

Professional Learning Communities:

Essential Principles for Developing Leadership and Promoting Change

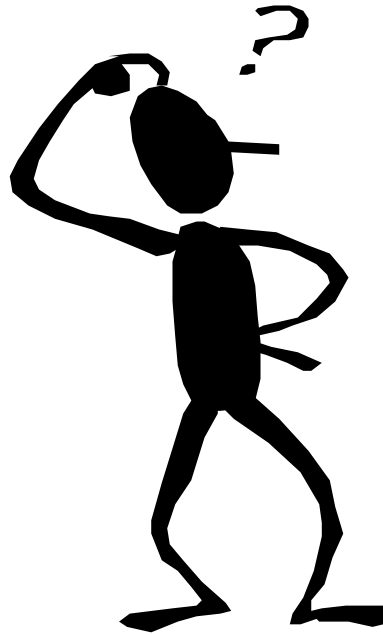


Paul Ketko
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What do you mean . . .

a professional learning community?





A Professional Learning Community...

- ❖ **IS NOT** a prescription.
- ❖ **IS NOT** a new program.
- ❖ **IS** an **infrastructure**, or a way of working together, which results in continuous school improvement.



Framework of a Professional Learning Community (PLC)

(Robert Eaker, Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour: Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities)

- ❖ **A solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, vision, values, and goals**
- ❖ **Collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals**
- ❖ **A focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement**



Shared Mission, Vision, Values, & Goals

Mission/Purpose

- ❖ *“Why do we exist?”*
- ❖ *“What is the core reason our school was created?”*

Vision

- ❖ *“What kind of school do we hope to become?”*

Values

- ❖ *“What collective commitments must we make to move our school in the direction we want it to go?”*
- ❖ *“How must we behave in order to create the kind of school we hope to become?”*

Goals

- ❖ *“What steps are we going to take and when will we take them?”*

“A core characteristic of the professional learning community is an undeviating focus on student learning.”

Shirley Hord, 1997



High-Performing, Collaborative Teams

- ❖ **People at all levels work collaboratively to solve problems and improve learning opportunities.**
- ❖ **Together they seek new knowledge and skills, as well as applying their new learning to their work.**



Results-Oriented Culture

The focus on results forces us to delve deeper and grapple with the questions that drive a PLC:

- ❖ *“If we truly believe all kids can learn, what is it that we want them to learn?”*
- ❖ *“How can we be certain all students have learned it?”*
- ❖ *“How can we respond to assist those students who are not mastering the intended outcomes?”*

“In communities of learning, all teachers and students feel included as full-fledged participants in the school,...take responsibility for the collective life of the school,...

and can count upon one another for help in meeting both individual and collective needs.

Fred M. Newmann



Shifting School Culture

If we think of “school culture” as involving, at least in part, “how we do things around here,” then we need to consider two key questions:

- ❖ **How are things done in a professional learning community as opposed to more traditional schools?**
- ❖ **What cultural shifts need to occur if traditional schools are to become professional learning communities.**



Shifting School Culture

Changing the school culture so that it becomes a PLC involves many elements:

- ❖ Collaboration
- ❖ Developing mission, vision, values, goals
- ❖ Focusing on learning
- ❖ Leadership
- ❖ Focused school improvement plans
- ❖ Celebration
- ❖ Persistence

Shifting School Culture: Collaboration

Traditional Schools	PLC
➤ Teacher Isolation	➤ Collaborative Teams

In a PLC, collaboration is embedded into every aspect of the school culture.

- ❖ Collaborative team members work interdependently to achieve common goals.
- ❖ Collaboration is embedded in routine practices.
- ❖ Time for collaboration is built into the school day and school calendar.
- ❖ Product of collaboration are made explicit.
- ❖ Team norms guide collaboration.
- ❖ Teams pursue specific and measurable performance goals.
- ❖ Teams focus on key questions associated with learning.
- ❖ Teams have access to relevant information.

Shifting School Culture: Mission Statement

Traditional Schools	PLC
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Statements are generic➤ Statements are brief, such as “we believe all children can learn.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Statements clarify what students will learn.➤ Statements address the question, “How will we know what students are learning?”➤ Statements clarify how the school will respond when students do not learn.

