. In time, however, researchers found that successful schools could not *sustain* their level of success *without* the support of the central office.

Effective District Leaders Use “Simultaneous Loose-Tight Leadership”

Historically, districts have tried two approaches to improve schools. On one end of the pendulum, with a site-based model, principals were given complete autonomy of their schools so they could be empowered to solve their own problems. While this did lead to individual school improvement, autonomy meant that schools were free to ignore evidence of success at other schools and there was no mechanism for spreading success across the entire district. At the other end of the pendulum, with a top-down approach from the district, principals simply became skilled at ignoring mandates and closing the school doors.

Instead of either extreme, successful school district leaders use what may be called “defined autonomy” or “simultaneous loose-tight leadership.” In this case, superintendents and central office administrators work with the board of education and principals to:

- Articulate clear, non-negotiable student achievement goals for the district, for each school, and for subgroups of students
- Establish a common framework of research-based strategies for achieving these goals
- Establish the indicators that will be used to monitor progress toward the goals

For example, the board of education decided that the primary strategy to help the Fairfax County Public Schools reach the district’s goals would be to have each school in the district operate as a PLC. However, this did not provide principals with enough specificity, so principals worked with a central office leadership team to outline specific PLC practices that were tied to improving student learning outcomes that they expected to see in each school. This resulted in the document entitled “Fairfax County Shared Vision of Professional Learning Communities – Fundamental Elements” part of which is excerpted below. Note that while there are specifics required, there is also room for latitude at each school. For example, it does not spell out how collaborative teams are to be organized (by grade, by subject level, etc.)

Fairfax County Shared Vision of Professional Learning Communities – Fundamental Elements excerpted from pp.31-32
Part 1: Learning as Our Fundamental Purpose
The fundamental purpose of our school is to help all students achieve high levels of learning and we will examine all practices in light of this. The priorities for our shared work will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Based on state standards and FCPS Program of Studies, schools will outline what students must know and be able to do for each unit of instruction.• Schools will develop and frequently administer team developed common assessments to monitor student learning.• Schools will provide time <i>during the day</i> for intervention and enrichment.
Part 2: Building a Collaborative Culture Through High-Performing Teams
We are committed to achieving the goal of learning for all students. The priorities for our shared work will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools will ensure that collaborative teams are given time to meet <i>during the contractual day</i> on a regular basis.• Collaborative teams will clarify what students must learn, gather and analyze evidence of this learning, and identify and share best practices.• Schools will ensure consistency among collaborative teams, where appropriate, in policies, procedures, pacing, grading and assessment.• School collaborative teams will work interdependently to create and achieve common SMART goals as part of the strategic planning process.
Part 3: A Focus on Results
We assess our effectiveness based on <i>results</i> rather than intentions. The priorities for our shared work will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools will analyze common assessment results to identify students who need additional support and also to identify individual and collective teaching strengths and weaknesses and help measure team progress toward its common goals. Schools will also act on this data.

Elements of Effective Districts

Effective District Leaders Create a Common Language

In many districts people throw around education jargon such as *formative assessment*, *professional learning community*, and *differentiated instruction*. It is imperative that district leaders build a common vocabulary with meanings that everyone understands. In order to do this, leaders must directly *teach* those terms using descriptions, explanations, and examples. Furthermore, they must engage staff in discussing those terms and even periodically assess staff understanding in the same way teachers do with their students’ understanding of vocabulary. In implementing PLCs, some of these terms might include: PLC, collaborative team, common assessment, etc. (See p.36 for a full list.)

Effective District Leaders Monitor the PLC Process as They Develop the Capacity of Principals to Lead the Process

In order to decrease the variability of principal quality across the district, superintendents need to clarify expectations and hold principals to those expectations while at the same time provide principals with the ongoing training needed to meet those expectations. Below are examples of the most powerful strategies and tools to support principals to succeed in leading a PLC:

- Superintendents help principals develop a deeper understanding of PLCs by having them visit schools that function as high-performing PLCs or read books or articles about PLCs and engage them in discussions about implementing them.
- Superintendents establish a common vocabulary and outline the specific conditions necessary to create a PLC.
- Superintendents turn district meetings into opportunities for principals to collaboratively identify and resolve implementation challenges. Furthermore, they use these meetings for principals to rehearse and role play what principals will need to do in their own buildings. For example, before principals ask their own teacher teams to establish SMART goals, at the district meeting the superintendent might help principals articulate a rationale for SMART goals, gather the tools/templates/resources necessary for implementation, and rehearse what to say when teachers oppose the idea.
- Superintendents monitor the PLC process by helping principals address challenges and then requiring principals to explain to colleagues and the central office the steps they've taken to implement the PLC process and present evidence of the non-negotiable conditions that must be present in each school. For example, the principal explains how teachers have been organized into teams, have been given time to collaborate, how the results of common formative assessments are being used, etc.
- Superintendents establish a process to have principals present to colleagues and central office staff an analysis of student achievement over three years. After this, principals are expected to work with peers to learn from each other's successes and help with each other's challenges. This combination of *pressure and support* helps to build capacity.

