
LEADING QUALITY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Florida Association for
Staff Development

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hallb@brevard.k12.fl.us

A Big Picture Look at Professional Learning Communities

What is a PLC?

"A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators."

—adapted from *Learning by Doing*

3 Big Ideas of a PLC

Focus on Learning

The fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. This focus on learning translates into four critical questions that drive the daily work of the school. In PLCs, educators demonstrate their commitment to helping all students learn by working collaboratively to address the following critical questions:

- 1) What do we want students to learn? What should each student know and be able to do as a result of each unit, grade level, and/or course?
- 2) How will we know if they have learned? Are we monitoring each student's learning on a timely basis?
- 3) What will we do if they don't learn? What systematic process is in place to provide additional time and support for students who are experiencing difficulty?
- 4) What will we do if they already know it?

Build a COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

- No school can help all students achieve at high levels if teachers work in isolation.
- Schools improve when teachers are given the time and support to work together to clarify essential student learning, develop common assessments for learning, analyze evidence of student learning, and use that evidence to learn from one another.

Focus on Results

- PLCs measure their effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions.
- All programs, policies, and practices are continually assessed on the basis of their impact on student learning.
- All staff members receive relevant and timely information on their effectiveness in achieving intended results.

6 Essential Characteristics of a PLC

Shared mission, vision, values, goals

Educators in a PLC benefit from clarity regarding their shared purpose, a common understanding of the school they are trying to create, collective communities to help move the school in the desired direction, and specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound (SMART) goals to mark their progress.

Collaborative teams focused on learning

In a PLC, educators work together interdependently in collaborative teams to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable. The structure of the school is aligned to ensure teams are provided the time and support essential to adult learning.

"Collaboration is a systematic process in which we work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results."

—adapted from *Learning by Doing*

Collective inquiry

Teams in a PLC relentlessly question the status quo, seek new methods of teaching and learning, test the methods, and then reflect on the results. Building shared knowledge of both current reality and best practice is an essential part of each team's decision-making process.

Action orientation and experimentation

Members of a PLC constantly turn their learning and insights into action. They recognize the importance of engagement and experience in learning and in testing new ideas. They learn by doing.

Commitment to Continuous improvement

Not content with the status quo, members of a PLC constantly seek better ways to achieve mutual goals and accomplish their fundamental purpose of learning for all.

All teams engage 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 the strategies and ideas
- Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

Results orientation

Educators in a PLC assess their efforts on the basis of tangible results. They are hungry for evidence of student learning and use that evidence to inform and improve their practice.

The success of the PLC concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the commitment and persistence of the educators within it.

—Richard DuFour

Adapted from the work of Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker.

Professional Learning Communities

An Overview

Definition

"...A Professional Learning Community is a collaboration of teachers, administrators, parents, and students, who work together to seek out best practices, test them in the classroom, continuously improve processes, and focus on results."

Rick DuFour, 2002.

Fundamental Assumptions

1. We can make a difference: Our schools can be more effective.
2. Improving our people is the key to improving our schools.
3. Significant school improvement will impact teaching and learning.

The ONE Thing

in a
Professional Learning Community,
"learning" rather than "teaching"
is the fundamental purpose
of your school.

Three Big Ideas

Focus on Learning
Collaboration
Focus on Results

Four Corollary Questions

1. What should students know and be able to do as a result of this course, class, or grade level?
2. How will we know that the students are not learning?
3. How do we respond when students do not learn?
4. How do we respond when students learn more?

Question 1 – What are the essential outcomes that we expect students to learn?

Question 2 – What assessment will we use to determine if the students have learned?

Questions 3 & 4 – How will we intervene when students do not learn or learn more than anticipated?

Six Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community

- **Shared mission, vision, values, goals**
What distinguishes a learning community from an ordinary school is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the staff of the school believes and that govern their actions and behaviors.
- **Collaborative Culture**
Professionals in a learning community work in teams that share a common purpose. They learn from each other and create the momentum that drives improvement. They build within the organization the structure and vehicles that make collaborative work and learning effective and productive.
- **Collective Inquiry**
People in a learning community relentlessly question the status quo, seek new methods of teaching and learning, test the methods, and then reflect on the results.
 - They reflect publicly on their beliefs and challenge each other's beliefs.
 - They share insights and hammer out common meanings.
 - They work jointly to plan and test actions and initiatives.
 - They coordinate their actions, so that the work of each individual contributes to the common effort.
- **Action Orientation / Experimentation**
Members of professional learning communities constantly turn their learning and insights into action. They recognize the importance of engagement and experience in learning and in testing new ideas.
- **Commitment to Continuous Improvement**
Members of a learning organization are not content with the status quo and continually seek ways to bring present reality closer to future ideal. They constantly ask themselves and each other:
 - What is our purpose?
 - What do we hope to achieve?
 - What are our strategies for improving?
 - How will we assess our efforts?
- **Results Orientation**
Professionals in a learning organization recognize that no matter how well-intentioned the efforts, the only valid judgment of improvement is observable and measurable results. Assessment and re-evaluation are the keys to continued improvement.

Adapted from Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998), Professional Learning Communities at Work

Mission, vision, values, and goals is the district/school's core ideology.

