

## **Building a Culture That Will Maximize and Sustain the Impact of Professional Learning Communities**

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Many schools have begun to implement professional learning communities (PLCs) by building time into the schedule for teachers and administrators to meet each week, introducing professional development opportunities regarding the use of student data to inform instruction, and possibly even requiring the submission of meeting minutes so that administrators can monitor progress toward goals and ensure some degree of accountability. There is an abundance of research that indicates the power of PLCs in improving student achievement. In spite of valiant efforts to implement this best practice, many schools are not experiencing the anticipated gains. Richard Dufour and Michael Fullan (2013) wrote a book called, *Cultures Built to Last: Systemic PLCs at Work*, which describes the importance of building a culture that will sustain the positive impact of PLCs, and doing so with a systems approach. This research brief will outline the work of Dufour and Fullan (2013), Anthony Bryk (2010) and Daniel Pink (2011) in order to address commonly asked questions, including “What is a professional learning community, what is an effective structure for communities of practice between schools, what are some of the barriers to successful PLCs, and how can leaders cultivate a school culture that will support and sustain PLCs?”

### **What is a Professional Learning Community?**

According to Dufour and Fullan (2013), there are certain characteristics that define an effective PLC:

- Shared mission (purpose), vision (clear direction), values and goals (indicators, timelines and targets) which are all directed toward student learning
- A collaborative culture
- Incorporation of best practice in the context of the current reality
- Focus on action
- Cycle of continuous improvement
- Results orientation

The work should be focused on four critical questions that guide the discussions of professional learning communities:

- What do we want our students to learn? What knowledge, skills and dispositions do we expect them to acquire as a result of this unit, course and grade level?
- How will we know if each student is learning each of the essential skills?
- How will we respond when some of our students do not learn? What process will we put in place to ensure students receive extra time and support for learning when needed?
- How will we enrich and extend learning for those students who are already proficient?

Educators learn together through discussing these key questions and making decisions about how teaching and learning will happen. Leaders must be participants in two-way discussions of these questions, hear and respond to questions and uncertainties, be patient with those taking longer to buy-in and must clearly communicate expectations.

Even if the six characteristics of an effective PLC are present, and participants are focusing on asking the right questions, leaders play a significant role in terms of providing guidance with regard to some of the key questions that will inevitably surface through this work. Unfortunately, these are the questions that have no easy answers. “Leaders at all levels should be prepared to provide clear and consistent answers to the following questions:

- What are the essential knowledge, skills and dispositions our students must acquire?
- What assessment processes will we use to gather evidence of student learning?
- What does the evidence of student learning reveal about the effectiveness of different educational practices?
- Who on our team is getting better results in an important area of student learning, and what can we learn from this teammate?
- Which students need additional time and support to help them acquire essential knowledge and skills?
- How will we provide those students with additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, precise, diagnostic, directive and systematic?
- Which students need enrichment and extension of their learning because they have already demonstrated proficiency?
- What are the areas in which our students consistently struggle, and what is our theory about why these skills or concepts are proving difficult for them?
- What do we need to learn individually and collectively to improve upon our ability to help students succeed?
- What action research can we initiate to test the impact of our own learning?” (Dufour & Fullan, 2013, p. 70).

In order to have a significant impact, the PLC process must be driving decisions and change in systems larger than individual schools. Entire districts must buy-in and begin to change the way things are done. Dufour and Fullan encourage schools to think even bigger by connecting with other districts across the state and the nation. Because professional learning communities refer to a process, not a program, the benefits come when teachers and administrators learn the process deeply and it becomes ingrained in the culture of the school. It is important that each person in the system understands their own role and responsibility in moving the school toward its goals. Each person must be a change agent and do what is needed to begin to change “business as usual.”

With so many pressing issues, teachers and administrators are often completely overwhelmed and sometimes even frozen in terms of knowing what to do next. A lack of focus tends to water down efforts and lead to initiative fatigue. We are only human and can only manage a certain amount all at once. Although the tendency is to tackle everything, or when something doesn’t lead to quick results, to change to another goal, a laser-like focus on a few key goals is required to establish efforts that are sustainable over the long-term and that will actually make positive change.

### **What are the different types and functions of PLCs within and between schools?**

PLCs have more potential to have a significant and sustained impact when the process is implemented within the context of an entire system. Ideally, similar districts should be working together in communities of practice toward common goals. Communities of practice, or professional learning communities between schools, enable individuals from many different contexts to collaborate and learn from each other as they work toward a common goal (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, 2010). This type of collaboration across settings has the potential for innovation and powerful learning opportunities.

Communities of practice are intentionally formed social organizations that have parameters for who can join, such as principals of urban high schools or elementary teachers in rural schools in the Capital District. The specific strategies and execution of those strategies can look different in each school setting, but the group can learn from the efforts and experiences of others. According to Bryk et al (2010), shared measureable targets help the group stay focused on what matters. “They catalyze discussions among participants as to why we should attend to this rather than to that” (p. 11). They demand argument about what is likely to afford immediate progress, and therefore introduce some discipline in priority setting.