All together, these strategies form a powerful set of tools to help with the continuous process of improving the capacity of principals. However, *the key to the effectiveness of this process is using it to inform principals and to improve their professional practice rather than to rank or rate them*. Furthermore, superintendents not only hold principals accountable for leading PLCs, but they are also accountable *to* principals for supporting them and providing them with resources and training to help them succeed.

Effective Superintendents Limit Initiatives and Communicate Priorities Effectively

It is impossible to improve schools if they are barraged by innumerable initiatives coming from the central office. If the plan is to make the PLC process *the* strategy for school improvement, then it should be the only one, not one of fifteen initiatives. There are already multiple components of the PLC process – collaborative teams, a guaranteed curriculum, common formative assessments, evidence of student learning to improve adult practice, systems of intervention and enrichment – but these are all interwoven into one larger strategy rather than isolated initiatives.

Furthermore, if a district has *one* priority it is easier to communicate that priority effectively. The district must do more than simply announce this priority at the beginning of the year. In fact, communication *during* implementation is far more important, so that there can be feedback and corrections mid-course. There is a sample survey on pages 43-45 with a set of over 30 questions that the central office can use to solicit honest feedback from principals and teachers about how well the implementation of the PLCs are going.

Chapter 3 – The Principal's Role in Leading a Professional Learning Community

This chapter focuses on how principals can use the PLC as a vehicle for change at their schools. Research has shown that principal leadership can have a positive and significant impact on student achievement. However, this impact is *indirect* rather than direct: principals influence the actions of teachers which in turn influences student achievement. In their research, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty identified twenty-one principal actions that have a positive effect on teachers. However, there are two barriers in most traditional schools to implementing these research-based leadership practices:

1. It is virtually impossible for one leader to perform all of these 21 actions on his or her own.
2. Because schools often have a structure and culture of professional isolation with teachers in stand alone classrooms, it is almost impossible for a leader to substantially impact the professional practice of teachers.

Effective Principals Maximize Their Influence Over Teachers

The PLC process aims to change the traditional structure and culture of schools so that the above two obstacles can be overcome. For example, the second obstacle – teacher isolation – has long been an impediment to improvement of teacher practice. In a school with fifty teachers, principals have had to come up with ways to interact with fifty individuals to find ways to influence their behavior, and many simply end up resigning themselves to managing buildings rather than influencing instruction. Now, with a collaborative team structure, instead of fifty interactions, that same principal can directly interact with seven teams and have a direct influence over instruction! The PLC becomes a vehicle for direct influence on teachers.

Effective Principals Maximize Their Use of Research-Based Actions

The PLC structure can also help principals implement a greater number of the research-based practices (mentioned above) that will positively influence teachers than in a traditional school. In fact, the collaborative team structure provides a venue in which to implement 19 of the 21 leadership practices mentioned above. There is a chart in the book on pages 54-56 that shows how 19 of the research-based leadership practices that have a positive effect on teachers are contained within the PLC structure. Below are a few excerpted examples:

Principal Responsibility	Application to Collaborative Teams of PLC
3. Establish processes to ensure effective communication throughout the school	Ensuring that each collaborative team has a clear understanding of priorities and access to the principal during PLC meetings and other times
6. Focusing on clear goals and relentlessly pursuing the school's purpose and priorities	Ensuring that each collaborative team has identified and is working toward clear SMART goals that can only be achieved if members work interdependently to achieve them
11. Demonstrating interest in and knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment	Providing teams with ready access to information on promising practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and learning with team members as they apply that knowledge
12. Creating processes to provide ongoing monitoring of the school's practices and their effect on student learning	Monitoring the individual and aggregate impact of the efforts of collaborative teams on student achievement and engagement and providing teams with the tool to monitor their own progress
16. Establishing a positive working relationship with each member of the staff	Using the collaborative team process to increase accessibility to teachers and become more familiar with teachers and their concerns
17. Providing teachers with the time, resources, materials, and support to help them succeed at what they are being asked to do	Ensuring that each collaborative team has the necessary time, materials, information, and support to effectively execute their work

Furthermore, the principal in a PLC does not conduct all of the responsibilities of leadership alone. No single person has all of the skills, knowledge and energy to fulfill all of the 21 responsibilities of an effective school leader. However, in a PLC principals do *not* attempt to do it alone – they share their leadership by choosing and developing the leaders for each collaborative team. In fact, it is crucial that the principal choose the *right* people to lead collaborative teams or they will not be able to remain focused on what must be their top priority: student learning! Below are four factors principals should consider in selecting team leaders:

Criteria for Choosing Team Leaders

1. How much influence they have with colleagues
2. Their willingness to champion the PLC process
3. Their willingness to persist in finding a way for students to succeed (rather than blaming factors outside of school)
4. Their ability to think systematically to connect the work of their team with the improvement of their school

Team leaders benefit when principals provide ongoing training in two types of skills:

Process Skills – These include building consensus, facilitating dialogue, problem solving, and conducting effective meetings

Specific and Concrete Tasks – This is when they learn the actual tasks that a high-performing team needs to accomplish. The best way for team leaders to learn these skills is to learn them by *doing* them. That is, a principal should not take team leaders away from their actual work, but should have them work on the actual challenges of leading a team when she or he meets with the group of team leaders. For example, if team leaders are about to present SMART goals to their teams, a principal might work with the group of team leaders to anticipate questions and concerns from teachers, rehearse possible dialogues, as well as share resources that will help address some of the questions teachers might have concerning SMART goals.