"The core ideology clarifies what doesn't change for an organization in an environment of rapid and unpredictable change." *Built to Last* (1997, p.48)

Collaborative teams are the engine of a Professional Learning Community. Professionals in a learning community work on interdependent teams that share a common purpose. They learn from each other and create the momentum that drives school improvement.

Collective inquiry, action orientation and experimentation, commitment to continuous improvement, and results orientation are the four habits of highly effective teams.

Adapted from Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998), Professional Learning Communities at Work

Professional Learning Communities at Work

Each word of the phrase “professional learning community” has been chosen purposefully. A “professional” is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. The knowledge base of education has expanded dramatically in the past quarter century, both in terms of research and in terms of the articulation of recommended standards for the profession. Although many school personnel are unaware of or are inattentive to emerging research and standards, educators in a professional learning community make these findings the basis of their collaborative investigation of how they can better achieve their goals.

“Learning” suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. In Chinese, the term “learning” is represented by two characters: the first means “to study”, and the second means “to practice constantly.” Many schools operate as though their personnel know everything they will ever need to know the day they enter the profession. The school that operates as a professional *learning* community recognizes that its members must engage in the ongoing study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement.

Much has been written about learning organizations, but we prefer the term “community.” An organization has been defined both as an “administrative and functional structure” (*Webster’s Dictionary*) and as “a systematic arrangement for a definite purpose” (*Oxford Dictionary*). In each case, the emphasis is on structure and efficiency. In contrast, however, the term “community” suggests a group linked by common interests. As Corrine McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson (1994) write:

Community means different things to different people. To some it is a safe haven where survival is assured through mutual cooperation. To others, it is a place of emotional support, with deep sharing and bonding with close friends. Some see community as an intense crucible for personal growth. For others, it is simply a place to pioneer their dreams.

In a professional learning community, all of these characteristics are evident. Educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone.

Adapted from Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998), Professional Learning Communities at Work

Activity – Cultural Shifts in a Professional Learning Community

- Get into groups.**
- Silently read your assigned cultural shift.**
- What is your cultural shift?**
- Is this shift important to consider? Why or why not?**
- As leaders, what can you do to help the district and school-based teams make this shift?**
- What is one major point/key learning/AH HA that jumped off the page for your group?**

Cultural Shifts in a Professional Learning Community

A Shift in Fundamental Purpose

| | |
|--|---|
| From a focus on teaching . . . | to a focus on learning |
| From emphasis on what was taught . . . | to a fixation on what students learned |
| From coverage of content . . . | to demonstration of proficiency |
| From providing individual teachers with curriculum documents such as state standards and curriculum guides . . . | to engaging collaborative teams in building shared knowledge regarding essential curriculum |

A Shift in Use of Assessments

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| From infrequent summative assessments . . . | to frequent common formative assessments |
| From assessments to determine which students failed to learn by the deadline . . . | to assessments to identify students who need additional time and support |
| From assessments used to reward and punish students . . . | to assessments used to inform and motivate students |
| From assessing many things infrequently . . . | to assessing a few things frequently |
| From individual teacher assessments . . . | to assessments developed jointly by collaborative teams |
| From each teacher determining the criteria to be used in assessing student work . . . | to collaborative teams clarifying the criteria and ensuring consistency among team members when assessing student work |
| From an over-reliance on one kind of assessment . . . | to balanced assessments |
| From focusing on average scores . . . | to monitoring each student's proficiency in every essential skill |

A Shift in the Response When Students Don't Learn

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| From individual teachers determining the appropriate response . . . | to a systematic response that ensures support for every student |
| From fixed time and support for learning . . . | to time and support for learning as variables |
| From remediation . . . | to intervention |
| From invitational support outside of the school day . . . | to directed (that is, required) support occurring during the school day |
| From one opportunity to demonstrate learning . . . | to multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning |

A Shift in the Work of Teachers

| | |
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| From isolation . . . | to a focus on learning |
| From each teacher clarifying what students must learn . . . | to collaborative teams building shared knowledge and understanding about essential learning |
| From each teacher assigning priority to different learning standards . . . | to collaborative teams establishing the priority of respective learning standards |
| From each teacher determining the pacing of the curriculum . . . | to collaborative teams of teachers agreeing on common pacing |
| From individual teachers attempting to discover ways to improve results . . . | to collaborative teams of teachers helping each other improve |
| From privatization of practice . . . | to open sharing of practice |
| From decisions made on the basis of individual preferences . . . | to decisions made collectively by building shared knowledge of best practice |
| From "collaboration lite" on matters unrelated to student achievement . . . | to collaboration explicitly focused on issues and questions that most impact student achievement |
| From an assumption that these are "my kids, those are your kids" . . . | to an assumption that these are "our kids" |

A Shift in Focus

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| From an external focus on issues outside of the school . . . | to an internal focus on steps the staff can take to improve the school |
| From a focus on inputs . . . | to a focus on results |
| From goals related to completion of project and activities . . . | to SMART goals demanding evidence of student learning |
| From teachers gathering data from their individually constructed tests in order to assign grades . . . | to collaborative teams acquiring information from common assessments in order to (1) inform their individual and collective practice and (2) respond to students who need additional time and support |

A Shift in School Culture

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|---|---|
| From independence . . . | to interdependence |
| From a language of complaint . . . | to a language of commitment |
| From long-term strategic planning . . . | to planning for short-term wins |
| From infrequent generic recognition . . . | to frequent specific recognition and a culture of celebration that creates many winners |

