THIRD EDITION

Learning by Doing

A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work®

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For Becky, to whom I dedicate this book, my life's work, and every day for the rest of my life.

—Rick DuFour

For Rick, my husband and soul mate. Thank you for inspiring me to grow and learn by doing in every aspect of our amazing life together.

—Becky DuFour

To the memory of my parents for their constant support and unconditional love.

—Bob Eaker

To Rick: Both personally and professionally and in so many ways, you have been my mentor, coach, advocate, and friend. Thank you for the privilege of being a fellow traveler on this incredible journey!

—Tom Many

To a visionary leader and true friend, Jeff Jones. I cannot thank you enough for your efforts in promoting the PLC process and for your support of my work.

—Mike Mattos

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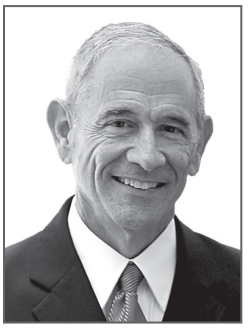
About the Authors



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 United States 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 superintendent.

A prolific author and sought-after consultant, Dr. DuFour is 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 (www.allthingsplc.info).

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

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Thomas W. Many, EdD, works with teachers, administrators, school boards, parents, and other education stakeholders on organizational leadership, implementation and change, and PLC at Work® strategies and concepts.

Dr. Many's long and distinguished career includes twenty years of experience as a superintendent. He has also served as a classroom teacher, learning center director, curriculum supervisor, principal, and assistant superintendent.

As former superintendent of Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96 in Illinois, Dr. Many used the tenets of the PLC at Work process to ensure high levels of learning for all students. He played a key role in preparing elementary and middle-grade students to enter Adlai E. Stevenson High School, a nationally recognized PLC. Under Dr. Many's leadership, student achievement in District 96 improved every year for twelve consecutive years. More than 95 percent of all students now meet or exceed state standards. The district has been especially effective in helping students with special needs improve their academic performance. It has become recognized as one of the premier elementary school districts in the United States. A dedicated PLC practitioner, he is a compelling and sought-after speaker.

Dr. Many has written numerous articles and has coauthored books.

To learn more about Dr. Many's work, visit AllThingsPLC (www.allthingsplc.info) and follow him on Twitter @tmany96.

Mike Mattos is an internationally recognized author, presenter, and practitioner who specializes in uniting teachers, administrators, and support staff to transform schools by implementing the response to intervention (RTI) and PLC processes. Mike co-created the RTI at Work™ model, which builds on the foundation of the PLC at Work process by using team structures and a focus on learning, collaboration, and results to drive successful outcomes to successfully create systematic, multitiered systems of support to ensure high levels of learning for all students.

He is former principal of Marjorie Veeh Elementary School and Pioneer Middle School in California. At both schools, Mike helped create powerful PLCs, improving learning for all students. In 2004, Marjorie Veeh, an elementary school with a large population of youth at risk, won the California Distinguished School and National Title I Achieving School awards.

A National Blue Ribbon School, Pioneer is among only thirteen schools in the United States selected by the GE Foundation as a Best-Practice Partner and is one of eight schools chosen by Richard DuFour to be featured in the video series *The Power of Professional Learning Communities at Work: Bringing the Big Ideas to Life*. Based on standardized test scores, Pioneer ranks among the top 1 percent of California secondary schools and, in 2009 and 2011, was named Orange County's top middle school. For his leadership, Mike was named the Orange County Middle School Administrator of the Year by the Association of California School Administrators.

To learn more about Mike's work, visit AllThingsPLC (www.allthingsplc.info) and follow him on Twitter @mikemattos65.

To book Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas W. Many, or Mike Mattos for professional development, contact pd@SolutionTree.com.

Introduction to the Third Edition

The first edition of this book began with a simple sentence: "We learn best by doing." This axiom certainly applies to our own work. Since the publication of the first edition of *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*® in 2006, we have made presentations to more than one hundred thousand educators, served on dozens of panels, worked with several districts on a long-term basis to assist with their implementation of the Professional Learning Communities at Work (PLC) process, and participated in ongoing dialogue with educators on AllThingsPLC (www.allthingsplc.info). This continuing work with teachers, principals, and central office staff from schools and districts throughout North America and beyond has given us a deeper understanding of the challenges they face as they attempt to implement the PLC process in their organizations.

We learn best by doing.

In 2010, we shared our deeper understanding in the second edition of *Learning by Doing*. That edition addressed such key concepts as reciprocal accountability, districtwide implementation of the PLC process, the dangerous detours and seductive shortcuts that undermine effective implementation, and a detailed five-point continuum of each element of the PLC process to help educators assess their progress on the PLC journey.