Redefining the Role of Principals

While it will certainly take principals time to develop and train team leaders, the authors believe this time is more productive than trying to supervise individual teachers into better practice through the old model of pre-observation, observation, post-observation conference, and write-up. In the traditional model, teachers get a satisfactory rating and practice rarely changes. In the new model, the principal meets weekly with team leaders. The collaborative teams also meet each week to ensure that each student's progress is being monitored by common formative assessments and evidence of student learning is being used to improve teacher practice. A recent study of school systems that are continuously *improving* shows that this type of collaboration and accountability to peers is what led to improvements rather than a system of evaluating individual teachers. The lesson here is that it would be far more effective to shift the role of principal away from supervising individual teachers to helping to develop the capacity of results-oriented collaborative teams.

Chapter 4 – Creating the Collaborative Culture of a Professional Learning Community

If the best way to improve student achievement is to *move away* from developing the knowledge and skills of *individual* teachers, then principals should focus on creating a collaborative *culture* based on interdependence, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability. So, what are the *conditions* that would promote this type of collaborative culture in which ongoing, job-embedded professional learning leads to the continuous improvement of student achievement? It is not easy for teacher teams to function as PLCs. In order for them to succeed, they will need to develop new knowledge, new skills, and new practices. If leaders are going to hold them accountable for improving their performance, then leaders need to be accountable *to the teams* by helping to develop the capacity of each team by providing the clarity, structure, resources, and ongoing support for the teams to succeed. Below are *seven ways* that district, school, and team leaders can help:

1. *Organize Staff into Meaningful Teams* – Teams should not be organized based on friendships or common interests. The definition of a collaborative team in a PLC is “a group of people working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are mutually accountable.” The most important criterion for putting together teams is their shared responsibility for answering the four questions from chapter 1 (*What do we want students to know? How will we know if they are learning? How will we respond when they do not learn? and How will we enrich and extend for those are proficient?*) Teams function best when they are comprised of three to seven individuals who teach the same course or grade.

2. *Provide Teams with Time to Collaborate* – One of the obstacles to finding time for collaboration is the American notion that time spent not presenting a lesson to students is not considered “working.” Other countries that have made the greatest educational progress have given teachers 15 to 20 hours a week of time to collaborate. There *are* ways to give teachers time to collaborate that do *not* involve money, loss of instructional time, or closing the school. Over 150 schools have *made* time for collaboration during the contractual day using strategies like the ones below – these are explained under ‘Tools and Resources’ at allthingsplc.info:

1. Creating common prep time	4. Sharing classes	6. Using PD or faculty meeting time for teams
2. Implementing a parallel schedule	5. Banking time	7. Using large group lessons, assemblies, and testing
3. Adjusting the start and end of the day		

3. *Help Teams Set Clear Expectations and Goals* —Teams often settle for being nice groups unless they have certain structures in place. The first important structure is to make sure the team has clear expectations and everyone knows what they have committed to. Another vital structure needed for effective teams is a common goal. Without a common goal, a group cannot become a team. However, without the *right* kind of goal, putting teachers into teams is *unlikely to impact their practice*. First, all goals should advance the primary purpose of school – high levels of learning for all students. Second, goals should not focus on projects, tasks, or activities. Rather, they should focus on specific performance targets. Each team should set SMART goals (as described in chapter 1) that focus on evidence of student learning.

4. *Clarify the Work Teams Must Accomplish* – The biggest mistake a leader can make is to leave teams alone and *hope* for the best. Instead, administrators and teachers need to work together to ensure that teams are focusing on the “right work.” It is not enough for teams to simply work hard; they need to work on the types of tasks that will lead to improvements in student achievement such as:

- Outline team norms, expectations, and SMART goals.
- Study all standards, curriculum guides, and high stakes assessments to ensure there is a guaranteed and viable curriculum. All team members must commit to this common curriculum and be able to answer, “What must all students learn in this unit?”
- Help each other gather evidence of and monitor student learning, develop frequent common formative assessments, analyze results together, and provide students with feedback and support.
- Examine student results to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and seek support of teammates.
- Create an ongoing process to identify students who are struggling and excelling in order to provide them with a plan of intervention or enrichment as needed.

Note: To know where each team should start with the work above, the authors suggest looking at the questionnaire online at go.solution-tree.com/plcbooks under the book *Learning By Doing*, then click on “Critical Issues for Team Consideration.”

5. *Monitor the Work of Teams and Provide Direction and Support as Needed* – One way for leaders to monitor the work of teams is to ask them to submit a written product that results from their work. For example, if the team is working on the first bullet above, the team might submit a written list of norms or a finalized SMART goal. If the team is working on the second bullet above, they might submit a list of essential outcomes for each unit or the common assessments they plan to use. Together, the principal and the team can create a timeline of when these products should be produced. The authors recommend that principals meet with each team once each quarter to review their work and offer support.