A Shift in Professional Development

| | |
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| From external training (workshops and courses) . . . | to job-embedded learning |
| From the expectation that learning occurs infrequently (on the few days devoted to professional development) . . . | to an expectation that learning is ongoing and occurs as part of routine work practice |
| From presentations to entire faculties . . . | to team-based action research |
| From learning by listening . . . | to learning by doing |
| From learning individually through courses and workshops . . . | to learning collectively by working together |
| From assessing impact on the basis of teacher satisfaction ("did you like it?") . . . | to assessing impact on the basis of evidence of improved student learning |
| From short-term exposure to multiple concepts and practices . . . | to sustained commitment to limited focused initiatives |

What Professional Learning Communities Are Not...and What They Are

Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink – *Sustainable Leadership (2006)*

| What PLCs Are Not... | What PLCs Are... |
|---|---|
| Professional learning communities (PLCs) aren't merely convivial and congenial. | They are demandingly collegial in the levels of commitment and critical debate they require in order to address compelling problems of student learning. |
| PLCs aren't just bunches of teams that sit down and analyze data together after school is over. | They are a way of life that changes the entire school culture and in which emergent leadership comes together in rewarding and caring communities that inquire into the need for, then create improvements that benefit all students. |
| PLCs don't get fixated on achievement scores in narrowly defined curriculum areas like literacy and mathematics in the old basics. | They develop a strong focus on improving deep and broad learning that also includes the new basics. |
| PLCs avoid obsessions with alignment in which improvement efforts and staff development initiatives are discouraged or forbidden outside of narrowly defined priorities. | They create focus and cohesion among a diverse community of teachers with demonstrable but differing skills and talents. |
| PLCs are not dependent on a restricted range of standardized scores and measurable results. | They focus on a broader and more intelligent use of multiple forms of evidence and accountability to steer and monitor improvement. |
| PLCs can't be forced. Mandating and legislating PLCs sacrifices emergence to the arrogance and overconfidence of imposed design, leading to changes in the designation of schools and districts as "learning communities" but to no real changes in their nature. | PLCs can only be facilitated and fed. They combine high emergence with progressive design. |
| PLCs shouldn't be used as cooperative devices to implement unquestioned mandates for scripted literacy programs, for example. PLCs are not designed to implement other people's specific program priorities. | They should work and function as empowered communities that can develop evidence-informed local solutions that respond to diverse and differing students and their compelling learning problems. The point of PLCs is to commit to and fulfill essential principles and purposes. |
| PLCs don't confine their discussions to the technicalities of training strategies and achievement gaps. | They engage in intelligent and ethical deliberations about what counts as achievement. These deliberations include courageous questioning and even creative subversion of the mandates and measurement tools that diminish that sense of achievement. |

Critical Issues for Team Consideration

Team Name: _____

Team Members: _____

Use the scale below to indicate the extent to which each of the following statements is true of your team.

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|------------------------|---|---|---|------------------|---|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Not True of Our Team | | | Our Team Is Addressing | | | | True of Our Team | | |

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>1. ___ We have identified team norms and protocols to guide us in working together.</p> <p>2. ___ We have analyzed student achievement data and have established SMART goals that we are working interdependently to achieve.</p> <p>3. ___ Each member of our team is clear on the essential learnings of our course in general as well as the essential learnings of each unit.</p> <p>4. ___ We have aligned the essential learnings with state and district standards and the high-stakes exams required of our students.</p> <p>5. ___ We have identified course content and/or topics that can be eliminated so we can devote more time to essential curriculum.</p> <p>6. ___ We have agreed on how to best sequence the content of the course and have established pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learnings.</p> <p>7. ___ We have identified the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need in order to master the essential learnings of our course and each unit of this course.</p> <p>8. ___ We have identified strategies and created instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.</p> <p>9. ___ We have developed strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking in those areas.</p> <p>10. ___ We have developed frequent common formative assessments that help us to determine each student's mastery of essential learnings.</p> | <p>11. ___ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our common assessments.</p> <p>12. ___ We have developed common summative assessments that help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of our program.</p> <p>13. ___ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our summative assessments.</p> <p>14. ___ We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learnings of our course, and we practice applying those criteria to ensure consistency.</p> <p>15. ___ We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and have provided them with examples.</p> <p>16. ___ We evaluate our adherence to and the effectiveness of our team norms at least twice each year.</p> <p>17. ___ We use the results of our common assessments to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of a process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.</p> <p>18. ___ We use the results of our common assessments to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learnings, and we work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.</p> |
|--|--|



Making Time for Collaboration

The issue of finding time for collaboration has been addressed effectively—and often—in the professional literature and is readily available for those who are sincerely interested in exploring alternatives. The National Staff Development Council alone has addressed the issue hundreds of times in its publications, and the www.allthingsplc.info website lists over 150 schools that have created time for teachers to collaborate in ways that don't require the school to be shut down, don't cost money, and don't result in significant loss of instructional time. The following strategies do not form a comprehensive list; rather, they illustrate some of the steps schools and districts have taken to create the prerequisite time for collaboration.

Common Preparation

Build the master schedule to provide daily common preparation periods for teachers of the same course or department. Each team should then designate one day each week to engage in collaborative, rather than individual, planning.