If we believe the primary mission of our school is learning, them:

- ❖ What do we expect students to learn?
- ❖ How will we know what students have learned?
- ❖ How will we respond to students who aren't learning?

Shifting School Culture: Vision Statement

Traditional Schools	PLC
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Statements are average opinions.➤ Statements deteriorate into wish lists.➤ Statements are often ignored➤ Statements are often dictated or developed by few.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Statements are research-based.➤ Statements are credible and focus on essentials.➤ Statements are used as a blueprint for improvement.➤ Statements are widely shared through broad collaboration.

The vision describes the school we are seeking to become by describing how excellent programs would look like.

- ❖ The vision forms the basis for school improvement planning, budgeting, and staff development.

Shifting School Culture: Values Statements

Traditional Schools	PLC
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Values are random.➤ Statements are excessive in number.➤ Values are articulated as beliefs.➤ Statements focus on self.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Statements are research-based.➤ Statements are credible and focus on essentials.➤ Statements are used as a blueprint for improvement.➤ Statements are widely shared through broad collaboration.

Must shift from beliefs to behaviours

- ❖ How do we need to behave if we are going to become the kind of school we said we seek to become?
- ❖ Value statements should begin with “we will.”

Shifting School Culture: Goal Statements

Traditional Schools	PLC
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Statements are random.➤ Goals are excessive in number.➤ Goals focus on means rather than ends.➤ Goals are impossible to assess or measure.➤ Goals are not monitored.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Statements are linked to vision.➤ Goals are few in number.➤ Goals focus on desired outcome.➤ Goals are translated into measurable performance standards.➤ Goals are monitored continuously.➤ Goals are designed to produce short-term wins and also stretch aspirations.

When developing goals we ask:

- ❖ What steps are we going to take and when are we going to take them?
- ❖ Why is the a goal?
- ❖ What are we trying to accomplish?



Shifting School Culture: Focus on Learning

Traditional Schools	PLC
➤ Primary focus on teaching	➤ Primary focus on learning

A PLC has deep collaborative decisions about key questions that are associated to learning

- ❖ What exactly do we expect students to learn?
- ❖ How will we know what students are learning?
- ❖ How can we assist and support students in their learning?
- ❖ Based on a collaborative analysis of the results of our efforts, what can we do to improve student learning?
- ❖ How can we recognize and celebrate improvements in student learning?

Shifting School Culture: Curriculum

Traditional Schools	PLC
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Each teacher independently decides what to teach.➤ Curriculum overload is common.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Collaboratively agreed upon curriculum focuses on what students are expected to learn.➤ Reduced content means meaningful content is taught at greater depth.➤ Assessment is developed through collaboration.➤ A plan for responding to students who are not learning is developed through collaboration

There is a collaborative effort to:

- ❖ Reduce content.
- ❖ Focus efforts on less, but more meaningful content.

Shifting School Culture: Collective Inquiry

Traditional Schools	PLC
➤ Discussions about improvement strategies are made by “averaging opinions.”	➤ Decisions are research-based with collaborative teams of teachers seeking out “best practices.”

Teachers in PLC are constantly seeking out “best practices.”

- ❖ They read and discuss books and professional journals.
- ❖ They search the Internet.
- ❖ They attend conferences and workshops.
- ❖ They belong to professional associations
- ❖ The quest for “best practices” is a “collective inquiry.”

Shifting School Culture: Research & Results

Traditional Schools	PLC
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Effectiveness of improvement strategies is externally validated. Teachers rely on others outside the school to identify what works.➤ Emphasis is placed on how teachers like various approaches.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Approaches are internally validated. Teams of teachers try various approaches and collaborate on how the approaches affect student learning.➤ The effect on student learning is the primary basis for assessing various improvement strategies.

Collaborative teams of teachers build a culture of experimentation by engaging in active research.

- ❖ The primary basis for embedding particular practices into the school culture is the effect the practices will have on student learning.

Shifting School Culture: Leadership

Traditional Schools	PLC
<p>➤ Administrators are viewed as being in leadership positions while teachers are viewed as “implementors” or followers.</p>	<p>➤ Administrators are viewed as leaders. Teachers are viewed as transformational leaders.</p>

Teachers are viewed as holding the key leadership positions in a school. Why:

- ❖ If the central purpose of schools is learning, it is the teachers who are in the best position to transform students' lives, motivate and inspire students, and get students to do things they never thought they could do.
- ❖ The principal's role is to promote, protect and defend the school's vision, and values and to confront behaviour that is incongruent with the school's vision and values.



