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***Professional Learning Communities:  
An Overview of What the Research Says***

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## What are Professional Learning Communities?



Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs as they are often called, are one of the hottest topics in education

because there is a growing body of evidence that shows that they have a positive impact on student achievement (Hord 1997; Hord 1997b; Stiggins, R. 1997; Dufour, R, Eaker R.E., & Baker, R. 1998; DuFour May 2004; Schmoker 2004; Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2004; Fullan 2005;) In fact, as Mike Schmoker points out, there is “an astonishing level of agreement...on this point.” He goes on to quote a fellow researcher, Milbrey McLaughlin, saying that she “speaks for a legion of esteemed educators and researchers when she asserts that ‘the *most promising strategy* for sustained, substantive school improvement is building the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community’” (Schmoker 2004). He concludes by saying “there simply isn’t space here to provide the names of all the esteemed

educators and organizational experts who advocate explicitly for such collaborative structures and their singular effectiveness. Along with (Linda Darling-Hammond, Richard Stiggins, Thomas Guskey, Bruce Joyce, Rick DuFour, Dennis Sparks, Michael Fullan, and others that he has) already mentioned...a list must also include Roland Barth, Louis Castenell, Jim Collins, Lisa Delpit, Karen Eastwood, Richard Elmore, Asa Hilliard, Stephanie Hirsh, Jacqueline Irvine Jordan, Anne Lieberman, Dan Lortie, Robert Marzano, Jay McTighe, Fred Newmann, Allan Odden, Susan Rosenholtz, Seymour Sarason, Tom Peters, Peter Senge, Gary Wehlage, James Stigler, Grant Wiggins, and... an avalanche of others” (Schmoker 2004).

In looking at the list of educators and researchers who are advocating for *Professional Learning Communities*, it is little wonder that many schools across the nation are forming them. However, in their enthusiasm to do this, Rick DuFour points out that many of the schools seem to lack clarity about what a highly effective *Professional Learning Community* is and does (DuFour May

2004). He explains this by saying, “the idea of improving schools by developing *Professional Learning Communities* is currently in vogue. People use this term 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.” This point is further illustrated by Mary Hord who points out that “the term *Learning Community* is becoming well integrated into the lexicon of American education (where) some educators see it as extending classroom practice into the community, utilizing community resources, both material and human. Still others (see it as) bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students (while) still others (see it as a) means for having students, teachers, and administrators reciprocally engaged in learning” (Hord 1997 b). It is easy to see that each of these views is different, but is there a view that encapsulates the type of PLC

that will have a sustainable, positive impact on student achievement? To answer that question it might be helpful to understand the genesis of the PLC movement.

Senge introduced the concept of *Learning Organizations* as it applied to corporate structures in 1990 in *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* where he described *learning organizations* as “organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together” (Senge 1990). In education, *Learning Organizations* became schools where the staffs worked collaboratively to continually expand their ability to increase student achievement and student learning. As this concept was applied more and more to the world of education, *Learning Organizations* became termed *Learning Communities* (Hord 1997 b). This concept was influenced by several different researchers over the intervening years.

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For example in 1993 Kruse and Louis defined a *school-based professional community* as “as one where teachers engage in reflective dialogue, where there is de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared norms and values” (Boyd & Hord 1994). These ideas are reflected in today’s concept of a *Professional Learning Community* as “a school in which the professionals—administrators and teachers—continuously seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness for students, and act on what they have learned” (Hord, 1997 in Leo & Cowan 2000).

Also these ideas are reflected in today’s concept of a PLC as “a place where critical inquiry is practiced by collegial partners who share a common vision and engage in shared decision-making, so that this continuous critical inquiry provides a basis for seamless school improvement” (Boyd & Hord 1994) and increased student learning. Perhaps DuFour describes this process best when he says, “The *Professional Learning Community* model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that



they learn. This simple shift—from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning—has profound implications for schools...(because) *Professional Learning Communities* judge their effectiveness on the basis of (increased student achievement) results. (In a PLC) working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the school. Every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress” (DuFour May 2004) through the use of formative and summative assessment and other data. As Dufour says, this process is important because “schools cannot achieve the systematic, results-oriented collaboration that impacts teacher practice unless teachers have both comparative student achievement data and collegial support...Indeed teachers may work together to identify common outcomes and develop common assessments. If, however, each teacher has access only to the results of his or

her students, without any comparison to other students in the school, team members will not be able to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of their individual instruction” (DuFour Summer 2003) or have the type of impact on student achievement that highly effective PLCs can produce. For this to happen certain structures and resources need to be in place that support collaboration and continued student achievement.