Parallel Scheduling

Schedule common preparation time by assigning the specialists (physical education teachers, librarians, music teachers, art teachers, instructional technologists, guidance counselors, foreign language teachers, and so on) to provide lessons to students across an entire grade level at the same time each day. The team should designate one day each week for collaborative planning. Some schools build back-to-back specials classes into the master schedule on each team's designated collaborative day, thus creating an extended block of time for the team to meet. Specials teachers must also be given time to collaborate.

Adjusted Start and End Time

Gain collaborative time by starting the workday early or extending the workday one day each week. In exchange for adding time to one end of the workday, teachers get the time back on the other end of that day. For example, on Tuesdays, the entire staff of Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, begins their workday at 7:30 a.m. rather than the normal 7:45 a.m. start time. From 7:30 to 8:30 a.m., the entire faculty engages in collaborative team meetings. Classes, which usually begin at 8:05 a.m., are delayed until 8:30 a.m. Students who can arrange for their own transportation arrive to school then. Buses run their regular routes so that no parent is inconvenienced and deliver students to the school at 7:40 a.m. Upon their arrival they are supervised by administrative and noninstructional staff in a variety of optional activities (such as breakfast, library and computer research, open gym, study halls, and tutorials) until classes begin. To make up for the twenty-five minutes of lost instructional time, five minutes is trimmed from five of the eight fifty-minute class periods. The school day ends at the usual time (3:25 in the afternoon), and again buses run on their regular schedules. Because they began work fifteen minutes early (7:30 rather than 7:45), Stevenson teachers are free to leave fifteen minutes earlier than the normal conclusion of their workday (3:30 rather than 3:45). By making these minor adjustments to the schedule one day each week, the entire faculty is guaranteed an hour of collaborative planning without extending their workday or workweek by a single minute.

Shared Classes

Combine students across two different grade levels or courses into one class for instruction. While one teacher or team instructs the students, the other team engages in collaborative work. The teams alternate instructing and collaborating to provide equity in learning time for students and teams. Some schools coordinate shared classes so older students adopt younger students and serve as literacy buddies, tutors, and mentors during shared classes.

Group Activities, Events, and Testing

Teams of teachers coordinate activities that require supervision of students rather than instructional expertise, such as watching an instructional DVD or video, conducting resource lessons, reading aloud, attending assemblies, or testing. Nonteaching staff members supervise students while teachers engage in team collaboration.

Banked Time

Over a designated period of days, extend the instructional minutes beyond the required school day. After you have banked the desired number of minutes, end the instructional day early to allow for faculty collaboration and student enrichment. For example, in a middle school, the traditional instructional day ends at 3:00 p.m., students board buses at 3:20, and the teachers' contractual day ends at 3:30. The faculty may decide to extend the instructional day until 3:10. By teaching an extra ten minutes for nine days in a row, they "bank" ninety minutes. On the tenth day, instruction stops at 1:30, and the entire faculty has collaborative team time for two hours. The students remain on campus and are engaged in clubs, enrichment activities, assemblies, and so on, sponsored by a variety of parent and community partners and cosupervised by the school's nonteaching staff.

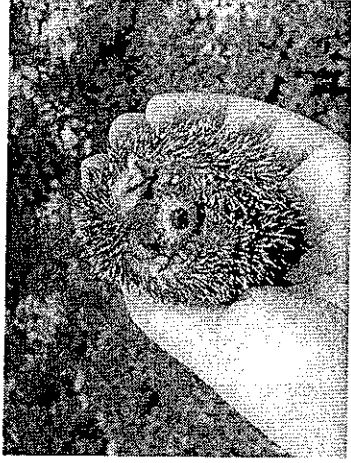
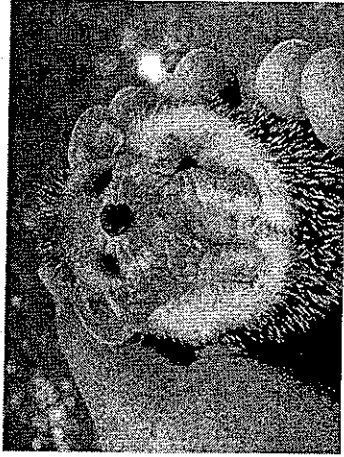
In-Service and Faculty Meeting Time

Schedule extended time for teams to work together on staff development days and during faculty meeting time. Rather than requiring staff to attend a traditional whole-staff in-service session or sit in a faculty meeting while directives and calendar items are read aloud, shift the focus and use of these days and meetings so members of teams have extended time to learn with and from each other.

For more ideas on making time for collaboration from successful PLC schools, visit allthingsplc.info and select "Evidence of Effectiveness."

Baby Porcupines

Have you ever seen a baby porcupine?



Fable of the porcupine:

It was the coldest winter ever and many animals died because of the cold. Some porcupines, realizing the gravity of the situation, decided to group together to share warmth. This way they were better covered and protected; however - the quills of each one wounded their closest companions. After a while they decided to distance themselves one from the other and soon after they began to die, alone and frozen. So they had to make a choice: either accept the quills of their companions or disappear from the Earth. Wisely, they decided to go back to being together. They learned to accept the little wounds that were caused by these close relationships, in order to benefit from what their companions offered. It was this way that they were able to survive and thrive.