Shifting School Culture: School Improvement Plans

Traditional Schools	PLC
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ School improvement plans focus on a wide variety of things➤ The goal is often to “get the plan turned in.” Then the plan is ignored.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ School improvement plans focus on a few important goals that will affect student learning.➤ The school improvement plan is the vehicle for organized, sustained school improvement.

A key question about any school improvement plan is:

- ❖ If all of the goals in the plan are accomplished, what will be the impact on student achievement?

Shifting School Culture: Celebration

Traditional Schools	PLC
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Celebration is frequent. When teachers are recognized, the celebration almost always focuses on groups.➤ Celebration and recognition occur when students reach an arbitrary standard.➤ Recognition is limited to a few individuals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ School improvement plans focus on a few, important goals that will affect student learning.➤ In addition to celebration and recognition when a standard is met, celebrations recognize improvement.➤ The school works hard to “create” winners and celebrate their successes.➤ Celebrations are linked to the vision and values of the school and improved student achievement

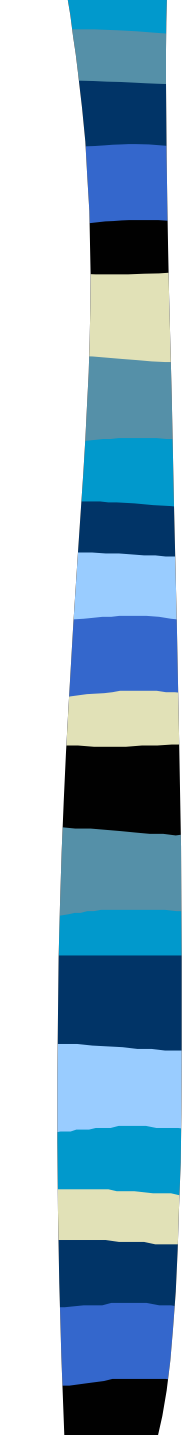
A PLC recognizes its highest achievers and also develops plans to recognize and celebrate improvements that other students are making.

Shifting School Culture: Persistence

Traditional Schools	PLC
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Improvement efforts frequently shift as new fads or trends come along.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ The school is committed to “staying the course” in the attainment of the school vision. New initiatives are only implemented if it is determined that the change will help the school achieve its vision of the future.➤ The leader’s role is to promote, protect and defend the school’s vision and values and to confront behaviour that is incongruent with the school’s vision and values.

A frequent question that is asked is:

- ❖ Will this (change, initiative, program, etc.) move us toward the vision we have for our school?



“Teachers who spend more time collectively studying teaching practices are more effective overall at developing higher-order thinking skills and meeting the needs of diverse learners.”

Darling-Hammond, 1998

Why would we want to create a professional learning community?





Research Base

- ❖ **Rosenholtz, 1989**

Conducted seminal research on how teacher workplace factors affect teaching quality

- ❖ **McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993**

Confirmed the impact of teacher collaboration on learning

- ❖ **Darling-Hammond, 1996**

Emphasized the importance of teacher involvement in shared decision-making and curriculum reform



Staff Benefits

- ❖ Reduced teacher isolation.
- ❖ Collective responsibility for student success.
- ❖ Increased understanding of the roles teachers play in helping all students achieve.
- ❖ More satisfaction, higher morale, less absenteeism.

