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PLC Defined

Have you ever wondered . . .

- Why is teacher professional development often ineffective?
- What would it take to improve teacher professional development?
- What would it take to improve student learning?
- What does professional learning look like that is contextually specific?
- Why can't professional development be more closely related to the problems or dilemmas I face in my classroom?

Have you ever thought . . .

- Why did I just sit in a three-day workshop about something I already know?
- Why did I just sit in a three-day workshop about something that is too difficult to do in my classroom?

Have you ever asked a colleague . . .

- How did you do that?
- Can I have a copy of your . . .?
- What can I do about . . .?

Finally, have you ever looked at an exemplary teacher and wondered why others didn't know the same strategies? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then a professional learning community (PLC) is likely a place for you.

WHAT IS A PLC?

In schools today, teachers seem constantly challenged to solve problems that someone else identifies and implement endless changes advocated by those outside the four walls of the classroom—administrators, politicians, consultants, federal and state departments of education, researchers, and the list goes on and on. While teachers have gained insights into their practices from these groups, teacher voices have typically been absent from these larger conversations about how to approach solving persisting teaching and student learning problems. PLCs, when well done, allow teachers to collaboratively untangle some of the complexities associated with student learning that occur within their school buildings and classrooms. The approach allows educators to proactively solve their own dilemmas rather than waiting for others to mandate solutions to these problems that may or may not be effective or appropriate. In sum, a PLC can be defined as a group of educators who are collaboratively engaged in contextually specific learning by raising questions that are relevant to their local context and working together to answer those questions.

To better understand what a PLC is, it's often useful to start with what a PLC is not. First and foremost, a PLC cannot be delivered as a workshop. For many years, educators have learned what effective professional learning does and does not look like. The research has clearly demonstrated that the "sit and get" workshop model of professional development still exists. In the workshop model, outside experts introduce new strategies, approaches, and pedagogy, and then teachers are expected to return to their classrooms and independently implement the new knowledge. The workshop model, when used in isolation, is not effective in changing classroom practice (Desimone, 2009; Showers & Joyce, 1995).

In contrast, PLCs situate the focus on professional learning within an ongoing community of support. The PLC honors the expertise within the school community. Just like the name entails, PLCs bring groups of educators together to *learn*. Over 40 years ago, Goldhammer (1969) emphasized the need for opportunities to help teachers understand what they are doing and why, by changing schools from places where teachers just act out "age old rituals" to places where teachers participate fully in the learning process for their own professional growth. Nolan and Huber (1989) described successful professional development programs as "making a difference in the lives and instruction of teachers who participate in them, as well as the lives of the students they teach" (p. 143). More recently, in the *Journal of Staff Development*, educators from across the country put forth their vision for "The Road Ahead" for professional learning. These ideas included the importance of creating activities, tools, and contexts that blend theory and practice (Darling-Hammond, 2007); supporting collaborative learning structures that deepen innovation implementation efforts (DuFour & DuFour, 2007); strengthening professionalism by recognizing

the complexity and importance of teacher professional knowledge (Elmore, 2007; Hord, 2007; Schlechty, 2007); and making professional learning a part of the work of each teacher in every classroom (Fullan, 2007). Each of these ideas reflects the type of learning that can occur in or from a PLC.

Secondly, a PLC is not a replacement name for a committee meeting, staff meeting, department meeting, team meeting, or the like. In schools, committee meetings, staff meetings, department meetings, and team meetings all serve a purpose and can be an important part of work and life in schools. However, unlike PLCs, these types of meetings do not have a laser-like focus on teacher professional development and student learning as their primary goal and reason for being. Rather, a committee might be formed to accomplish a particular task, such as reviewing and selecting a new textbook series for the school or district, whereas staff, department, and team meetings often function in order to work through logistical aspects of teaching and to ensure the smooth running of a school, department, or grade level.

Unfortunately, in many places across the nation, schools and districts have "jumped on the PLC bandwagon" too quickly and in their haste to actualize the promise PLCs hold have ended up simply renaming already existing structures such as committee, staff, department, and team meetings as "PLCs." When this happens, teachers don't experience the benefits of PLCs and become disenchanted with this mechanism for professional learning. Sadly, in some schools and districts, we have even seen *PLC* be referred to by teachers as a "three-letter dirty word."