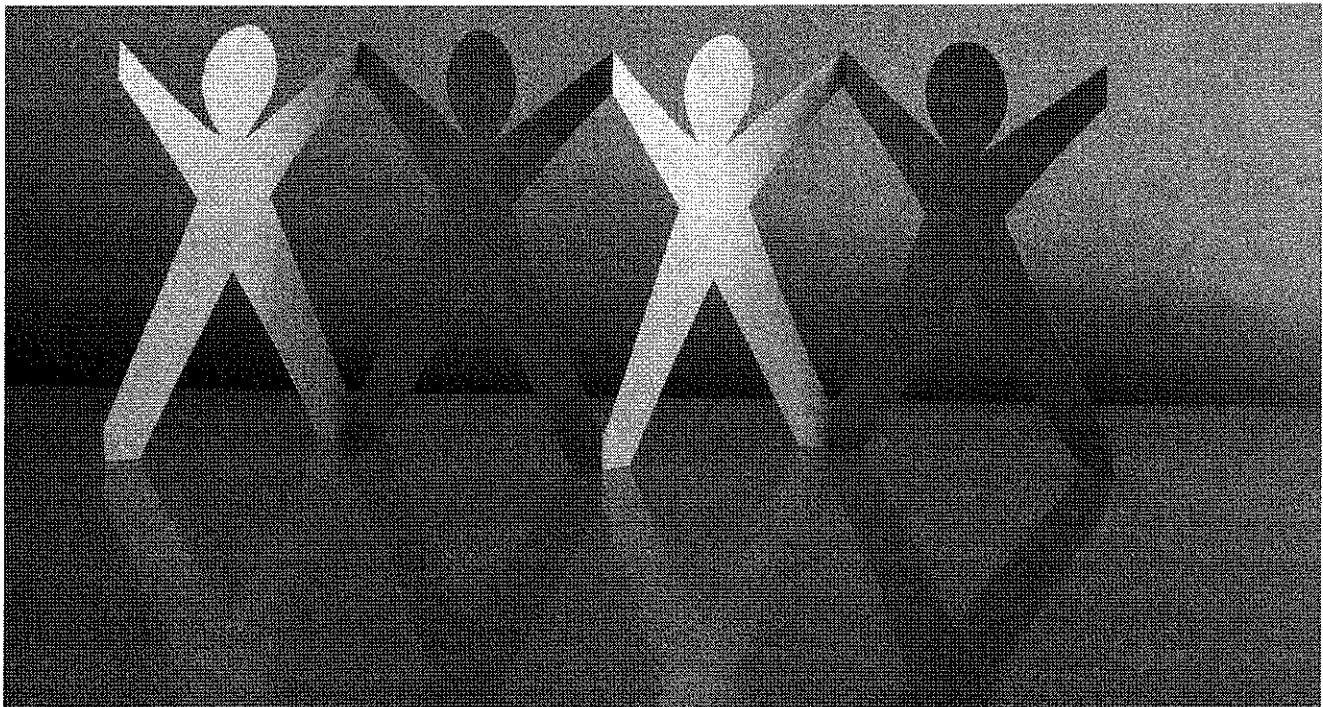
Moral of the story:

The best relationships are not ones that bring together perfect beings, but are instead ones where individuals learn to live with the imperfections of others and can still accept the gifts they have to offer.

Work Together But Only if You Want To

We cannot waste another quarter century inviting or encouraging educators to collaborate.

By Rick DuFour



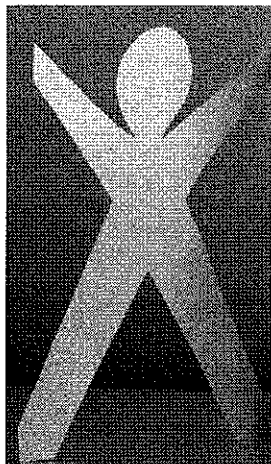
Thinkstock/Stockphoto

Teachers work in isolation from one another. They view their classrooms as their personal domains, have little access to the ideas or strategies of their colleagues, and prefer to be left alone rather than engage with their colleagues or principals. Their professional practice is shrouded in a veil of privacy and personal autonomy and is not a subject for collective discussion or analysis. Their schools offer no infrastructure to sup-

RICK DUFOUR is an education author and consultant on the implementation of the professional learning community concept in districts and schools. © 2011, Rick DuFour.

port collaboration or continuous improvement, and, in fact, the very structure of their schools serves as a powerful force for preserving the status quo. This situation will not change by merely encouraging teachers to collaborate, but will instead require embedding professional collaboration in the routine practice of the school.

Sound familiar? These were the conclusions of John Goodlad's study of schooling published in *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1983. Unfortunately, these findings have been reiterated in countless studies from that date to the present. The reason for the persistence of this professional isolation — not merely of teach-



I simply cannot find any dictionary that defines a professional as someone who can do whatever he or she pleases.

ers, but of educators in general — is relatively simple. The structure and culture of the organizations in which they work haven't supported, required, or even expected them to collaborate.

Attempts to promote collaboration among educators inevitably collide with this tradition of isolation. Defenders of this tradition argue that professional autonomy gives each educator the freedom to opt in or out of any collaborative process. *Requiring* educators to work together violates their right as professionals to work in isolation and can result only in "contrived congeniality" rather than a true collaborative culture (Hargreaves 1991). Some critics of systematic collaboration even offer a conspiracy theory, arguing that any effort to embed collaborative processes into the school day represents an administrative ploy to compel teachers to do the bidding of others and demonstrates a lack of commitment to empowering teachers. Thus proponents of volunteerism greet any attempt to ensure that educators work together with the addendum, "but only if they want to."

