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## REALITY CHECK: CLARIFY YOUR CURRENT REALITY WITH AN AUDIT OF PLC PRACTICES

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes one districts attempt to move from calling its schools professional learning communities to ensuring that those schools actually did what learning communities do. It outlines the district's process to determine the levels of understanding of PLC concepts among all staff, to assess each school's practices in light of those concepts, and to identify high-leverage strategies for helping the faculty in each school move from the language and rhetoric of PLCs to the effective implementation of PLC practices. As a result, schools throughout the district became more focused on and committed to clarifying the essential learnings for all students, creating frequent common assessments to monitor that learning, and developing systems of intervention to provide struggling students with additional time and support.

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In 2004 Allen Parish, Louisiana committed to implementing Professional Learning Community concepts in all its schools as the key strategy to improve student achievement. Although staff members generally expressed support for the PLC model, they encountered formidable barriers in their implementation efforts.

Confusion regarding key terms, the lack of specific, practical examples of PLC practices, ambiguity regarding both the structures and culture of a PLC, and uncertainty in how to assess progress hindered the initiative.

As Mike Schmoker (2004) wrote, "Clarity precedes competence" (p.85). In order to become more competent in creating true PLCs, Allen Parish educators needed to develop greater clarity regarding the implementation of PLC concepts and to become more precise regarding the conditions they were attempting to create. Furthermore, they needed a strategy for conducting an honest assessment of their current practices in light of PLC concepts. In the words of Jim Collins (2001), they had to "confront the brutal facts of their current reality" (p. 70), because without widespread understanding of those facts they could not make informed decisions about how to move forward.

The issues facing Allen Parish were not unique. Any school district attempting to implement the PLC model in its schools must address questions such as, how can we help our educators (1) build shared knowledge of key PLC concepts, (2) clarify the current reality regarding the extent to which those concepts are at work in each school, and (3) assess the effectiveness of our initiative to promote the PLC model. Allen Parish discovered one of the most powerful strategies for addressing those questions was engaging its schools in a reflective audit of their PLC practices.

### **The Allen Parish Audit Process**

The audit process consisted of four phases.

First, teachers and principals were asked to respond to a survey designed to assess their shared understanding of PLC concepts and vocabulary. Each school was then provided with a copy of its results and the results for the entire Parish so a staff could examine its "score" in light of scores from other Parish schools.

Second, each school created a portfolio of artifacts including school improvement plans, evidence of student achievement, and the use of structures designed to support PLCs. These artifacts were used to determine the presence of important PLC components such as an agreed-upon set of essential outcomes, common assessments, curriculum pacing guides, systems of intervention for students experiencing difficulty, collaborative team norms, results-oriented team goals, etc.

Third, facilitators conducted on site interviews with staff members, using a predetermined protocol to gather insights into the beliefs and assumptions at work in the school. The interviews also served to affirm validity of the survey results

Finally, the facilitators provided a written audit report to each school identifying areas of progress to celebrate and pointing out high-leverage next steps that could be taken to strengthen PLC concepts in that school.

The audit helped Allen Parish leaders to identify and address common concerns that had emerged in their schools. For example, the Louisiana State Department of Education had developed an exhaustive set of standards and benchmarks, but teachers in Allen Parish found there simply wasn't enough time in the school day, school year—or a student's academic career—to ensure mastery of so many standards. The audit process gave voice to their frustration and led to the recommendation that teachers move away from a focus on covering content to a commitment to ensure students acquire the most essential learnings. Working collaboratively, teacher representatives from each school identified a manageable number of essential learnings (what Doug Reeves calls "power standards"), labeled them as Power Grade Level Expectations or GLEs, reviewed them with the teachers from their schools, and received their commitment to help each student become proficient in those areas.

Once teachers had clarified what all students were expected to learn, they turned their attention to how they could better monitor each student's learning. The audit helped teachers recognize that the assessment system in Allen Parish relied almost exclusively on summative assessments. As Rick Stiggins (2001) has concluded, summative assessments, or assessments *of* learning, can serve a useful purpose in holding schools and districts accountable; however, they are "grossly insufficient" as a tool for school improvement and offer "little value at the instructional level" (p.385).

Teachers began to acknowledge that if assessment was to be used to help more students achieve at higher levels, they needed frequent *common formative assessments*. To promote a shared understanding and to guide the work going on in each school, the Parish established criteria to define "common assessments." Each school was called upon to ensure assessments were in place that were 1) frequent and formative, 2) created collaboratively by teams of teachers, 3) connected to the essential outcomes, and 4) given to all students enrolled in the same class, course, or grade level. Furthermore, these common assessments were to be used to identify students who needed additional time and support for learning, to analyze the effectiveness of the individual and collective instructional strategies utilized by teachers, and to discover curriculum areas that needed strengthening.