6. *Avoid Shortcuts in the Collaborative Team Process* – While it may be tempting to simply *purchase* assessments if teachers seem too busy to create common formative assessments or hire outsiders to analyze student data if teachers have not yet been trained to do this, this is *not* the answer. It is the *process* of building the shared knowledge and the collaborative dialogue that will increase the capacity of the teacher teams to function as a high-performing team. Leaders do *not* improve the capacity of teams by taking away the hard work from them.

7. *Celebrate Short-Term Wins, and Confront Those Who Do Not Contribute to Their Teams* – It’s a delicate dance for leaders. To maintain momentum, leaders must celebrate small wins. But at the same time, if leaders are not willing to confront those who ignore or undermine the collaborative process, then they should not attempt to put the collaborative team concept into effect in the first place.

Chapter 5 – Developing a Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum

One of the most powerful things a school can do to improve student achievement is to provide a guaranteed and viable curriculum -- that is, that specific content is taught in specific grades (guaranteed) and that there is enough instructional time to do it (viable). While many schools and many districts may have clear curriculum guides that they distribute to teachers, it is rare that the same curriculum is taught in each class. Some teachers give priority to certain units, others prioritize other units, and some ignore the documents all together. It is common that there is a huge discrepancy between the *intended* curriculum and the *implemented* curriculum even though this crucial aspect of schooling has such a tremendous impact on student achievement.

In a professional learning community, teachers must have *both* a common understanding of the curriculum *and* a commitment to teach it. The first part is related to the first of the big ideas of a PLC – *What must students learn?* To answer this question, the teachers will need to:

- Study the intended curriculum
- Agree on priorities within the curriculum
- Clarify how the curriculum translates into student knowledge and skills
- Establish general pacing guidelines for delivering the curriculum

The teams address the second part – a commitment to teach the common curriculum -- by monitoring student learning and addressing the second key question of PLCs -- *How will we know if students are learning?* This question goes even further than ensuring that teachers are teaching the curriculum by guaranteeing that students are *learning* it. Providing a guaranteed and viable curriculum is one of the basic tenets of a PLC.

Most schools have far too many standards and far too much content to cover in a given academic year. To make sure that a curriculum is viable, teams should begin by identifying content that is considered “essential” to a course or subject area within a grade level. People may use different terms for this critical content: *goals, objectives, learning targets, etc.* In this book, the authors call this essential content, “objectives” and basically teachers should organize sets of objectives into **topics** which fall under **strands** as is illustrated in this excerpted example below. If this were fleshed out for the entire year (as it is in the book on pages 107 to 109) it would provide a guide for teachers to inform instruction and assessment for the year:

Strand 1: Earth and Space Sciences
<i>Atmospheric Process and the Water Cycle</i>
Objective 1: Students will illustrate how climate patterns are affected by the water cycle and its processes. Objective 2: Students will model how all levels of the earth’s atmosphere (troposphere, stratosphere, mesosphere, and thermosphere) are affected by temperature and pressure.
<i>Composition and Structure of the Earth</i>
Objective 3: Students will describe the unique composition of the earth’s layers and how the earth is affected by the interaction of those layers. Objective 4: Students will describe the constructive and destructive forces that create and shape landforms. Objective 5: Etc.

The final step teams should take to help them better answer the two questions of what students should know and how they will know if students have learned involves creating proficiency scales (or rubrics) for each objective. This begins by identifying content that would be simpler than the objective and more complex than it as well. For example, a second grade science objective might be:

Students will be able to describe and exemplify what different plants and animals need to survive.

The above asks students for basic informational knowledge, but a simpler objective might be:

Students will be able to recall specific terminology such as plant, animal, and survival.

Then the team might come up with a more complex objective such as the following:

Students will be able to compare and contrast different ways in which plants and animals breathe and find nourishment.

Once teams come up with these three levels, they can create proficiency scales, like the one below, to assess student understanding with a 3.0 representing the original target objective, the 4.0 the more challenging objective, and 2.0 the simpler objective. See p. 115 for this sample generic rubric.

Score 4.0	More complex content
Score 3.0	Target objective
Score 2.0	Simpler content
Score 1.0	With help, partial success at score 2.0 content and score 3.0 content
Score 0.0	Even with help, no success

Chapter 6 – Ongoing Monitoring of Student Learning

Once collaborative teams have a guaranteed and viable curriculum in place, they need to ensure that they are monitoring student learning in a systematic way. A number of years ago Paul Black and Dylan William brought to the attention of educators in the United States how formative assessment could help us do that. They analyzed over 250 studies on formative assessment and found that, “The research reported here shows conclusively that formative assessment does improve student learning.” This means that educators must make a *conceptual* shift and understand that an assessment is not an absolute measure of a student’s proficiency, it simply represents where the student is at one moment on the path toward achieving the objective. For example, the following chart shows how one student performed with regard to the objective of transition sentences in essays over the course of five formative assessments.