I've searched for the dictionary that defines "professional" as one who is free to do as he or she chooses. I can't find it. I see references to occupations in which people must engage in specialized training in order to enter the field and are expected

to stay current in the practices of the field. I see references to expertise and to an expectation that members will adhere to certain standards and an ethical code of conduct. I simply cannot find any dictionary that defines a professional as someone who can do whatever he or she pleases.

PROFESSIONAL DOESN'T MEAN AUTONOMOUS


Time spent in collaboration with colleagues is considered essential to success in most professions. When professional airline pilots prepare to take off, they coordinate their work with air traffic control. If the tower informs a pilot that he or she is to move to runway 24L and be fourth in line for takeoff, the pilot does not, as a professional, have the autonomy to declare, "I prefer runway 25 and I refuse to wait." He or she is not merely expected, but is actually *required* to work interdependently with others to achieve the common goal of a safe takeoff.

The law firm that represented our school district when I was superintendent required all of its attorneys to meet on a weekly basis to review the issues and strategies of various

cases assigned to individual members. Each attorney presented the facts of the case and his or her thoughts on how to proceed. The others offered advice, suggested relevant precedents, and shared their experience and insights. Attending the meetings was not optional. One might say this law firm *coerced* its members to attend. The firm, however, believed that all of its clients should have the benefit of the collective expertise of the entire firm, not merely the single attorney to whom the case had been assigned.

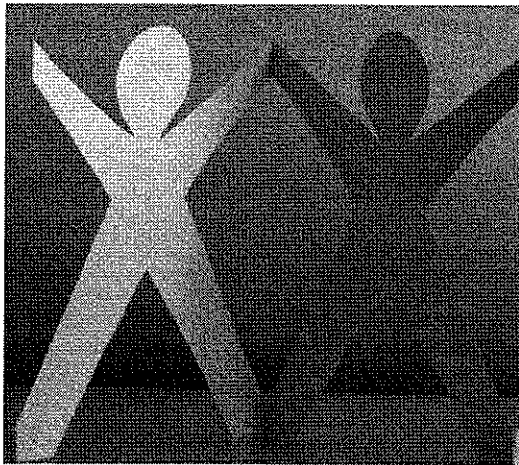
When our school district underwent a major construction project, the professionals engaged in the project always worked as a team. Each week, architects, engineers, and the construction manager convened in a collaborative meeting to make certain they were pursuing a common objective according to their established plan. They monitored progress toward clearly defined benchmarks and observed agreed-on protocols for identifying and solving problems. The meetings were not optional, and it might be said that members were *compelled* to be there.

When I went for a comprehensive physical examination, a doctor who reviewed one of the tests initially recommended that I undergo an immediate angioplasty. The hospital protocol, however, *demand*ed that his recommendation be reviewed by two specialists. Those specialists examined the data from the


Deepen your understanding of this article with questions and activities on page PD 13 of this month's *Kappan Professional Development Discussion Guide* by Lois Brown Easton, free to members in the digital edition at kappanmagazine.org.

test, but they also sought additional information. Based on that information, the team concluded that the procedure was not necessary as long as I engaged in alternative treatments.

In each of these instances, the professional is expected to collaborate with others. In fact, collaborating effectively with others is a condition for membership in their profession. Certainly, they will spend a great deal of their time working individually and autonomously. The pilot will work in isolation during some portions of a flight. A lawyer in the courtroom must be able to respond to the immediate situation. The engineers, architects, and construction managers return to their individual realms to work at their respective tasks in the joint effort to complete their project. And the cardiologist will make decisions based on his or her individual judgment



when in the operating room. In every case, however, these professionals are required to work with others on a regular basis, and a structure is created to ensure that they do so.

When schools are organized to support the collaborative culture of a professional learning community, classroom teachers continue to have tremendous latitude. Throughout most of their workday and work week they labor in their individual classrooms as they attempt to meet the needs of each student. But the school will also embed processes into the routine practice of its professionals to ensure that they co-labor in a coordinated and systematic effort to support the students they serve. Like the professionals described above, they work interdependently in the pursuit of common purposes and goals. They share their expertise with one another and make that expertise available to all of the students served by the team. They establish clear benchmarks and agreed-on measures to monitor progress. They gather and jointly examine information regarding student learning to make more informed decisions and to enhance their practice. They will not have the opportunity to

opt out, because the entire structure of the school will be designed to ensure that they collaborate with their colleagues.

THE WEIGHT OF THE EVIDENCE

Professionals make decisions based on the evidence of the most promising strategy for meeting the needs of those they serve. In a profession, evidence trumps appeals to mindless precedent (“This is how I have always done it”) or personal preference (“This is how I like to do it”). So, let’s apply the standard of the “weight of the evidence” to the question, “Do schools best serve their students when educators work collaboratively or when each educator can elect to work in isolation?”

Professional organizations. Almost all of the professional organizations in education, including the Na-

There is abundant research linking higher levels of student achievement to educators who work in the collaborative culture of a professional learning community.

