

# Introduction to Professional Learning Communities

*Adapted with permission from Learning by Doing (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, pp. 2–5)*

Public school educators in the United States are now required to do something they have never before been asked to accomplish: Ensure high levels of learning for all students. If educators are to make significant progress in meeting this challenge, they must first recognize that the institutions in which they work were not designed to accomplish the task of learning for all. They must then acknowledge the need to make fundamental changes in both the practices of their schools and the assumptions that drive those practices. The most promising strategy for meeting this challenge is developing the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community (PLC).

## What Is a Professional Learning Community?

The term *professional learning community* has become commonplace; it has been used to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education. This lack of clarity can be an obstacle to implementing PLC concepts. First and foremost, PLCs are focused and committed to the learning of each student. Second, they are composed of teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals—thus creating a culture of collaboration. This collaboration involves collective inquiry into best practice and current reality and an action orientation. Lastly, PLCs share a results orientation with a commitment to continuous improvement.

## A Focus on Learning

The very essence of a *learning* community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it. In order to achieve this purpose, the members of a PLC create and are guided by a clear and compelling vision of what the organization must become in order to help all students learn. They make collective commitments clarifying what each member will do to create such an organization, and they use results-oriented goals to mark their progress. Members work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, provide systematic interventions that ensure students receive additional time and support for learning when they struggle, and extend and enrich learning when students have already mastered the intended outcomes.

A corollary assumption is that if the organization is to become more effective in helping all students learn, the adults in the organization must also be continually learning. Therefore, structures are created to ensure staff members engage in job-embedded learning as part of their routine work practices.

There is no ambiguity or hedging regarding this commitment to learning. Whereas many schools operate as if their primary purpose is to ensure that children are taught, PLCs are dedicated to the idea that their



organization exists to ensure that all students learn essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions. All the other characteristics of a PLC flow directly from this epic shift in assumptions about the purpose of the school.

## A Collaborative Culture With a Focus on Learning for All

A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all. The team is the engine that drives the PLC effort and the fundamental building block of the organization. It is difficult to overstate the importance of collaborative teams in the improvement process. It is equally important, however, to emphasize that collaboration does not lead to improved results unless people are focused on the right issues. Collaboration is a means to an end, not the end itself. In many schools, staff members are willing to collaborate on a variety of topics as long as the focus of the conversation stops at their classroom door. In a PLC, *collaboration* represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school.

## Collective Inquiry Into Best Practice and Current Reality

The teams in a PLC engage in collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning. They also inquire about their current reality—including their present practices and the levels of achievement of their students. They attempt to arrive at consensus on vital questions by building shared knowledge rather than pooling opinions. They have an acute sense of curiosity and openness to new possibilities.

Collective inquiry enables team members to develop new skills and capabilities that in turn lead to new experiences and awareness. Gradually, this heightened awareness transforms into fundamental shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and habits which, over time, transform the culture of the school. Working together to build shared knowledge on the best way to achieve goals and meet the needs of clients is exactly what *professionals* in any field are expected to do, whether it is curing the patient, winning the lawsuit, or helping all students learn. Members of a *professional* learning community are expected to work and learn together.

## Action Orientation

Members of PLCs are action oriented: They move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality. They understand that the most powerful learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and experience as the most effective teachers. In fact, the very reason that teachers work together in teams and engage in collective inquiry is to serve as catalysts for action.

Members of PLCs recognize that learning by doing develops a deeper and more profound knowledge and greater commitment than learning by reading, listening, planning, or thinking. Traditional schools have developed a variety of strategies to resist taking meaningful action, preferring the comfort of the familiar. Professional learning communities recognize that until members of the organization “do” differently, there is no reason to anticipate different results. They avoid paralysis by analysis and overcome inertia with action.



## A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Inherent to a PLC are a persistent disquiet with the status quo and a constant search for a better way to achieve goals and accomplish the purpose of the organization. Systematic processes engage each member of the organization in an ongoing cycle of:

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implementing those strategies and ideas
- Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Applying new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

The goal is not simply to learn a new strategy, but instead to create conditions for perpetual learning—an environment in which innovation and experimentation are viewed not as tasks to be accomplished or projects to be completed but as ways of conducting day-to-day business, *forever*. Furthermore, participation in this process is not reserved for those designated as leaders; rather, it is a responsibility of every member of the organization.

## Results Orientation

Finally, members of a PLC realize that all of their efforts in these areas—a focus on learning, collaborative teams, collective inquiry, action orientation, and continuous improvement—must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions. Unless initiatives are subjected to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark rather than purposeful improvement. As Peter Senge and colleagues conclude in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1994), “The rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results” (p. 44).

This focus on results leads each team to develop and pursue measurable improvement goals that are aligned to school and district goals for learning. It also drives teams to create a series of common formative assessments that are administered to students multiple times throughout the year to gather ongoing evidence of student learning. Team members review the results from these assessments in an effort to identify and address program concerns (areas of learning where many students are experiencing difficulty). They also examine the results to discover strengths and weaknesses in their individual teaching in order to learn from one another. Most importantly, the assessments are used to identify students who need additional time and support for learning. Frequent common formative assessments represent one of the most powerful tools in the PLC arsenal.