0 to 4.0 Proficiency Score	1.5	2.0	2.0	3.5	3.5
Formative Assessment	1 st Assessment	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th

Tracking like the chart above allows the teacher and the student to monitor student progress toward specific learning objectives. However, in order to track student progress in this way, we need to reconsider some of the *current* practices we use in classroom assessment. For example, currently teachers often give assessments that cover multiple topics and therefore give grades that cover multiple topics. This means two students might receive a 70 on a test even though their mastery of the topics might differ drastically – one might get 35 of her points correct from topic A and 35 points from topic B while the other might get all of the topic B points correct (all 65 of them) but only 5 points from topic A correct. By recording a 70 for each student we do not provide the students with accurate feedback about their progress. There is a detailed description of a new way to score assessments and a new way to format report cards (see the chapter for the details), but if you don’t have the latitude to do this, the authors suggest identifying all of the objectives that an assessment covers, and then giving a separate grade for each objective. For example, for an essay, students might receive one grade for their thesis statement, one grade for their transitions between paragraphs, one grade for their subject/verb agreement, one grade for communicating a clear message, and one grade for capitalization and end of sentence punctuation.

Another important aspect of monitoring student learning in a PLC is that it is done *collaboratively* and it is done *before* the unit begins. This is different than the traditional approach in which individual teachers create summative assessments at the end of a unit. Instead, a collaborative team comes together *before* teaching a unit to create a *common formative assessment* and agrees when it will be given. Then the team collaboratively analyzes the results and decides on actions they can take to maximize their instructional effectiveness and identifies students who need additional support. This ongoing monitoring of student learning is one of the most powerful tools of collaborative teams. Furthermore, research shows this collective analysis of results leads to real change in teacher practice. Again, the conceptual shift here is for teams to understand assessment as a tool not simply to *prove* what students know but to *improve* their learning as well. If common assessments are used to simply assign grades and move on, little improvement in student achievement will occur.

Chapter 7 – Ensuring Effective Instruction

In the first big idea of any PLC, it is clear that teams must ensure that all students learn at high levels. Therefore, teams have the responsibility of planning and delivering lessons that are highly effective. However, there is no *one* instructional strategy – even those strategies backed by research – that will be guaranteed to improve student achievement. Instead, teachers must work collaboratively to design and monitor lessons and have the flexibility to determine what works best to improve student learning.

Working collaboratively to plan and analyze effective lessons is not new. This process is part of *kounaikenshuu* – a school improvement process that includes lesson study in Japan. In PLCs teachers have the opportunity to come together and develop lessons collaboratively. However, it is important to note that the plans the team creates are general plans not *scripts* that teachers must follow and if certain strategies are not working, teachers have the latitude to shift course midway. Below is an example of how teams might collaboratively plan a rubric and outline activities and tasks to go along with the rubric while still allowing for teachers to have flexibility in their own individual lesson plans.

Academic content can be classified into three categories: (1) information, (2) mental procedures, and (3) psychomotor skills. This section focuses on information. We saw in the previous chapter that performance scales or rubrics should be designed around three levels of content knowledge (2.0, 3.0, and 4.0). Because each of these levels of knowledge requires a *different* type of instruction, teams should create *three different types of lessons* for each scale. Take a look at the sample scale below excerpted from p.144:

Score	Content
4.0	Students predict and defend possible changes in the Bill of Rights in the 21 st century.
3.0	Students demonstrate an understanding of the influence of political rights on individuals and society in general with specific focus on the Bill of Rights within the US Constitution.
2.0	Students recall or recognize important details about the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important terms and phrases including <i>right to petition, freedom of press, US Constitution, Bill of Rights</i> • Important facts including the general history of the Bill of Rights and more well-known elements of it, like the First Amendment
1.0	With help, partial success at score 2.0 content and score 3.0 content

Planning Lessons for 2.0 Information Content

First collaborative teams would plan lessons for the 2.0 level. They would need to understand that this information is at the basic level of details (time, sequences, facts, and vocabulary terms). Introducing this material is fairly straightforward and the team may design an approach such as the following:

- *Organize students into small groups* – Two to three students is ideal
- *Help students preview the content* – Ask students what they already know or give them an overview
- *Chunk the content into small bites* – Give them small bits of information at a time so as not to overwhelm them
- *Scaffold the chunks* – Think through the sequence of information presented so it is tied to previous information
- *Allow students to process each chunk* -- Students can summarize each chunk or ask their own questions
- *Ask elaborative questions* – Ask students questions that go beyond what is presented such as inferential questions
- *Have students represent the content in linguistic or nonlinguistic ways* – Write a summary, outline, poster, or sketch
- *Have students reflect on their learning* – In a journal, ask students to write about the most significant thing they learned

Planning Lessons for 3.0 and 4.0 Information Content

Again, the collaborative team would simply outline activities but allow teachers to be flexible enough to respond to their particular students. After students have developed a solid foundation of the details (from the 2.0 level) they will be prepared to learn about principles and generalizations (the 3.0 level) and they will be able to make inferences and applications (the 4.0 level). Because understanding a generalization or principle means being able to generate examples of that principle independently, collaborative teams should first identify examples and nonexamples that teachers might present and explain to students. Teachers will present a few of these examples and then ask students to generate and defend their own examples. For level 4.0, the job of collaborative teams is to design tasks in which students must make inferences about and applications of knowledge.