## Effective Professional Learning Communities:

All effective professional learning communities are results driven (Dufour, Eaker , & Baker 1998; DuFour Spring 1997; Schmoker,2001; Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2004; DuFour May 2004;; Schmoker,2004; Fullan 2005 ). They focus on increasing student achievement.



Therefore, as DuFour points out, in effective PLCs, “Every professional in the building must engage with colleagues in the ongoing exploration of three crucial questions that drive the

work of those within a professional learning community:

- 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?” (DuFour May 2004)

While these questions are self-explanatory, having teams come to a mutually agreed-upon answer requires some work. It doesn’t happen simply because grade level or content area teachers are given common planning time—although common planning time is a great help—nor does it happen because these groups are relabeled professional learning communities. “As many schools are learning, professional learning communities don’t just happen because a principal sets aside time for teachers to meet and slaps a new label on that meeting. That’s especially the case when teachers have been accustomed to working in isolation” (Richardson November 2005). The name alone isn’t enough, so what does it take?

“Establishing a professional learning community within a school does not occur quickly or spontaneously. It requires dedicated and intentional effort on the part of the administrator and the professional staff” (Morrissey 2000). Most of the research lists five elements that all highly effective professional learning communities share. Effective PLCs demonstrate:

➤ **Supportive and shared leadership:**



Administrators in effective PLCs embrace distributive leadership by encouraging ‘collegial relationship with teachers’ where they ‘share power and decision making and promote the leadership development of their entire staff’ (Hord 1997; Hord & Rutherford 1998; Hord, Chapman, Hinson, Hipp, Jacoby, Huffman, Pankake, Sattes, Thomas & Westbrook 2000; Leo & Cowan 2000; Morrissey 2000).

This doesn’t mean that the principals stop being strong leaders as DuFour points out, “Principals do not empower others by disempowering themselves. Empowered teachers and

strong principals are not mutually exclusive, and it is imperative that schools have both” (DuFour Fall 1999). He explains this duality by saying, “I found that maintaining the appropriate balance between teacher autonomy and my responsibilities for accountable leadership was one of the biggest challenges of the principalship...I attempted to adhere to the principles of loose-tight leadership. I was “loose” on the particular strategies teachers used to advance (our shared) vision and values, but was determined to remain passionately “tight” on the fact that our **agreed-upon vision and values** must be observed” (Emphasis added) (DuFour Fall 1999).

➤ **Shared vision and values:**



“Research demonstrates that the development of a strong professional community among educators is a key ingredient in improving schools (Fullan 1999; Langer 2000; Little and McLaughlin 1993; Louis, Kruse, and Marks 1996; Newmann and Associates 1996 in Annenberg 2004), but this

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professional community doesn't just happen. It takes effort on everyone's part. So why would they be willing to do it? They do it because the educators in the PLC "recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all...(and since collaboration is the key to success, they) create structures to promote a collaborative culture" (DuFour May 2004). These structures include a common vision or mission statement, shared or mutually agreed-upon values, and a set of norms to govern how the teams operate. "Without a vision of the school they are trying to create, principals will be unable to identify the initiatives that are necessary to move the school in a purposeful direction...If vision articulates the end, shared values represent the means that are necessary to move the school toward that target. Shared values articulate the specific behaviors and attitudes that must be in evidence if the intended school improvement is to take place. They carry the message of common purpose and agreed upon standards" (DuFour & Berkey 1995).

Their importance shouldn't be minimized. As DuFour explains, "The identification of the shared vision and values changed my relationship with the faculty. Rather than emphasizing regulations and procedures to control the work of teachers, I could rely on shared vision and values to provide a sense of direction. Gradually, I came to regard the identification, promotion, and protection of shared vision and values as one of a principal's most important responsibilities" (DuFour Fall 1999). While we refer to a set of common values and a shared vision like it was a fixed document, it should be pointed out that it is not just a product that sets on the shelf or hangs on the wall. Really it is an ongoing inquiry process. As Singe points out, "For anybody really serious in this work, they'll spend 20 to 40 percent of their time—forever—continually working on getting people to reflect on and articulate what it is they're really trying to create" (O'Neil April

1995). This type of reflection and inquiry is at the heart of all highly effective PLCs because “inquiry helps principals and teachers create the ties that bind them together as a special group and that bind them to a shared set of ideas” (Hord 1997). These ideas state that it is the job of all educators to ensure that all students learn. Everything must be focused upon student learning. All personal and professional practice within the school must be viewed in that light. DuFour says, “Leaders determined to impact student achievement must not settle for...any form of "collaboration lite." They must promote a collaborative culture by defining collaboration in narrow terms: the systematic process in which we work together to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results. The first key term in this definition is systematic. Teachers are not invited or encouraged to collaborate. Collaboration is

embedded in the routine practices of the school. Teachers are organized into teams and provided time to meet during the school day. They are provided specific guidelines and asked to engage in specific activities that help them focus on student achievement” (DuFour Summer 2003). Thus shared personal and professional practice are part of the group norms and are reflected in the PLCs’ shared beliefs.

