

# Foreword

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School improvement to improve the quality of classroom teaching

School improvement to meet the requirements of the 21st century

School improvement to ensure every student learns well

While the verses may differ, the refrain remains the same: reform our schools!

Many schools are successfully meeting the needs of a broad range of students who come to school from widely varying family backgrounds, family cultures and traditions; homes of non-English-speaking parents, resulting in multiple languages in a classroom; students who come from all levels of our social and economic platforms—in a word, to form an amazing array of individuals, with significant differences in capacities, to experience an instructional program that will benefit the learning needs of each. Many other schools are unsuccessfully meeting these challenges, while the profession as well as the press and the public want results that indicate each child is learning well.

## HOW TO MOVE THIS INTENTION INTO REALITY?

### The Process

The *improvement of our schools* seldom results from mandates issued from some higher authority: the superintendent or some other district office coordinator/director, the principal, or grade-level team leader or academic subject matter department head—the recipient typically, teachers. Such “directives” might be adopted, but the likelihood of more than superficial implementation is slight.

Engaging staff, including the implementers, in the study of multiple sources of student data to ascertain where students are performing well, and celebrating those outcomes, is a first step. Revisiting the data to identify areas where performance is poor warrants careful scrutiny. Thoughtful and reflective work is encouraged here in order to discover possible explanations for the less-than-desirable performance of the students.

As a result of the staff’s identification and specification work, a focus for immediate, and possibly long-term, attention is made. A decision is taken about what is not working and will be deleted. Plus a commitment is made to find a solution or “new way”—a *change*—that has the potential for increased results and introduce it into the school. What has become very clear is that change (its adoption and implementation) cannot occur without the provision of ongoing and long-term learning for the professionals who will deliver the “new way.”

## Enter: The Professional Learning Community

The premise, the purpose, the promise of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) is the learning of the professionals of the staff—in schools, those certified, responsible, and accountable for delivering an effective instructional program for all students.

Most of our citizens would volunteer that we have schools for the purpose of student learning. They may debate what students should learn, or how, or when, but there is consensus that schools are for student learning. Research tells us that the most significant factor in whether students learn well is quality teaching. Note that it is not just *teacher* quality, but *teaching* quality, for many factors within the school, in addition to the teachers, contribute to the quality of the teaching.

How can teaching quality be increased or enhanced? Through continuous professional learning, is a unanimous response. What makes abundant good sense for the professionals' learning is the setting or environment of an effective PLC. This setting is one in which a self-organizing group of people come together to explore students' work, to assess the quality of that work, and make shared decisions about what to do when student performance is poor. Because the community shares leadership and its concomitant power, authority, and decision making, this is messy work. Staff members are learning how to become a community of professional learners while they are doing the work.

Such communities have been a long time in development. In the early years of this country, schools were modestly organized around some mother's fireplace where the Bible was likely the only "textbook" for reading. As teaching became recognized for the important role it played, teachers' colleges were organized and built, course work prescribed, and credits or degrees awarded. At graduation, teachers found their life's work occurring in the "egg crate" school house where there was no professional and little personal interaction between and among the teaching staff.

In current school settings where the idea of PLC is being introduced into their faculties, teachers have the opportunity to meet together—a significant change! It would appear from the number of schools that describe their PLC as a "time to meet" (period) the time to meet *is* the innovation and the purpose of the PLC. Given little guidance and no expectations of what to do in this meeting time, not much happens.

A second typical description of PLC is the community's focus on collaborative work. It is possible, of course, that such collaboration can have substantial results, but whether or not it prepares the fifth-grade team to do a more successful job of teaching long division tomorrow to their poorly performing students is not very likely. Collaboration *is* the means, or a skill needed to be able to work and learn together productively; it is not the end.

It would seem sensible that educators would derive some rather clear understandings of the three words of the PLC label: *professionals* are those certified or licensed to do an established system of work; *community* is a group of individuals who share common goals; and, these professionals meet in their community to focus on *learning*. Rather than an understanding that the learning is meant to be adult learning that is directly related to the needs of students, one wonders, given the widespread attention now being directed to student learning, if the understanding that is gained from professional learning community is learning for students. Student learning is the ultimate goal—but it is achieved through adults who learn

how to become more effective. The attention on adult learning is sorely missing in many PLC settings.

Despite the abundance of information and resources committed to professional learning, we have much to learn about how to create and maintain effective communities of professional learners. These communities are comprised of continuous learners, who seek thoughtfully and consistently to learn how to provide students with higher quality teaching so that students are more successful learners.

Lois Easton's story of and commentary on the PLC developing at Glen Haven Middle School helps us do just that, as do the resources provided with this extremely beneficial book.

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