Given that many schools are already implementing PLCs, how do you know if your PLC is in name only? Learning Forward (2015), the premier national organization for teacher professional development (formally National Staff Development Council [NSDC]), offers teachers a way to assess whether their PLC is really a PLC. This assessment criteria helps to further define and clarify what a PLC is and what a PLC is not. According to this organization, a well-functioning PLC should do the following:

- evaluate student, teacher, and school learning needs by reviewing data on teacher and school performance;
- define a clear set of educator learning goals based on analysis of data;
- achieve educator learning goals by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidence-based learning strategies that improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement;
- provide job-embedded assistance to help teachers transfer new knowledge and skills to the classroom;
- regularly assess the effectiveness of PLCs in relationship to ongoing improvements in teaching and student learning; and
- request external expertise when the community determines it is needed.

By reviewing these characteristics, you will have a better idea as to whether you're really currently working in a learning community. If your assessment is that the group is not engaged in these activities, then it is time to start rethinking how your community works. This book will help you do that.

In this book, we take a broad and practitioner-driven definition of PLC—one that allows educators not only to participate in the process but also to have a say in the development of the PLC process at their school. In sum, the overarching description of a successful PLC is simple— have robust conversations about improving teaching and learning that includes research, multiple forms of data, teacher knowledge construction, support in between meetings, and public sharing that target and ultimately lead to improved student learning.

DO PLCs REALLY WORK?

At this point, you may be thinking that PLCs sound good in theory, but over time you have developed a healthy skepticism. The everyday work of teaching is already challenging, and teachers are constantly asked to do more and more with less and less. If teachers are to embrace PLCs, it's important to know what evidence exists to show this is really worth doing.

So what evidence exists that PLCs are worth doing? Fortunately, evidence abounds that teachers' participation in well-functioning PLCs is indeed worth the effort (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). A comprehensive research report on PLCs, conducted by the Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2007), identified multiple ways the PLC has demonstrated a positive impact on teachers and their students. The report identifies that PLCs have the power to change school culture, teacher impact, and student achievement. In regards to culture, PLCs cultivate collective responsibility, as well as lead to deprivatization, reflective dialogue, and faculty empowerment. PLCs also have an impact on teachers. For example, Hord (1997) reported decreased teacher isolation and heightened commitment to shared goals and responsibilities. Trimble and Peterson (2000) added that teacher participation in PLCs identified changes in teacher classroom practice, including increased understanding of content taught and roles they play in students' learning. Other research has noted that PLC participation increases teacher renewal, satisfaction, morale, and participation in change.

In addition to PLCs helping change the school's culture and positively affecting teachers, evidence exists that when done right PLCs can enhance student achievement. In general, researchers have identified an important positive relationship between teacher PLCs, teacher instructional practices, and student achievement (Buffman & Hinman, 2006; Erb, 1997; Natkin & Jurs, 2005; Wheelan & Kesselring, 2005; Wheelan & Tilin, 1999). Not surprisingly, these researchers have also reported that the students of

teachers who participated in mature PLCs that really focus on student learning performed higher on standardized tests. Students also demonstrated better attitudinal and behavioral outcomes including greater satisfaction, increased commitment to doing school work, and more engagement. All of this evidence suggests the promise and possibility PLC work holds for transforming schools, empowering teachers, and enhancing student learning.

HOW DO PLCs WORK?

PLCs are typically composed of six to twelve educators who meet on a regular basis to systematically and intentionally learn with and from one another about their own teaching practice through engagement in deliberative and purposeful professional dialogue. PLCs serve to connect a group of professionals to do just what their name entails—*learn* from practice. Although PLCs meet on a regular basis, just because they meet doesn't mean that learning happens. Sometimes PLC members understand the end goal of their work to be teacher and student learning, but they may not know how to engage in the type of professional dialogue together that will get them there.