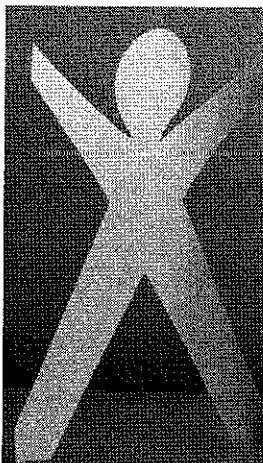
tional Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, have specifically endorsed the premise that educators should work collaboratively. In addition, advocacy organizations, such as the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF), also call on educators to work as members of a professional learning community. NCTAF’s president wrote:

Quality teaching is not an individual accomplishment, it is the result of a collaborative culture that empowers teachers to team up to improve student learning beyond what any of them can achieve alone. . . . The idea that a single teacher, working alone, can know and do everything to meet the diverse learning needs of 30 students every day throughout the school year has rarely worked, and it certainly won’t meet the needs of learners in years to come. (Carroll 2009: 13)

Principals have been advised by their professional organizations that one of their key responsibilities and a core strategy for improving student achievement is building the capacity of staff to work as members of a collaborative professional learning commu-

nity. When advocating collaboration, neither principal nor teacher professional associations have added the caveat, "but only if each person wants to."

Research. There is abundant research linking higher levels of student achievement to educators who work in the collaborative culture of a professional learning community. A recent study of schools and districts that doubled student achievement concluded, "it should be no surprise that one result of



Can we agree that an individual's desire to work in isolation does not trump the professional's obligation to apply what is considered the most effective practice in his or her field?

the multiplicity of activities was a collaborative, professional school culture. . . what is commonly called a 'professional learning community' today" (Odden and Archibald 2009: 78). A study of the best school systems in the world found that schools in those systems focused on providing the "high-quality, collaborative, job-focused professional development" characteristic of "professional learning communities" in which teachers work together to help each other improve classroom practice (Barber and Mourshed 2009: 30). The most comprehensive study of factors affecting schooling ever conducted concluded that the most powerful strategy for helping students learn at higher levels was ensuring that teachers work collaboratively in teams to establish the essential learnings all students must acquire, to gather evidence of student learning through an ongoing assessment process, and to use the evidence of student learning to discuss, evaluate, plan, and improve their instruction (Hattie 2009).

A useful exercise for a school or district that claims its purpose and priority is to help students learn at high levels is to gather all the evidence faculty can find that supports the idea that students learn better if educators work in isolation. At the same time, gather all the evidence that students learn at higher levels when educators work as members of collaborative teams. The web site www.allthingsplc.info provides specific quotes from organizations and researchers who have concluded that a collaborative school culture raises student achievement. I'm un-

able to include research indicating students learn at higher levels when educators work in isolation, because I'm unaware of any.

If the group determines that the preponderance of evidence indicates the school will be more successful if its members work together rather than in isolation, then structures should be created to support collaboration, and all members of the staff should be required to participate. An individual's desire to work

in isolation does not trump a professional's obligation to apply what is considered the most effective practice in his or her field.

The fact that schools create the infrastructure to ensure educators work as members of collaborative teams does not preclude those educators from forming additional, voluntary collaborative communities. Many educators use technology to form virtual communities based on common interests. However, these voluntary communities

should not substitute for school structures and cultures in which working together interdependently is the norm.

ONLY ON WHAT WE WANT

A corollary to the volunteerism argument is that if educators work in collaborative teams, each team must have the autonomy to determine the focus of its work. The issue is presented as a question of power — who will have the authority to decide what we will collaborate about. In a mature profession united in a joint effort to best meet the needs of those it serves, the more relevant questions are: Can we agree that the purpose of our collaboration is to improve our professional practice and the learning of our students? Do we recognize that we must resolve certain critical questions if we are to accomplish that purpose? Can we demonstrate the discipline to focus on the right work?

FOCUSING ON THE RIGHT WORK

Collaboration is a means to an end. Collaboration alone will not improve a school, and in a toxic school culture, providing educators with time to collaborate is likely to reinforce the negative aspects of the culture and deteriorate into complaint sessions. Team meetings that focus on the deficiencies of students, better strategies for punishing students who wear hats, or determining who will pick up the field trip forms will not improve student achievement; however, in many schools topics like these dominate

the discussion. Providing educators with structures and time to support collaboration will not improve schools unless that time is focused on the right work.

What is the right work? As members of collaborative teams, educators in a PLC work collectively to develop a guaranteed and viable curriculum to ensure that students have access to the same essential knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned. The team gathers ongoing information regarding the learning of their students through a comprehensive, balanced assessment process that includes common formative assessments developed by the team. The team then jointly analyzes the evidence of student learning from the assessments and uses the information to improve the professional practice of individual members and collective effectiveness of the team. As members look at actual evidence of student proficiency in the knowledge and skills the team has deemed essential, on an assessment the team has agreed is valid, they are able to learn from one another and continually enhance their ability to meet the needs of their students.

Finally, in a professional learning community, the school creates a *systematic* process that ensures that students who are struggling receive additional time and support for learning. Rather than continuing with the education lottery, where what happens when a student experiences difficulty will depend almost solely on the individual teacher to whom that student is assigned, the school will create a multi-tiered, coordinated, and collective response to support that student.

Schools committed to higher levels of learning for both students and adults will not be content with the fact that a structure is in place to ensure that educators meet on a regular basis. They will recognize that the question, "What will we collaborate about," is so vital that it cannot be left to the discretion of each team. Educators in these schools will collectively identify the right work and then create processes to support teams as they focus their efforts on those matters that improve student learning.