What's New in This Edition

We remain proud of the second edition of *Learning by Doing*, but since it was published, we have learned a lot, individually and collectively, and we have written extensively about the PLC process. As we reflected on our learning, we soon recognized several areas of the second edition that needed updating and a few significant issues that we had not adequately addressed. In this third edition, we address those issues and expand on others. New additions and expanded topics to this revised edition include the following.

- **We have added two new chapters:** One new chapter focuses on the importance of team-developed common formative assessments. In our work with schools and educators, we have come to recognize that developing assessments is a fork in the road for many schools on their PLC journey. The path that educators take determines in large part whether their schools will become high-performing PLCs or settle for "PLC lite." The new material on

creating common formative assessments in this edition will help you travel the right path.

We have also added a chapter on staffing issues in PLCs. We have heard educators express their frustration with the disruption of the collaborative team process that occurs when colleagues leave the team and they must bring new members on board. In this edition, we address keys to hiring staff members who will be a good fit for the PLC process, how to provide effective orientation for them, and how to do a better job of retaining educators.

- **We include more information about successful implementation and common mistakes:** We now have a deeper understanding both of how to implement the PLC process successfully districtwide and the common mistakes districts make when implementation has little impact on student achievement. In this edition, we compare and contrast the strategies that high-impact and low-impact districts use.
- **We address proficiency:** We have come to recognize that clarifying essential standards demands developing an agreed-on understanding of what proficient work looks like. Too often we have seen teams leave the issue of proficiency unaddressed. We provide examples of the kind of clarity regarding proficiency that is a prerequisite to a guaranteed and viable curriculum.
- **We offer suggestions for integrating deeper knowledge into the curriculum and teacher-made assessments:** The Common Core State Standards Initiative has called attention to the fact that state assessments have typically relied on low-level questions that primarily focus on recall of information rather than probing for deeper knowledge. Whether or not a state adopts the Common Core, educators must focus on requiring deeper learning on the part of their students and on creating assessments that will allow students to demonstrate that deeper knowledge.
- **We comprehensively address the issue of systematic intervention:** We are thrilled that Mike Mattos, one of the leading experts on intervention, has become an integral part of our team. Although we addressed the issue of systematic intervention in previous editions, Mike addresses the issue of systematic intervention more fully in this edition.
- **We provide even more tools for your work:** It has become evident to us that educators benefit from having explicit protocols and tools to guide their work as they move through the various steps on the PLC journey. Throughout this edition, we include proven protocols, tools, and sample products from high-performing PLCs and districts.
- **We provide a broader research base:** In this edition, we have updated the research base that supports the PLC process with more than one hundred new references.
- **We focus on immediate steps:** In previous editions, we attempted to present a compelling rationale for why schools should operate as PLCs. The

PLC process has become so widely accepted as the best strategy for improving schools that in this edition, we place a much greater emphasis on taking immediate steps to begin implementation of the process itself.

A Move From Interest to Commitment

It has been gratifying to witness the growing interest in the PLC at Work process since Rick and Bob published their groundbreaking book on PLCs in 1998, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. It has been frustrating, however, that more educators have not moved from interest to commitment. As Art Turock, the author of several books on self-motivation, observes, "There is a difference between interest and commitment. When you are interested in something, you do it only when it is convenient. When you are committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results" (A. Turock, personal communication, September 30, 2015).

Our colleagues Ken Williams and Tom Hierck (2015) frame the issue another way. To paraphrase their approach, they observe that many educators are "flirting" with PLCs, observing the process from afar but not taking positive steps to move forward. Other educators are "dating" PLCs. They are dabbling in the work and curious about its potential, but they leave their options open so that they can break up when the next hot thing comes along. Still other educators are "engaged" to the PLC process because they have made a commitment to engage fully in the work and are striving to get better at it. As Williams and Hierck (2015) put it, these educators have "put a ring on it" (p. 96). Finally, we would extend their analogy to say that some educators are "married" to the PLC process. This is the way of life they have chosen, and they would never return to their old way of doing things. Their schools continue to flourish even if key leaders leave because the PLC process is so deeply embedded in the culture of their school it has become "the way we do things around here."

It is time for educators to move from an interest in the PLC process to a commitment to the process where there are no excuses for failing to move forward. It is time to progress from flirting with PLCs to marrying the process. It is time to move from thinking about PLCs and talking about PLCs to *doing* what PLCs actually do and getting better at it. The moral imperative for engaging fully in this process has never been stronger, and we do not apologize for presenting this book as what it is intended to be: a demand for action from educators at all levels.

