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## THE POWER OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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There is good news for contemporary educators. Never in the history of American education has there been greater consensus regarding the most powerful strategy for helping all students learn at high levels. Researchers and professional organizations alike have come to endorse the professional learning community concept as our best hope for sustained, substantive school improvement.

The bad news is that the term, "professional learning community" has become so prevalent in contemporary "educationese," has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education, it is in danger of losing all meaning. What does it really mean to be a "professional learning community?"

Michael Fullan (2005) observed that "terms travel easily.... but the meaning of the underlying concepts does not"(p.67). Throughout North America schools, districts, professional organizations and occasional gatherings of educators proudly proclaim they are professional learning communities (PLCs), but few have come to implement the underlying concepts of the term. It is difficult to bring these concepts to life in a school or district when there is a common, shared understanding of their meaning. It is impossible when the terms mean very different things to different people in the same organization. Therefore, school leaders who hope to build the capacity of their organizations to function as PLCs must first engage their staff in building shared knowledge of PLC concepts, and then hold people accountable for acting in accordance with those concepts.

We (DuFour, et. al, 2006) offer the following definition of the term:

A professional learning community is a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLC's operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators.

Of course it takes effective leadership to create these conditions in a school or district, and who could be opposed to "effective leadership." But once again, the specific underlying concepts behind that term are often lacking. The emphasis on collaboration, collective inquiry, shared decision-making, and widely dispersed leadership in PLCs has led some administrators to conclude strong leadership is not required, that their job is merely to poll the staff to determine practices and resolve issues. We are convinced, however, that strong leadership is imperative if PLC concepts are to take hold in the culture of a school or district. Leaders do not empower others by disempowering themselves. Without strong leaders schools and districts will neither be able to overcome the inertia of traditional schooling practices nor to sustain the improvement process through the inevitable setbacks that occur along the way.

The most effective leaders of PLCs are skillful at applying the leadership concept of “simultaneous loose and tight leadership” – a concept in which leaders encourage autonomy and creativity (loose) within well-defined parameters and priorities that must be honored (tight). These leaders are able to create a “culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship” (Collins, 2001, p.124). Bob Eaker and Deborah Gonzalez explore this concept in “Leading in Professional Communities.” They call upon leaders to define their role as “shapers and keepers of a culture committed to learning,” and they offer specific examples of what leaders must be “tight” about if they are to create such a culture.

Can this culture be created in low-performing schools where the socio-economic status and the historical performance of students have created a climate of low expectations? It can, but only with effective leadership. Anthony Muhammad, Michigan’s Middle School Principal of the Year in 2005, describes the lessons learned as his staff created a model PLC in a school that had been plagued by low achievement and low expectations.

A shared understanding of key concepts is necessary for making progress as a PLC, but it is not sufficient. Educators must also come to grips with the current reality in their schools. This requires “seeing with new eyes” and “confronting the brutal facts” (Collins, 2001). Tom Many and Sam Ritchie describe how schools in Allen Parish, Louisiana used a reflective audit process both to clarify PLC concepts among all staff and to help them assess their current practices in light of those concepts.

How can leaders build support for PLC concepts when teachers have become accustomed to a predictable cycle of initiatives with short life spans – launched with fanfare, set adrift by confusion and lack of support, and then quickly lost at sea? How can school leaders avoid “initiative fatigue” as they ask a faculty whose plates are already full to engage in new practices?

Chuck Hinman presents a candid account of one high school’s attempt to build a PLC as weary teachers grappled with the challenge of meeting rising expectations with declining resources.

In their study of professional learning communities in large high schools, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) concluded that the assumptions and practices of teachers were influenced more by their department than the school itself. Therefore, high school principals must address the issue of shaping the culture of departments and building leadership within them. Eric Twadell describes the evolution of a high school social studies department and the lessons learned by its transition.

The shelf life of most school improvement initiatives lasts only until the leader who initiated them departs. There is a reason teachers react to new improvement initiatives with a resigned, “this-too-shall-pass” attitude: they have been conditioned to do so. But changes in leadership need not lead to changes in the direction a school or district is taking. Bill Hall raises an issue seldom considered in most school districts – succession planning. He offers specific advice to create a culture attentive to the need to groom the next generation of leaders.

The authors of the following articles provide both greater clarity regarding PLC concepts and specific strategies to help educational leaders implement those concepts in their schools and districts. They represent what Michael Fullan (2005) has called Strategic Thinkers in Action – “practitioners whose theories are lived in action every day” (p. x). We believe they make a significant contribution to those interested in moving from terminology to concept to actual practice. They offer a wealth of insight gained through practical experience, and we encourage readers to correspond with the authors to benefit more fully from their expertise.

Collins, J. (2002). **Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and others Don't.** New York: Harper Collins.

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McLaughlin, M and Talbert, J. (2001). **Professional Communities and the Work of High School Teaching.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press.