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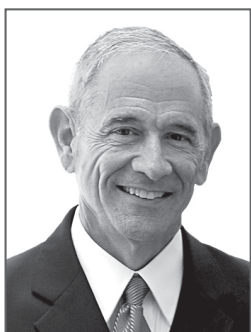
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About the Authors



Richard DuFour, EdD, was a public school educator for thirty-four years, serving as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. During his nineteen-year tenure as a leader at Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, Stevenson was one of only three U.S. schools to win the U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon Award on four occasions and the first comprehensive high school to be designated a New America High School as a model of successful school reform. He received his state's highest award as both a principal and a superintendent.

A prolific author and sought-after consultant, Dr. DuFour was recognized as one of the leading authorities on helping school practitioners implement the Professional Learning Communities at Work[®] process in their schools and districts.

Dr. DuFour was presented the Distinguished Scholar Practitioner Award from the University of Illinois and was the 2004 recipient of the National Staff Development Council's Distinguished Service Award.

To learn more about Dr. DuFour's work, visit AllThingsPLC (<https://allthingsplc.info>).



Rebecca DuFour served as a teacher, school administrator, and central office coordinator. As an elementary principal, she helped her school earn state and national recognition as a Model PLC. She was coauthor of numerous books, articles, and a video series on the topic of PLCs.

Serving as a consultant for more than fifteen years, Becky brought more than thirty-five years of professional experience to her work with educators around the world who were implementing the PLC process in their own organizations.

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To learn more about Becky's work, visit AllThingsPLC (<https://allthingsplc.info>).



Introduction

Since the first public school in what would become the United States opened in Boston on April 23, 1635 (National Geographic Society, 2023), there has never been a shortage of initiatives aimed at improving public schools. However, with few exceptions, each has been short-lived. The Professional Learning Communities at Work® (PLC at Work) process is one exception. It has been more than twenty-five years since the 1998 publication of *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, and the number of schools and school districts implementing the PLC at Work process continues to show considerable growth (allthingsplc.info, 2024). Schools that have embedded PLC at Work practices can be found in every state and province in North America and increasingly throughout the world (allthingsplc.info, 2024).

What accounts for the staying power of the PLC at Work process? Why, after more than twenty-five years, does the PLC at Work process continue to grow in popularity? The primary reason is results. When embedded with fidelity and specificity, the PLC at Work process leads to improved student learning (Cottingham, Hough, & Myung, 2023; Hanson et al., 2021; Read On Arizona, 2024; Solution Tree, 2024a–j). While many factors contribute to long-term acceptance of and commitment to various improvement initiatives, by far the most powerful factor is always results. It is difficult to disagree with solid data that show increases in student learning.

In traditional schools, results are often thought of in terms of likability—whether a particular process or practice is liked by the faculty. While the PLC at Work process places a high value on administrator, faculty, and staff feelings, ultimately, the measure of results is the impact on student learning, and the PLC at Work process continues to demonstrate a positive impact on student learning in all kinds of schools of various sizes, grade levels, and socioeconomic conditions. (See “Why Should We Implement the Professional Learning Communities at Work Process?” on pages 11–12 for what the research says about the impact of the PLC at Work process.)

Contributing to the continuing popularity of PLC at Work is the reliance on collaborative teaming as the engine that drives the work. The primary structural characteristic of traditional schools is individual teachers being asked to do an increasingly difficult and complex job in isolation, by themselves. In today’s schools, this is a recipe for failure and eventually contributes to low morale. The use of collaborative teaming provides teachers with an enhanced sense of hope and confidence. While an individual teacher might think, “I cannot be successful,” they come to believe, “We can succeed,” when working as a contributing member of a high-performing team. Teaming in a PLC at Work school gives teachers hope.



CHAPTER 1

A Guide to Action for Professional Learning Communities at Work

Like the previous editions of this book, this fourth edition is grounded in the understanding that we learn best by doing. We have known this to be true for quite some time. More than 2,500 years ago, Confucius observed, “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” Most educators acknowledge that our deepest insights and understandings come from action, followed by reflection and the search for improvement. After all, most educators spent four or five years *preparing* to enter the profession—taking courses on content and pedagogy, observing students and teachers in classrooms, completing student teaching under the tutelage of a veteran teacher, and so on. Yet almost without exception, they admit that they learned more in their first semester of *teaching* than they did in the four or five years they spent preparing to enter the profession. This is not an indictment of higher education; it is merely evidence of the power of learning that is embedded in the work.

Our profession also attests to the importance and power of learning by doing in educating our students. We want students to be *actively engaged* in *hands-on, authentic exercises* that promote *experiential learning*. How odd, then, that a profession that pays such homage to learning by doing is so reluctant to apply that principle when it comes to developing its collective capacity to meet students’ needs. Why do institutions created for and devoted to learning not call on the professionals within them to become more proficient in improving the effectiveness of schools by actually doing the work of school improvement? Why have we been so reluctant to learn by doing?

What Are Professional Learning Communities?

Since 1998, we have published many books and videos with the same two goals in mind: (1) to persuade educators that the most promising strategy for meeting the challenge of helping all students learn at high levels is to develop their capacity to function as a professional learning community and (2) to offer specific strategies and structures to help them transform their own schools and districts into PLCs.

It has been interesting to observe the growing popularity of the term *professional learning community*. In fact, the term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a

common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning. This lack of precision is an obstacle to implementing PLC practices because, as Mike Schmoker (2004a) observes, “clarity precedes competence” (p. 85). Thus, we begin this handbook with an attempt to clarify our meaning of the term. To those familiar with our past work, this step may seem redundant, but we are convinced that redundancy can be a powerful tool in effective communication, and we prefer redundancy to ambiguity.

We have seen many instances in which educators assume that a PLC is a program. For example, one faculty told us that each year, they implemented a new program in their school. The previous year, it had been PLC; the year prior to that, it had been Understanding by Design; and the current year, it was differentiated instruction. They had converted the names of the various programs into verbs, and the joke among the faculty was that they had been “PLCed, UBDed, and Died.”

The PLC process is not a program. It cannot be purchased, nor can it be implemented by anyone other than the staff themselves. Most importantly, it is ongoing—a continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it.

It is helpful to think of the school or district as the PLC and the various collaborative teams as the building blocks of the PLC.

We have seen other instances in which educators assume that a PLC is a meeting—an occasional event when they meet with colleagues to complete a task. It is not uncommon for us to hear, “My PLC meets Wednesdays from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.” This perception of a PLC is wrong on two counts. First, *the PLC is the larger organization and not the individual teams that comprise it*. While collaborative teams are essential parts of the PLC process, the sum is greater than the individual parts. Much of the work of a PLC cannot be done by a team but instead requires a schoolwide or districtwide effort. So we believe it is helpful to think of the school or district as the PLC and the various collaborative teams as the building blocks of the PLC. Second, once again, the PLC process has a pervasive and ongoing impact on the structure and culture of the school. If educators meet with peers on a regular basis only to return to business as usual, they are not functioning as a PLC. So the PLC process is much more than a meeting.

A PLC is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.

Other educators have claimed they are members of a PLC because they engage in dialogue based on common readings. The entire staff reads the same book or article, and then members meet to share their individual impressions of what they have read. But a PLC is more than a book club. Although collective study and dialogue are crucial elements of the PLC process, the process requires people to *act* on the new information.

So, what is a PLC? We argue that it is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators. Transforming a traditional school into a PLC changes the very culture and structure of the school. We summarize some of these shifts in the reproducible “Cultural Shifts in a Professional Learning Community” on pages 15–17; the following section examines elements of the PLC process more closely.