Observing Lessons in Action

To make their instruction more effective, collaborative teams should observe and revise their lessons. Instructional rounds are one tool teams can use, but in a different way than they were originally intended. Originally, instructional rounds were conducted by administrators, coaches, and supervisors to focus on a common problem. However, instructional rounds are *more effective* when conducted by teams of teachers and used differently. Instead, instructional rounds can be used by a collaborative team to observe the effectiveness of a lesson that was designed by the team to compare their own instructional approach with what they observe. It is *not* used to provide feedback to the teacher teaching the lesson.

About three to five teachers observe the collaboratively planned lesson and then meet to debrief. They do *not* offer suggestions to the observed teacher and instead comment on positive aspects and concerns about the structure of the lesson. At the end, the teacher observers comment on *both* the effectiveness of the lesson as well as what they will bring back to their own individual practice:

- What instructional practices will I continue to use because I saw other teachers employing them effectively?
- What instructional practices that I currently use will I re-examine?
- What strategies have I not used but will now attempt because I saw them effectively used by other teachers?
- What part of our team-developed lesson plan worked well?
- What part of our team-developed lesson plan did not work as well as we had hoped and what might we do differently?

It should be noted that instructional rounds is *not* a substitute for examining student learning from common assessments and making adjustments to teaching based on this evidence. Instead, instructional rounds should *complement* this work and help teachers name and pinpoint those practices that are leading to positive results.

Chapter 8 – Responding When Kids Don’t Learn

No matter how wonderful the curriculum, the unit plan, the assessments, or the lesson plan are, there will *always* be students who struggle. The question is, how does a collaborative team of teachers respond when some students master an objective and some do not? Historically, schools and teachers have addressed this problem in different ways, neither of which have solved the problem. *Schools* have attempted to address the problem of struggling learners by making *structural* changes such as: breaking big schools into smaller schools, creating block schedules, creating tracks and putting struggling students in lower tracks, providing rewards for students who do learn, etc. None of these have worked, and yet schools continue to make these types of structural changes. Why? Because structural changes are easy to make and have the *appearance* that the school is addressing the problem.

Individual teachers have addressed the problem of some students not learning in an haphazard way. Some teachers work with struggling students after school, some do not. Some teachers allow students to improve their work until it meets a certain standard, others do not. Some teachers contact parents to ask for their help, others do not. In other words, whether or not a struggling student receives additional help is like a lottery – it depends on which teachers the student has. Historically, there has been no school-wide *systematic* approach to helping students who did not learn the objective the first time around. This chapter presents the way a school systematically addresses this challenge.

Effective Systems of Intervention

Below are suggestions to help schools create a *systematic* process for addressing the needs of students struggling with their learning.

1. All students need access to effective instruction on a regular basis. Any intervention plan could not possibly compensate for overall poor instruction. Schools need to provide teachers with the support they need to deliver effective instruction.
2. The intervention plan must be *proactive*, not reactive. The school needs a plan to assess the proficiency levels and needs of all students when they *enter* the school. Otherwise it can take months to determine who needs help.
3. An effective intervention plan must rely on an *assessment process* that provides *frequent* and *timely* information about each student. This is the information that drives the intervention process.
4. Time and support must be considered as *variables*, not as *constants*. In most schools, students who struggle are given the same exact amount of time to learn an objective as students who are accomplished. Instead, effective intervention plans should provide struggling students with additional time without removing them from the new instruction taking place.
5. The intervention plan should be *directive* not *invitational*. Effective intervention plans do not merely invite struggling students to stay afterschool if they wish. Rather, struggling students should be *assigned* to intervention just as students are assigned to math.
6. The plan of intervention should be *fluid* and *flexible*. Students who struggle should only be assigned to specific programs of assistance for as long as they need them, *not* for certain periods of time. Unlike special education programs where it is difficult to identify students and then get the student removed from those services, students should flow in and out of intervention as needed.
7. The plan of intervention should be *specific* and *precise*. When assigning a student to intervention, it's best to be as specific as possible. Rather than saying, "He is not doing well in math," say, "He is having difficulty adding and subtracting two-digit integers."
8. The plan of intervention should address *two types of non-learners*. Some students make an effort but fail despite this effort. This group needs intensive tutorial support by effective teachers. The second type of non-learners includes students who are *unwilling* to put in the necessary effort to succeed. This group needs help ensuring they do their work, or, failing this, they may need noninstructional assistance in determining why they are engaging in this type of unproductive behavior.
9. The intervention plan should be *systematic*. It should happen in an organized, step-by-step fashion. There should be specific criteria for when interventions occur. Roles and responsibilities should be clear and those involved must have time to collaborate to monitor it.