One resource that PLC members can draw upon are protocols. Protocols can ensure focused, deliberate conversation and dialogue by teachers about student work and student learning. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, and McDonald (2003) explain the importance of using protocols:

> In diplomacy, protocol governs who greets whom first when the President and Prime Minister meet, and other such matters. In technology, protocols enable machines to "talk" with one another by precisely defining the language they use. In science and medicine, protocols are regimens that ensure faithful replication of an experiment or treatment; they tell the scientist or doctor to do this first, then that, and so on. And in social science, they are the scripted questions that an interviewer covers, or the template for an observation. But in the professional education of educators? One could argue that elaborate etiquette, communicative precision, faithful replication, and scripts would prove counterproductive here. Don't we best learn from each other by just talking with each other? No, we claim. Among educators especially, *just* talking may not be enough. The kind of talking needed to educate ourselves cannot rise spontaneously and unaided from *just* talking. It needs to be carefully planned and scaffolded. (p. 4)

Protocols for educators provide a script or series of timed steps for how a conversation among teachers on a chosen topic will develop.

A variety of different protocols have been developed for use in PLCs by a number of noteworthy organizations. While many excellent materials have been produced by numerous organizations, in this book, we rely most heavily on resources from School Reform Initiative (SRI), an organization working to create transformational learning communities fiercely committed to educational equity and excellence. Further information about SRI can be found at www.schoolreforminitiative.org. If you are interested in PLC work and not already a member of SRI, we highly recommend membership to connect you to other professionals across the country that are working to change the nature of the dialogue that happens among the professionals in schools into meaningful and learning-full conversation with the assistance of protocols. We also highly recommend the training SRI provides to fully understand the use of protocols, their purpose, their limitations, and the role they can play in PLC work.

In sum, when used within a PLC, protocols can ensure planned, intentional conversation by teachers within each PLC meeting. The protocols can help teachers identify dilemmas and questions, help teachers become familiar with and review external expertise, help identify the types of data that need to be collected, help teachers analyze student work or a lesson to be taught, lead to new insights and learning, and help point to changes needed in practice. Different protocols are selected for use depending on where the PLC is in its work, what the topic for discussion is at a particular PLC meeting, as well as what the purpose of that discussion is in relationship to moving the work of the PLC forward.

A word of caution regarding protocols is important to note. Because the dialogue and conversation that occurs in education has not been structured traditionally, teachers have had few opportunities to engage in rich professional exchanges with their teaching colleagues. When teachers experience dialogue and conversation that is structured by the use of a protocol like the learning communities you will read about in this book, they are often "blown away" by the richness of their exchange with colleagues. This rich exchange fills an empty void in the teacher's practice that existed for years, and PLC members express how marvelous a protocol-led discussion has been for their professional learning.

Protocols *can* be very powerful. However, the power of protocols can become seductive when PLC members marvel at how incredible the experience of engaging in dialogue using the protocol has been for them. This can lead some PLCs to believe that the selection and use of protocols is the most important part of their work. PLCs begin planning their meetings around this question: What protocol would be good for our PLC to try this week? rather than What is the next step in our collective work to move us closer to our PLC goals? It's important to remember that the value of protocols is not in the protocols themselves but in their ability to be used by a PLC as a tool to move the PLC group members' collective work forward.

Protocols work for the PLC. The PLC doesn't work for the protocols. It is important that PLCs do not let the use of protocols become more important than the learning of the group.

WHY IS THIS BOOK CALLED *THE PLC BOOK*?

Having read and reviewed in this chapter what PLCs are and are not, what evidence exists to support their implementation, and how PLCs work in general, it may seem like PLCs can be pretty complicated. Hence, you may be wondering, Why is the title of the book so simple? The answer to that question is also simple. PLCs should not be complicated. They should be effective. The structure and process that PLCs use need to be easy to navigate. However, with the proliferation of workshops, books, and materials that have been generated about PLC work by different consultants, authors, and educational scholars in recent years, PLC structure and process has taken on all different shapes and sizes. Special processes and procedures, steps, and rules to guide PLC work have been offered by many, with one approach differing from the next, and often each approach becoming more and more intricate and complicated than the ones offered before. While much can be learned from different approaches and actualizations of PLC work, it can also lead to confusion among teachers who just want to focus on solving dilemmas that they are facing in their classrooms and schools.