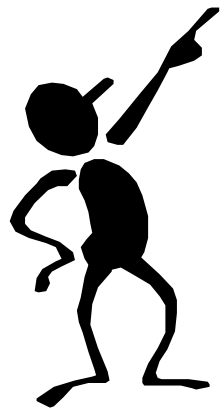


Student Benefits

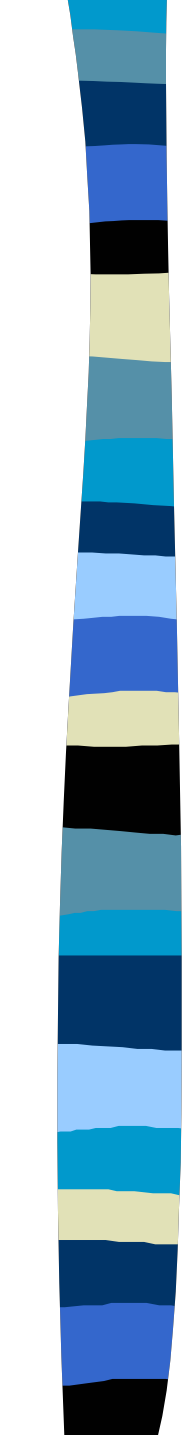
- ❖ Decreased dropout rate.
- ❖ Less absenteeism.
- ❖ Raises the Bar: Greater academic gains in comparison to traditional schools.
- ❖ Closes the Gap: Smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds.

What difference does it make?

“Teachers in professional learning communities are more likely to be consistently well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired so that they inspire students.”



Hord, S. (1997). *“Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement”*.
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory



“If you always do what you’ve always done, then you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.”

- Nick Lezzi
Philadelphia Electric Company

What can I do to nurture a professional learning community?





First Things First

The four main priorities for leaders when building a PLC are:

- ❖ Focus on learning.
- ❖ Focus on collaborative culture.
- ❖ Focus on results.
- ❖ Provide timely, relevant information.



PLC Priority One: Focus on Learning

- ❖ **The very fundamental purpose of our school is learning.**
- ❖ **Questions to consider when building a PLC:**
 - ❖ Does every teacher understand what each student should know and be able to do after completing the unit of instruction, course, and grade level?
 - ❖ What systems are in place to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis?
 - ❖ What happens when a student is not learning? How does the school respond?
 - ❖ What systems are in place to provide these students with additional time and support?



PLC Priority Two: Focus on Collaborative Culture

The challenge facing leaders is providing the focus, time, and parameters critical to effective teamwork.

- ❖ What is the nature of teams in our school?
- ❖ How are these teams organized?
- ❖ When do the teams meet?
- ❖ Are teams given time for collaboration during the school day?
- ❖ Do team conversations focus on questions that will improve student achievements?
- ❖ Does the team guide its work by protocols or norms that team members have created and endorsed?
- ❖ Are teams asked to assess their effectiveness? If so, on what basis do they make the assessments?



PLC Priority Three: Focus on Results

When focusing on results leaders ask:

- ❖ What is the current reality regarding student achievement in our school? (Can we paint a picture of that reality with data? Are the data widely understood by staff? Do we have a clear picture of the school we are attempting to become?)
- ❖ Is this vision of the desired future for our school widely shared throughout the staff?
- ❖ Have we made commitments regarding what each of us is prepared to do to move the school in the desired directions?
- ❖ Have we translated our schoolwide vision into SMART goals for the school?
- ❖ Has each team identified the SMART goals it is pursuing to help the school advance toward its vision?



PLC Priority Three: Focus on Results

❖ SMART Goals

Strategic and specific

Measurable

Attainable

Results-oriented

Time-bound



PLC Priority Four:

Provide Timely, Relevant Information

- ❖ **The best staff development occurs not in workshops, but in the workplace when teachers come together and learn with from another.**
- ❖ **Leaders must ensure teachers have:**
 - ❖ **A systematic support system to help them with students who were struggling.**
 - ❖ **A clear focus on what students were to learn.**
 - ❖ **Insightful feedback on the performance of their students.**
 - ❖ **Colleagues to help them develop their professional capacity.**
 - ❖ **Time to work with those colleagues.**



PLC Priority Four:

Provide Timely, Relevant Information

Schools that hope to become PLCs will focus on the following questions:

- ❖ Does every teacher receive timely, relevant feedback on the achievement of his or her students in comparison to other, comparable students attempting to meet the same standard?
- ❖ How do teachers use this information?
- ❖ Do teachers come together as a team to identify and celebrate strengths in student learning and to identify areas that need additional attention?
- ❖ Are teachers working together to support one another in seeking ways to improve individual and team results?
- ❖ Does a teacher who may be struggling have someone he or she can talk to, a support system to help him or her grow and learn?



Principals must be driven by this question:

“What can I do to help teachers develop their full potential as professionals so that collectively we can be more effective in meeting the needs of our children?”

- Richard DuFour



Coming together
is a beginning,

staying together
is progress,

and working together
is success.

- Henry Ford