A program improvement map that considers all of the microsystems within a school is developed by the group, so as to address change on all necessary levels. Next, an additional tool called a driver diagram, is developed in order to specify the targets, primary drivers and secondary drivers. In other words, how will we take action to meet the larger goal we have set as a group? Just as with PLCs within a school, communities of practice between schools enters into a cycle of continuous improvement by planning, doing, studying and acting. As each individual school implements the designated strategies, all of the other schools learn from the experience about what may or may not work in their own settings.

### **What are some of the challenges in implementing successful PLCs?**

Changing the culture of an organization is definitely possible, but does not come easily. There are many reasons why changing the culture is so challenging:

- PLCs change the way everyone in the school relate to and communicate with each other
- When a group of people convenes to discuss and attempt to solve a complicated issue, it is sure to create conflict
- Building a culture is complex and multi-faced, so administrators must be skilled at dividing their time and resources
- There is no one prescribed way to develop a positive culture. Leaders must use data and reflection within a cycle of continuous improvement to keep moving in a positive direction
- The “cycle” of continuous improvement never ends, and therefore, the work is never done

There is a danger that schools will implement PLCs as a “program” and be looking for a quick fix to the many complex problems they are facing. In this case, PLCs will be viewed as “the latest thing” and will be quickly replaced by another initiative. In addition, being part of an effective learning community is something that is new to most people, and requires a deep understanding of the process. People must be committed to learning together and must not be afraid to make mistakes along the way.

There must be an understanding of the big picture in terms of how PLCs fit in with the many other programs that come and go. This is necessary in order to develop a coordinated, sustained approach. Using a balanced leadership approach is essential in creating a culture that supports PLCs. When there are multiple issues to be addressed and immediate change is desired, as so often is the case in schools, many leaders adopt a leadership style that focuses on accountability, technology, the talent of individual teachers and many fragmented strategies with little or no understanding of the big picture. A culture that supports the work of PLCs requires a focus on capacity building, the quality of the group, instruction and a focus on the entire school system. To achieve reform of the entire system, leaders must make the right drivers the focus of the work.

### **Building the foundation**

Why is it that professional learning communities have much more success in some schools than in others? A certain type of culture must be developed that will allow the PLC process to take off. Culture refers to “the way we do business around here,” and helps people make sense of their complex environments. Structural change can be mandated, but cultural change is a lengthy, slow process that must include acknowledging and changing the assumptions, beliefs and expectations that are ingrained in the fabric of the school (Dufour & Fullan, p. 2).

*Trust.* Trust is an essential feature of the school culture. Trust is not something that just appears – trust is built, one brick at a time. Leaders can encourage the strengthening of trust by ensuring that these four conditions exist: social respect, personal regard, self-efficacy and role competence, and personal integrity. Data must be used to encourage others and improve results, not to disparage and punish colleagues.

*Engagement.* In addition to cultivating trust between everyone in the system, leaders must ensure that there buy-in. “Effective change involves developing an engaging process that draws people into something that the vast majority of people find worthwhile while the number of skeptics becomes smaller and smaller” (Dufour & Fullan, 2013, p. 33). According to Steven Covey (1989), without involvement in decision-making process, people will not be committed to the goals. Leaders must find a healthy balance between autonomy and direction, coordination and accountability.

*Central Office Leadership.* Since the largest-ever study of superintendents conducted by Marzano and Waters (2009), we now understand that there is a significant relationship between central office leadership and student achievement. Central office support is crucial with regard to PLCs so that other schools in a district are able to learn from an effective school. This support and leadership also helps to sustain a commitment to continuous improvement, even with staff turnover and the passage of time.

*Engaging Learning Environments.* Learning environments must be critically reviewed and analyzed with the goal of creating new and engaging classrooms. Dufour and Fullan also suggest that classrooms should include study of real-life problems so that students can learn about their world and how they can contribute.

When schools make the decision to incorporate professional learning communities into their schedules, they are starting down a path that holds much promise. This best practice requires a commitment of time, resources and patience since changing a culture that has been in existence for decades does not happen quickly. With a genuine understanding of the process and the importance of addressing change at a systemic level, schools will begin to see marked improvements in student learning.

## Resources

Bryk, Anthony, Gomez, Louis and Grunow, Alicia. (2010). *Getting Ideas Into Action: Building Networked Improvement Communities in Education*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Stanford, CA.

Dufour, Richard and Fullan, Michael. *Cultures Built to Last: Systemic PLCs at Work*. Solution Tree Press: Bloomington, IN. 2013.

Pink, Daniel. *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Riverhead Press: New York, NY. 2009.