Being able to simply navigate the PLC structure and process is particularly important when the problems educators are trying to solve today are *not* simple at all. Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) wisely explains, "Effective teaching is not routine, students are not passive, and questions of practice are not simple, predictable, or standardized" (p. 67). Too many people, both internal and external to schools, have complicated the PLC process, ignoring the simplicity of the learning that many good teachers are naturally inclined do—pose and explore questions about the highly complex act of teaching in an effort to make learning powerful and possible for all the students they serve.

Hence, we wrote this book to bring simplicity back to the PLC process while simultaneously honoring the complexity inherent in teaching itself. We believe PLCs build on effective teachers' natural inclinations to solve the complexity of teaching and that PLC process and procedure can simply mirror that natural inclination, providing space and opportunity for teachers to work collaboratively to

- give voice to issues, tensions, problems and dilemmas they face due to the complexity of teaching;
- decide on which issues, tensions, problems, and dilemmas they wish to focus their gaze;

- develop a plan for how to learn together to gain insights into the area they selected for focus through such activities as reading on the subject and collection and analysis of data;
- implement that plan;
- take action based on their individual and collective learning; and
- share the learning of the PLC with others.

We have organized this book to illustrate the ways teachers' natural inclinations to learn from practice, which was just articulated, can be simply translated into five components of PLC work: "Getting Started" (Chapter 2), "Establishing a PLC Direction" (Chapter 3), "Developing a PLC Action Learning Plan" (Chapter 4), "Analyzing Data in Your PLC" (Chapter 5), and "Making PLC Learning Public" (Chapter 6).

Each of these chapters follows the same format. First, we discuss the "what" and "why" of each component, simply defining each component and explicating the reasons it is important for a PLC to give attention to it. Next, we discuss the "how" of each component, suggesting and providing resources, such as specific protocols PLCs might use when they are at this particular stage in their learning. Next, we articulate what each component of PLC work might look like in practice. Often offered as a story depicting a particular meeting of a PLC, this portion of each chapter allows the reader to become a "fly on the wall" and "observe" a PLC actualizing each component of PLC work. Finally, we end each chapter with questions for discussion, designed to help you and your PLC members unpack each component and apply it to your own PLC work in ways that make sense to you.

The final chapter of the book, titled "Essential Elements of a Healthy PLC," looks across each component of PLC work, naming and discussing ten essential elements of a healthy and highly functioning PLC. While the previous chapters explore individual components of PLC work, this final chapter provides a bird's-eye view of it, offering important considerations to keep in mind as PLCs form and function over time.

Together, we have over fifty years of experience studying and working in schools alongside teachers to actualize powerful professional learning. As a result, in large part, this book was put together by applying work we have done with all different types of teacher-driven, job-embedded forms of professional development to the form and functionality of PLCs. To do so, we borrow from many of our previous writings, drawing most heavily on an award-winning book we wrote for coaches of PLCs in 2009: *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Professional Development: Coaching Inquiry-Oriented Learning Communities.* To write *The PLC Book*, we sought to combine the best of all we have learned about PLCs since that time and write for all members of a PLC, not just one individual who may be considered "the coach." Our goal in the writing of this book was that all members of a PLC would have equal ownership of and insights into the form and

functionality of the PLC, with the process being demystified and simply and succinctly explained for all who participate as PLC members.

Whether you are new to PLC work or are currently engaging in PLC work in your school or district, we hope this text provides helpful ideas for you to consider as you begin or renew PLC work currently underway. For although the acts of teaching that are the focus of PLC work are both complicated and complex, the structure and process of PLC work itself need not be. If PLC structure and process becomes terribly complicated, it risks detracting from and even overtaking the purpose of PLCs in the first place—teacher and student *learning*. We hope the content of this book will put *learning* back front and center, where it belongs in a PLC, by providing simple explanations and illustrations of PLC work. Let's get started with an exploration of getting PLC work started, the focus of Chapter 2.