

## DO WE BELIEVE THAT THEY CAN LEARN?

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### ABSTRACT

How does a school leader create a commitment to high levels of learning for all students in a school plagued by a history of low expectations and achievement? This article describes how a principal engaged staff in the careful, collective analysis of data both to challenge long-held perceptions and to monitor quarterly "vital signs" of student learning. It also describes how he used an effective collaborative team process to help teachers develop their capacity to help students learn at higher levels. Creating a collective sense of self-efficacy among a staff, helping people believe in themselves, is vital to improving schools. This article makes the case that teachers are unlikely to believe students can learn unless school and district leaders demonstrate a belief and expectation that the professionals in the school will continue to learn and grow.

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The Professional Learning Community (PLC) concept resonated with me the first time I heard it explained. Who could argue against the premise that a staff should focus its collective attention on the fundamental questions that drive the work of a PLC:

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How do we know if the students have learned?
3. What do we do when students have not learned?
4. How will we respond when they already know it?

The question that plagued me was not, "does this concept hold potential for improving schools," but rather, "how can it be implemented in a school environment where many of the educators did

not believe their students were capable of learning at high levels - regardless of the quality of the curriculum, assessments, and systems of support." How can a PLC thrive in a school where perceived barriers like race, socio-economic class, gender, and/or English proficiency prevent educators from having high expectations for all students? These perceptions are much too common in high poverty schools, and the casualties of such assumptions are the very students we are called upon to educate. These barriers must be conquered because the students who attend these schools are most in need of the collective commitments and support of a PLC.

The lethargy of low expectation cannot be overcome without strong and effective leadership serving as a catalyst for cultural change in the school and community. But, where does a leader start?

### Create A Comprehensive Data Picture

I recently attended a workshop where I overheard two teachers having a conversation. One teacher jokingly told her colleague, "*In God we trust, all others bring data.*" Meaningful data are the life-blood of a PLC. We cannot accurately focus on the success of each student without accurate, relevant, and timely data.

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law has generated both critics and advocates, but one inescapable result of the legislation is that it has forced educators to look at data - disaggregated data. This NCLB demand for disaggregated data can be particularly beneficial in schools where past experiences, stereotypes, and unquestioned assumptions have perpetuated the belief that some groups of students are incapable of learning at high levels. Low expectations are fueled by assumptions, and assumptions can only be challenged with facts (Green, 2002). The careful, collective analysis of real, hard data is an essential tool in challenging the perceptions that impact the culture of a school.

As an educator and consultant, many teachers have approached me with comments like, "Our black boys really struggle with math," or "Our limited English students just don't seem to care about school." These are very bold statements and I always respond with a question, "What do your data say?" I have never received an answer to that question. If educators enter classrooms on a daily basis with an assumption that certain groups of students are predisposed to underachievement, and they have no data to confirm or disprove their assumption, improvement is unlikely to take place.

Of course the disaggregated data from state tests required by NCLB do not provide the timely information teachers and administrators need to improve their schools. Therefore, additional data tracking the **vital signs** of a school should be compiled and reviewed, at least quarterly. Like vital signs taken by a physician, these data gives a quick scan of the health of the school. This information might include teacher grade distributions, student suspensions, percentages of students on the honor roll, student citizenship, student tardies, student absences, teacher absences, student performance on formative assessments, etc. This information should also be divided into subgroups so that teachers can see, in real terms, where student groups are not performing well and where they are excelling. This information gives educators plenty of direction for setting goals, designing professional development, and identifying students in need of support.

### **Increase Staff Capacity to Teach *YOUR* Children**

The primary goal of a PLC is *learning for all students*. This may seem like a simple concept at first glance, but it is a seismic shift in how many schools practice. With all of the government mandates, collective bargaining agreements, financial constraints, and the politics of education, it is easy to understand how the collective attention of educators can stray from a focus on learning. Leaders of PLCs help staff members keep their focus despite the competing demands for

attention. They recognize students cannot continually learn at higher levels unless educators are continually developing their capacity to meet the needs of students. Therefore, PLC leaders commit to adult learning and consider the collaborative team as the best format for promoting adult learning.

PLC leaders engage collaborative teams in ongoing collective inquiry into two critical areas: what is the current reality in our school and what are the best practices for ensuring that all students learn. It is the responsibility of the leader to compile the critical data that enable a staff to visualize and understand the real picture of the school's current performance. After helping the staff come to grips with the "brutal facts" of the current reality, leaders must then 1) provide them with the relevant research and literature for improving upon that reality, 2) design professional development that will increase teacher effectiveness, and 3) embed this critical adult learning into the routine practices of the school

The staff of Levey Middle School in Southfield, Michigan embarked upon this process in 2002. As principal, I provided teachers with comprehensive, longitudinal data on the learners in our school. After studying the data, we had to acknowledge that our current practices and structures were not meeting the needs of our students. As a result, we spent a full year studying relevant research on adolescent learners such as the National Middle School Association's report, *Turning Points*. Teachers worked together in their teams to study the state standards and state assessment, to align curriculum with those standards, to develop common formative assessments to monitor each student's learning, and to create systems of intervention for students who required additional time and support.

Of course members of a PLC not only discuss what they must start doing to improve results in their school, they also discuss what they should *stop doing*. Teachers in our district were required to attend two staff meetings each month. The Levey staff decided to stop using

staff meetings for trivia and announcements and to use this time instead to improve ourselves professionally.

Staff meetings became opportunities for building shared knowledge, reflecting on practice, identifying the most effective instructional strategies, and brainstorming solutions to the problems we confronted. A committee of teachers helped to select the materials for our collective inquiry, read the material in advance, and designed questions that would link the information to our students and to our instructional practice. Each staff member was responsible for completing a small reading assignment and being prepared for a guided discussion with their colleagues. Soon the conversations about students were guided by facts and research-based solutions instead of stereotypes and unthinking assumptions. Slowly we began to build a collective sense of efficacy.

By 2005, student achievement and student conduct at Levey had improved tremendously. The percentage of students meeting the state proficiency standard in reading had more than doubled and the percentage proficient in math had increased by more than 50 percent. A school that had lagged far behind state averages had surpassed the state and eliminated the achievement gap. This transformation occurred, not because of an influx of better, brighter students, but because of the increased capacity, skill, and confidence of the staff.

### **A Leader's Highest Duty**

Michael Fullan (2003) writes, "The leader's job is to help change context – to introduce new elements into the situation that are bound to influence behavior for the better" (p. 1). The administrator is the torch-bearer. He/she must introduce new elements to impact practice, but must also display the kind of intellect, passion, and persistence needed to inspire his/her staff to conquer past assumptions that interfere with student achievement.

Those who hope to lead PLCs must recognize that they cannot expect the students and staff to learn and change if they do not model that behavior for them. As leaders they should not expect teachers to believe in students or to lead students to improved achievement, if they do not believe in teachers and create the conditions that lead teachers to improved practice. They must remember, "fostering self-efficacy, helping people to believe in themselves, is one of a leader's highest duties" (Gardner, 1988, p.23).

## REFERENCES

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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.