POWERFUL CONCEPTS CAN BE APPLIED BADLY

The concept of a collaborative culture of a professional learning community is powerful, but like all powerful concepts, it can be applied badly. Schools can create artificial, rather than meaningful and relevant, teams. Educators can make excuses for low student achievement rather than develop strategies to improve student learning. Teams can concentrate on matters unrelated to student learning. Getting along can be a greater priority than getting results. Administrators can micro-manage the process in ways that do not build collective capacity, or they can attempt to hold teams accountable for collaborating

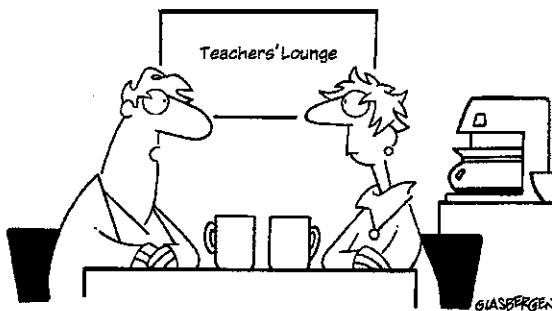
while failing to provide the time, support, parameters, resources, and clarity that are crucial to the success of teams.

Creating a PLC is fraught with difficulty, but that doesn't mean educators should reject the concept or allow individuals to opt out. If they are to be members of a *profession*, educators must work together in good faith to develop their collective capacity to implement this powerful concept effectively.

More than a quarter century has passed since Goodlad warned that overcoming the tradition of teacher isolation will require more than an invitation. We must do more than exhort people to work together. In order to establish schools in which interdependence and collaboration are the new norm, we must create the structures and cultures that *embed* collaboration in the routine practice of our schools, ensure that the collaborative efforts focus on the right work, and support educators as they build their capacity to work together rather than alone. ■

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"Daydreaming is a serious problem in my classroom. I can't stop thinking about retirement, summer vacation, winter break, snow days . . ."

The Journey to Becoming a Professional Learning Community

Keating, Eaker, DuFour, DuFour

- **Clarify “What is a professional learning community?”**
 - Build shared knowledge of PLC characteristics and their links to research of effective schooling practices.
 - Build shared knowledge of the current reality in our district/school.
 - Develop a guiding coalition.
 - Establish a common vocabulary.

- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**

- **Why establish a professional learning community?**
 - Articulate a moral purpose.
 - Commit to ensuring high levels of learning for all – students and adults alike.

- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**

- **Build the foundation for a professional learning community.**
 - Mission – Develop a clear understanding of our core purpose.
 - Vision – Describe the district/school we hope to become and what it would look like if we really meant it.
 - Collective Commitments – Articulate attitudes, behaviors, and commitments we must demonstrate in order to advance our vision.
 - Goals - Determine first steps, short-term achievable goals, and long-term stretch goals.

- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**

- **Align district/school policies, practices, and procedures with the learning mission.**
 - Develop an action plan.
 - Communicate priorities through:
 - Developing systemic procedures
 - Monitoring
 - Modeling
 - Asking the right questions
 - Allocating resources to support the learning mission
 - Celebrating
 - Confronting

- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**

- **Build collaborative teams that focus on learning.**
 - Embed collaboration into the routine practices of the district/school.
 - Provide time for teams to collaborate.

- Maintain team focus on the critical questions of learning.
 - Clarify the products that teams will be expected to generate.
 - Establish the norms of collaboration.
 - Ensure team members work interdependently to achieve common SMART goals for which they are mutually accountable.
 - Engage in ongoing collective inquiry into best practice and current reality.
- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**
- **Focus on learning.**
 - All teams will:
 - Clarify what each student is expected to learn – the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions – of each course or subject, unit-by-unit.
 - Monitor each student’s learning on a timely basis through the use of frequent, common formative assessments.
- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**
- **Set aside systematic time and support for learning – intervention and enrichment.**
 - Identify students who need additional time and support or enrichment.
 - Create systems to ensure students receive additional time and support if they are not learning.
 - Provide timely intervention rather than sluggish remediation.
 - *Direct* rather than *invite* students to participate in intervention.
 - Create systems to ensure students receive the additional time and support according to a schoolwide plan rather than at the discretion of individual teachers.
 - Create systems to ensure students receive enrichment and extension when they are proficient.
- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**
- **Focus on results to inform and improve professional practice.**
 - Each team will analyze evidence of student learning to:
 - Inform and improve professional practice of each member.
 - Identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning.
 - Share effective instructional practices.
 - Support members as they implement more effective practices.
 - Gather new data to assess the impact of new practices.
 - Identify professional development needs.
- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**
- **Facilitate adult learning.**
 - Provide staff with the training, support, and resources to implement best practice.
 - Ensure that staff development is linked to student learning goals.
 - Foster ongoing, job-embedded learning into every position.

- Create systems for frequent and public recognition of improvement – individually and collectively.
- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**
- **Strive for continuous improvement.**
 - Establish SMART goals to drive the work of teams.
 - Align team goals with school goals and school goals with district goals.
 - Ensure every individual receives frequent and timely feedback on the level of his or her effectiveness compared to other members of his or her team.
- **Celebrate your progress on the PLC journey.**