With agreement on *what* students should learn and *how* to measure whether they had learned it, teachers turned their attention to creating systematic pyramids of interventions for students who were experiencing difficulty in their learning. Once again, Allen Parish educators found it helpful to utilize specific criteria as they designed the intervention program for their school. The SPEED criteria listed below served that purpose.

### SPEED Intervention Criteria

**Systematic:** The intervention plan is school-wide, independent of the individual teacher, and communicated in writing (who, why, how, where, and when) to everyone – staff, parents, and students.

**Practical:** The intervention plan is affordable in terms of the school's available resources such as time, space, staff, and materials. The plan must be replicable and sustainable so that its programs and strategies can be replicated in other schools.

**Effective:** The intervention plan must be effective, – available, and operational early enough in the school year to make a difference for the student. It should have flexible entrance and exit criteria designed to respond to the ever-changing needs of students.

**Essential:** The intervention plan should focus on agreed-upon standards and the essential learning outcomes of the District's curriculum and should target a student's specific learning needs as determined by formative and summative assessments.

**Directive:** The intervention plan should be directive. It should be mandatory – not invitational – a part of the student's regular school day. Students should not be able to opt out and parents and teachers cannot waive the student's participation in the intervention program (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2006).

Not only did interventions benefit students who needed more time and support, they changed the school culture. Imagine students' reactions when it became clear that they were *required* to complete *all* homework and, if they were not successful, were *required* to attend tutorial sessions. The interventions conveyed the powerful message that learning was not optional!

Participating in the audit process brought teachers together to “challenge and question each other’s practice in spirited but optimistic ways” (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 50). When asked what had changed since the PLC initiative had begun, one teacher replied, “Gone are the days when I teach my students/you teach your students. Now WE teach all students and share responsibility no matter what the subject matter.”

Another teacher reported relationships were far more professional and focused on student learning. “Our conversations are very different,” she said. “We talk about learning everywhere—in the teachers’ lounge, on the sidewalk before and after school, through emails and phone calls.” She continued, “Our conversations are more focused on how to improve student work and we spend much less time complaining.”

Principals reported teachers no longer felt isolated or left alone to solve problems. As one principal remarked, “Our teachers realize they can bring their challenges to a group of fellow teachers and work together.” He continued, “Teachers meet to examine student work and talk about strategies for re-teaching. We share a common goal that all our students will succeed, and sometimes that means having to admit something doesn’t work or accepting advice from others. That did not happen before we began working as a Professional Learning Community.”

### Was the Audit Worth the Effort?

Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee (2005) observed that, “It is not change itself that is so hard; what is hard is being honest with ourselves, looking at ourselves with no filters, and admitting that we need to change” (p. 201). By examining their efforts through the filter of the PLC audit, Allen Parish schools that had made only halting progress toward becoming a PLC began to see positive results. Faculties openly examined specific recommendations, implemented new procedures, focused on short-term goals, and celebrated small

victories. In short, they began to behave differently and changed the culture of their schools in powerful ways. As one principal remarked, “Sometimes we assumed the model was more deeply embedded than it really was, but, as a result of the audit, we are more aware of where we have been and where we are going. The audit clarified *our* reality and gave us direction.”

By conducting an audit of their PLC practices, Allen Parish educators took a risk, confronted the brutal facts, and brought the current reality of the PLC initiative to light. More importantly, the shared understanding of both the concept and their current practices that resulted from the audit clarified the essential next steps schools needed to take on the PLC journey.

Conducting an audit of a school’s Professional Learning Community takes courage, but when educators honestly examine their practices, confront those individuals, beliefs, or traditions that prevent all children from learning to high levels, and make a commitment to do things differently, they open their hearts and minds to the possibilities of unprecedented success for all students.

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## DEVELOPING A SUBSTANTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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### ABSTRACT

Most schools suffer from what Doug Reeves has called, "initiative fatigue" as they are deluged with new initiatives, programs, and tasks. As a result, veteran staffs are likely to respond to a proposal for yet another initiative with resignation and cynicism. So how does a principal convince a staff that implementing Professional Learning Community concepts is worthy of their collective effort and commitment? This article advises that leaders should acknowledge rather than ignore initiative fatigue; make a long-term commitment to implementation; use data to demonstrate the need for improvement; provide staff with the time, structures and support to engage in the collective exploration of the critical questions of PLCs, and sustain the focus on those questions until they become the essence of the school's culture.

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The publication of *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities* (DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, 2005) clearly established that the leading educational researchers in North America endorse the PLC concept as the best hope for substantive school improvement. So the question confronting practitioners is, "now what?" How do we take this powerful model from the conceptual and theoretical to the practical and pragmatic? How do we bring the model to life in our schools when change is so difficult? While all school leaders must find their own solution to these challenges and address them in the unique context of their schools, the experiences of others can shine light on the effort.