Enrichment

The fourth critical question all PLCs grapple with is, "*How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are already proficient?*" Like with the intervention plan, the response must be systematic. Below are a few strategies to address this question:

1. Provide students with *specific criteria* they must meet to demonstrate advanced proficiency. This can be done by using the proficiency scales introduced earlier by outlining advanced proficiency in the 4.0 level of those scales.
2. Build enrichment activities into *each unit* of instruction *during the school day*. Some collaborative teams set aside regular time when teachers divide up and one teacher works with struggling students to provide intervention, another teacher works with proficient students to provide reinforcement, and another teacher works with advanced students to engage them in enrichment activities.
3. Allow participation in co-curricular activities. Help advanced students apply their learning outside of the classroom by finding opportunities for them such as academic decathlons, history fairs, science Olympiads, model United Nation programs, etc.
4. Use students as *tutors*. One way to understand material in a deeper way is to teach it. Advanced students can tutor others.

Chapter 9 – Leadership is an Affair of the Heart

A lot of this book focuses on what data and research show is needed for an effective educational leader to improve student achievement. However, any book on effective leadership must also address the emotions of the people being led. An effective leader knows how to appeal to the heart as well as the head. One of the ways to do this is with stories as well as data. Furthermore, the best leaders are in love with their work and the people they lead and serve. For them, work is not as much a job as it is a calling or a cause. Staff can feel the difference between the leader who gushes with enthusiasm when describing staff and students versus a superintendent or principal who belittles the abilities of staff or students. In addition, effective leaders need to have the skills to take the school's mission and vision and turn them into a *shared* vision that captures the hopes and dreams of all the stakeholders. Then leaders constantly remind students and staff of the importance of their daily work and the link it to a higher purpose. Of course all leaders confront conditions over which they have no control, but effective leaders focus on the factors within their sphere of influence and hold themselves accountable rather than blaming external conditions. Furthermore, effective leaders always see themselves as *learning* about how to get better. Great leaders are great learners.

THE MAIN IDEA’s Discussion Questions for Use with a Leadership Team

This book addresses a number of *large* issues – from changing the way principals supervise teachers to organizing teachers into results-oriented collaborative teams. Because these are overwhelming issues to tackle at once, especially if they are new to your school or district, below are simply **a few questions** district or school leaders can discuss with their leadership teams to begin to grapple with these important issues. There are also **a few implementation suggestions** as well.

Question: Lazy teachers or lack of capacity? In the book, the authors write that many recent educational reforms have been about giving schools and teachers *incentives* (such as money, good press, or status) to perform better or *sanctions* when they perform poorly (such as bad press, bad “grades,” firing teachers, or shutting down entire schools). However, the authors claim that this reward system assumes that teachers have had the *ability* to help all students succeed all along, but simply lacked the motivation or were unwilling to do the work. In contrast, the authors believe that teachers have lacked the *collective capacity to help all students learn* in the existing structures and cultures where they work. What do you think about these contrasting ideas?

Question: How well do you do PLCs? In order to truly improve education, the authors believe that rather than doling out more sanctions and incentives, we need to improve the quality of teaching and learning. They believe that setting up authentic **professional learning communities** (PLCs) is the best way to achieve this goal. There is a lot of misconception about what a PLC actually is. As a team, take a look at the 3 big ideas of a PLC on p.1 of the summary and discuss how well you believe your school implements each bullet on a scale of 1 to 5.

Question 3: District support – autonomy or top-down? The authors say schools cannot maintain success without the appropriate support from the district. How would you categorize the relationship between the school and the district? Where on the pendulum would you place the school – is it closer to the autonomous side or is it more controlled by the district in a top-down approach?

Question 4: How do principals maximize their impact on instruction? The authors discuss the need to change the role of principals so they can have *more* of an impact on teaching and learning. They give an example. Say that a principal has 50 teachers and tries to find creative ways to interact with 50 people to “supervise them into better practice,” often with the old model of pre-observation, observation, post-observation, and a conference. Instead, with a collaborative team model, the principal meets regularly with 7 teams, and in the meantime, these teams meet weekly to ensure that each student’s progress is monitored by common formative assessments and evidence of student learning is used to improve teacher practice. Discuss the difference between the principal’s impact on teaching and learning with the old model vs. the new model.

Question 5: How do schools implement more effective, research-backed principal actions? One of the authors, Robert Marzano, collaborated on research about effective school leadership and found 21 principal actions that had a *positive* effect on teachers. The authors claim that it is difficult for *one* principal to exhibit all of these qualities, and that a PLC helps to spread leadership among all of the team leaders, and in fact, covers 19 of these 21 research-based principal actions. Below is an excerpted list of the 19 principal responsibilities (from pp.52-53 in the book). Discuss how well the current leadership team at your school demonstrates these actions and whether a PLC might add to the number of leadership actions that could be covered. Note this is excerpted from research done by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, in *School leadership that works*.

