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**Taking the Fear Out of the First Year**

**Professional Learning Communities: School Leaders' Perspectives** *Jennifer Henderson*

**School leaders discuss how they have used professional learning communities to transform teaching practices and boost student achievement.**

You have probably heard the term *professional learning community* (PLC) before, but it is, unfortunately, often used incorrectly. In the article "What Is a Professional Learning Community?" in the May 2004 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Richard DuFour notes that the term has been used "to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education—a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, a national professional organization, and so on. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning."

So what is the true definition of a PLC? On its Web site, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory explains that the term describes "a collegial group of administrators and staff who are united in their commitment to student learning." Administrators and staff work collaboratively to create shared goals, assess student understanding and learning, and improve their own teaching practices.

According to DuFour, a former superintendent and an expert on PLCs, true PLCs follow principles that center on student learning, a culture of collaboration, and results.

**Developing a Collaborative Culture**

As part of a PLC, DuFour explains in his *Educational Leadership* article, schools need to explore crucial questions: What do we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? These questions are best discussed and answered in a collaborative setting in which teachers work in teams to evaluate their own teaching, develop common formative assessments, and analyze student learning.

At first, PLCs can be unsettling for teachers who are used to teaching in isolation. "Most traditional schools encourage teaching in isolation, but with PLCs we encourage collaborative teaching," says Tom Many, superintendent of Kildeer Countryside School District 96 in Buffalo Grove, Ill.

"Once teachers see results, though, resistance tends to melt away," he adds. "We can see steady improvement in learning due to the collaborative culture. As student achievement has improved, so has the collaborative culture."

In Many's district of K–8 schools, expertise is shared throughout the building and across the district. At each school, teachers meet regularly. At the elementary level, teachers are organized by grade level and meet at least twice a week for planning time, and at the middle school level, teachers are organized into interdisciplinary and subject-specific teams that meet daily. The district also has created teams composed of one teacher representative from each grade and subject area so that the teachers can collaborate on identifying outcomes and developing assessment instruments for each content area.

Because of teachers' busy schedules, it is important for administrators to allot specific time for teachers to meet as groups. "It's absolutely immoral to tell teachers they need to collaborate and not give them the time to collaborate," says Mike Mattos, principal at Pioneer Middle School in Tustin, Calif. His school implemented the Late Start Wednesday program, in which students come to school late on Wednesdays (the other days are longer to make up classroom time), allowing teachers time for collaboration.

**Making Student Learning a Priority**

For the PLC approach to be useful, teachers must focus on student learning as the end goal. But agreeing on a unified mission and opening up schoolwide discussion on how to improve student learning are sometimes challenging, says Peter Noonan, chief academic officer for Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia. "I met a lot of resistance at first," he says.

When Noonan was a principal just beginning to develop a PLC for his high school, several teachers pushed back, saying, "We're a really good school. Why are you asking us to do something different?" Noonan recalls. When the teachers looked closely at the data, Noonan says they determined that they were meeting the needs of a lot of their students but started to ask, "How do we meet the needs of *every*kid? How do we become great?" By looking at their work differently, teachers were able to set new goals for student achievement.

**Focusing on Accountability and Assessment**

Chris Weber, former principal of R.H. Dana Elementary in Dana Point, Calif., says that he found that assessment data helped his teachers identify struggling students. While working in collaborative groups, they use the assessment data to identify students' needs and develop strategies for addressing these issues.

Teachers find it encouraging to see student improvement. "When you start noticing children having success due to your efforts, that builds confidence," says Weber.

At the same time, though, it can be hard to face reality if students are failing, says Mattos. "When you start to look at common assessment data and some of your kids aren't learning, it's painful," he says. "It takes a change of mind-set to realize that sometimes great teachers do great lessons that don't quite click with kids. It's a measure, instead, of how kids learn and not a measure of if you're a good teacher or not. It's one of the things all PLCs struggle with."

**Persistence Pays Off**

In the article "A Review of Research on the Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Teaching Practice and Student Learning" in the January 2008 issue of *Teaching and Teacher Education*, authors Vicki Vescio, Dorene Ross, and Alyson Adams stated, "when teachers participate in a learning community, students benefit as well, as indicated by improved achievement scores over time."

Indeed, PLCs can make a difference in learning and teaching. Since developing its PLCs, Pioneer Middle School, where Mattos is principal, now has the highest state assessment scores of all the middle schools in Orange County, Calif., and ranks in the top 1 percent in the state. "Without question, I feel that implementing PLCs has been the key element in taking us from good to great," says Mattos.

R.H. Dana Elementary's state Academic Performance Index score has improved 100 points since switching to a PLC approach, says Weber. Despite the initial challenges that come with developing a PLC, the reward—improving student learning and developing a collaborative culture—is worth the effort. "When you're achieving the goal of helping the kids, it's an awesome feeling," says Mattos.

**Additional Resources**

All Things PLC: [www.allthingsplc.info](http://www.allthingsplc.info/)

DuFour, R., Eaker, R., DuFour, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

Learning Communities (National Staff Development Council):[www.nsdc.org/standards/learningcommunities.cfm](http://www.nsdc.org/standards/learningcommunities.cfm)

*Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*:[www.allthingsplc.info/pdf/articles/plccommunitiesofcontinuousinquiry.pdf](http://www.allthingsplc.info/pdf/articles/plccommunitiesofcontinuousinquiry.pdf" \t ")

*Sustaining School Improvement: Professional Learning Community*:[www.mcrel.org/PDF/LeadershipOrganizationDevelopment/5031TG\_proflrncommfolio.pdf](http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/LeadershipOrganizationDevelopment/5031TG_proflrncommfolio.pdf)