➤ **Shared personal practice:**



In PLCs,  
“collaborative  
conversations  
call on team

members to make public what has traditionally been private—goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers—individually and collectively” (DuFour May 2004). This open door policy is

reflected in the fact that “one of the first characteristics cited by Louis and Kruse of individuals in a productive learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and to work toward improvement...(Therefore) the review of a teacher's behavior by colleagues is the norm in the professional learning community. This practice is not evaluative but is part of the "peers helping peers" process. Such review is conducted regularly by teachers, who visit each other's classrooms to observe, script notes, and discuss their observations with the visited peer. The process is based on the desire for individual and community improvement and is enabled by the mutual respect and trustworthiness of staff members” (Louis & Kruse 1995 in Hord 1997). By giving and receiving feedback, team members can better evaluate the effectiveness of their own efforts and adjust their instruction to better meet their students’ needs. It also lets them see the strategies that the team has selected to

implement from a variety of vantage points.

➤ **Collective Creativity**



We have all heard the statement, “Think out of

the box.” Well that is exactly what happens in highly effective PLCs. They have structures in place that allow the teams to openly put ideas on the table for consideration. Besides the shared vision or goal, common values, and norms, PLCs use the inquiry-based data-driven decision making process. This inquiry process “helps them to overcome chasms caused by various specializations of grade level and subject matter. Inquiry forces debate among teachers about what is important...and it promotes understanding and appreciation for the work of others” (Hord 1997).

Collaboration again is a key component of this process. Data-driven decision making is not enough. “Data will become a

catalyst for improved teacher practice only if the teacher has a basis of comparison. When teacher teams develop common formative assessments throughout the school year, each teacher can identify how his or her students performed on each skill compared with other students...This focus on continual improvement and results requires educators to change traditional practices and revise prevalent assumptions” (DuFour May 2004). When they do this collectively and honestly, amazing things happen because “when teams commit to shaping their ideas into new classroom practice, reflecting on the results, and sharing the benefits with each other, professional growth skyrockets. Teams reach their ultimate goal of changing classroom assessment practices in specific ways that benefit students” (Stiggins & Chappuis Winter 2006) and all student achievement increases which is the goal of all PLCs.

➤ **Supportive conditions:**



“Supportive conditions” covers a wide variety of factors. For one thing, PLCs need a supportive administrator who is willing to commit time and resources to see to it that the process goes smoothly. “Making time available for teachers to reflect and study about student learning issues is a critical component of a PLC...In addition to these times, regular and meaningful faculty meetings served as a vehicle to bring all the staff together to discuss issues of importance to student learning” (Leo & Cowan 2000). An effective instructional leader uses all of these elements to support the PLCs within his/her building. As Senge explains, “The principals I know who have had the greatest impact tend to see their job as creating an environment where teachers can continually learn. Then, in turn, I believe the job of the superintendent is to find these

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principals and support (them)”  
(Senge in O’Neil April 1995).

Providing supportive structures for the PLCs requires an effort on the principal’s part because there are always conflicting demands for the same set of resources, but, for PLCs to be successful, the necessary structures have to be in place to allow teachers to focus collectively on ensuring that every student is learning. “The rise or fall of the professional learning community concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, (research shows that it works) but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the commitment and persistence of the educators within it” (DuFour May 2004) and they deserve to have the tools necessary to make this work. This includes time, resources, and job-embedded professional development. “One of the most common mistakes made in attempting to implement an innovation in any organization is the failure to support it and

sustain the effort until it is institutionalized (Kanter, 1983). “If professional growth initiatives are to be effective, principals must abandon the potpourri approach to staff development and support ongoing, purposeful learning until there is evidence that the learning is having the desired impact upon the school” (DuFour & Berkey 1995).



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PLCs provide the perfect format for this because teachers need "an environment that values and supports hard work, the acceptance of challenging tasks, risk taking, and the promotion of growth" (Midgley & Wood, 1993 in Hord 1997) and research shows PLCs offer educators this.

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Therefore Professional Learning Communities are an effective way to provide essential staff development that results in increased student achievement for all learners.

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