<i>Research-based Principal Action that Has a Positive Effect on Teachers</i>	<i>How well do our leaders do this?</i>	<i>How well might a PLC do this?</i>
1. Providing affirmation/celebration of staff effort/achievement		
2. Challenging the status quo as change agent		
3. Establishing school-wide processes for effective communication		
4. Shaping assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that make up the school’s culture		
5. Demonstrating flexibility in meeting different needs of teams and being willing to make modifications to school procedures		
6. Focusing on clear goals and relentlessly pursuing priorities		
7. Articulating ideals and beliefs that drive the school’s day-to-day work		
8. Soliciting input from staff in the design and implementation of procedures and policies		
9. Regularly engaging staff in review and discussion of most promising practices to improve student learning		
10. Participating in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment		
11. Demonstrating interest in and knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment		
12. Creating processes to provide ongoing monitoring of school’s practices and their effect on student learning		
13. Creating the conditions that optimize school improvement efforts		
14. Establishing clear procedures and orderly routines		
15. Serving as a spokesperson/advocate for the school and staff		
16. Establishing a positive working relationship with each member of the staff		
17. Providing teachers with the resources, materials, and support to help them succeed		
18. Recognizing the informal undercurrents of the school and using that information to be proactive in addressing problems/concerns		
19. Being visible throughout the school and having positive interactions with staff and students		

Question 6: How well do you support teacher teams? Many schools have teachers working in teams but these are often plagued by a “culture of nice” and don’t really improve student achievement. Rather than leaving teacher teams alone and hoping for the best, the authors outline 7 ways leaders can support teams. Discuss how well your leadership provides these 7 types of support (see p.5 of the summary for more detail): (1) organize staff into meaningful teams, (2) provide teams with time to collaborate, (3) help teams set clear expectations and goals, (4) clarify the work teams must accomplish, (5) monitor the work of teams and provide support and direction, (6) avoid shortcuts, and (7) celebrate short-term wins while confronting those who do not contribute to the team.

Action: If your teacher teams find it difficult to go beyond a culture of nice and move toward honest and rigorous assessment of student learning and teacher practice, email me (Jenn) and I will send you a useful article to distribute to teacher leaders – this could be a great article for a discussion with them. This might also be a helpful article for your leadership team to read as well!

Question 7: What tasks should your teacher teams start to work on? There are so many different components of a PLC, how do you know where to have your teacher teams start? The authors suggest that teams look at the questionnaire online at go.solution-tree.com/plcbooks under the book *Learning By Doing* (a different book by DuFour and colleagues), then click on “Critical Issues for Team Consideration.” As a leadership team, take a look at and discuss the excerpt of the questionnaire below (or print out the entire questionnaire). Which areas would your teams rate more highly and which areas would they need more assistance to improve?

Rating (1-10)	Critical Issues for Team Consideration
	We have identified team norms and protocols.
	We have analyzed student achievement data and have established SMART goals and are working interdependently to improve student achievement.
	Each member of the team is clear about what students must know for our course/grade level and for each unit.
	We have aligned the curriculum with all necessary standards and high-stakes assessments.
	We have developed frequent common formative assessments that help us determine each student’s mastery of essential learning.
	We use the results of each common assessment to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.
	We use the results of each common assessment to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learning, and we work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.
	We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learning of our course, and we continually practice applying those criteria to ensure we are consistent.
	We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and provided them with examples.
	We formally evaluate our adherence to team norms and the effectiveness of our team at least twice a year.

Action: – Consider distributing your own list of “Critical Issues for Team Consideration” and for each item, list a *product* that you expect will come from the team’s work. For example, from the first item (“We have identified team norms and protocols”) you might expect a list of team norms. Other items might include SMART goals, lists of essential outcomes for each unit, common formative assessments teams plan to use, lists of students who need additional time and support, etc. Then, work with staff to develop a timeline of when teacher teams will complete products to turn in to you. This will keep the teams on track and help you to monitor their work and provide feedback when you meet with each team. Below is a sketch of the beginning of a simple timeline:

Date to turn in:	September 5	September 15	September 15	September 20
Team product:	List of team norms	SMART goals	Essential outcomes for first two units	First common formative assessment

Question 8: How does your school respond when students don’t learn? How do different teachers at your school respond when students struggle to learn? Does Mr. Jones stay late to help students with their writing? Does Ms. Rodriguez allow students to rework math problems until they get them right? The authors argue that whether or not students receive support should *not* differ depending on who their teachers are. Instead, there should be a *school-wide, systematic* approach to intervention. Discuss how well your current system of support works for your struggling students. Can you actually call it a “system” or does it depend on which teacher(s) the struggling student has? Take a look at the criteria for *Effective Systems of Intervention* below and explained in more detail on p.9 of the summary. How many of these characteristics does your current approach have?

Do you already have *effective instruction* for everyone? Is your approach *proactive*? Does your plan rely on a *frequent* and *timely assessment* process? Do you have *additional time* built into the day for struggling learners? Do you *require* struggling learners to come for intervention? Is your intervention plan *fluid* and *flexible*? Does the plan communicate student needs in *specific* and *precise* language? Does the intervention plan account for *different types of non-learners*? Overall, is the plan *systematic*?

Action: If your leadership team has *not* answered in the affirmative to all of the criteria of an effective intervention plan listed above, consider putting together a committee and having them develop an action plan to do some research (perhaps starting with reading Chapter 8 in this book, “Responding When Kids Don’t Learn”) and come up with several proposals for creating a systematic approach to addressing the needs of students who struggle at your school (or in your district).