It is time for educators to move from an interest in the PLC process to a commitment to the process where there are no excuses for failing to move forward.

The first edition supported schools and teams engaged in the PLC process by providing helpful tools and templates in two formats—within the pages of the book and on a compact disc that was included with the book. In the second edition, we moved many of the tools and templates online so that we could revise, update, and add to them on an ongoing basis. This edition features the most up-to-date online resources along with some new tools and templates. Please visit **go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks** to download the free reproducibles and access materials related to this book. We also invite educators to visit AllThingsPLC (www.allthingsplc.info) to access research, case studies, strategies, and tools and to share materials they have created to help them in their work.

The Format

We continue with the format that we introduced in the second edition. Starting in chapter 2, each chapter of this handbook includes seven parts.

- Part One: The Case Study
- Part Two: Here's How
- Part Three: Here's Why
- Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey
- Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward
- Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community
- Part Seven: Dangerous Detours and Seductive Shortcuts

Part One: The Case Study

Each chapter opens with a case study describing some of the issues and challenges that have arisen in a school or district that is attempting to implement the PLC process. The names of schools and people described in the case studies are fictional, but the situations presented are neither fictional nor hypothetical. They represent the very real issues educators must grapple with and resolve if they are to bring the PLC process to life in their schools and districts. Readers may be tempted to skip the case studies and move quickly to solutions; we urge you to resist that temptation. A critical step in assessing alternative solutions to any problem is to come to an understanding and appreciation of the problem itself. We hope you will take the time to consider each case study carefully, reflect on the issues it presents, and generate possible strategies for addressing those issues prior to studying the rest of the chapter. Engaging in this reflective process with your colleagues will further strengthen your learning.

Part Two: Here's How

In our work with schools, we have found that *how* questions come in at least two varieties. One type represents a sincere and genuine solicitation of guidance from inquirers who are willing to act, and the other typically comes in waves as a series of "Yeah, but . . ." questions. For example, after listening to an explanation of the PLC process, a teacher or administrator responds:

- "Yeah, but . . . how are we supposed to find time to collaborate?"
- "Yeah, but . . . how can we give students extra time and support for learning when our schedule will not allow it?"
- "Yeah, but . . . how can this work in a school this big (or small, or poor, or urban, or rural, or suburban, or low achieving and, therefore, too despondent, or high achieving and, therefore, too complacent)?"

- "Yeah, but . . . how can we make this happen with our ineffective principal (or unsupportive central office, or adversarial teacher union)?"

These questions are less of a search for answers on how to implement the PLC process successfully and more of a search for a reason to avoid implementation. As Peter Block (2003) says, "Asking 'How?' is a favorite defense against taking action" (p. 11). Block (2003) goes on to say, "We act like we are confused, like we don't understand. The reality is that we *do* understand—we get it, but we don't like it" (pp. 47–48). Our own work with schools has confirmed that a group that is determined not to act can always find a justification for inaction. Questions about *how* can have a positive impact only if those asking are willing to act on the answers. We challenge you as you read this book to begin with the attitude that you are seeking a solution for every obstacle instead of looking for an obstacle in every solution.

Therefore, the Here's How sections in this book are written for those who seek ideas, insights, and information regarding how the PLC process comes alive in the real world of schools. Part Two of each chapter describes how educators bring a particular PLC element to life in their school. It presents exemplars for schools to use as a model as they work through the challenges of moving from concept to action.

We fully recognize that there is no precise recipe for school improvement (blending two parts collaboration with one part formative assessment does not work). We also understand that even the most promising strategies must be customized for the specific context of each district and each school. The most effective improvement models are those that staff have *adapted* to fit the situation in their schools and communities. In these schools and districts "leaders use an array of strategies and tactics to accommodate the contextual realities in which they operate" (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010, p. 62). Therefore, the Here's How sections do not presume to present the answer to problems posed in the case study, because it is the dialogue about and the struggle with those problems at the school and district levels that result in the deepest learning and greatest commitment for teachers and administrators. Our hope is that this book can serve as a tool that educators can use to initiate the dialogue and to engage in the struggle.

Even the most promising strategies must be customized for the specific context of each district and each school.

Part Three: Here's Why

Informing others about how something can be done does not ensure they will be persuaded to do it. In fact, we are convinced that one of the most common mistakes school administrators make in the implementation of improvement initiatives is to focus exclusively on *how* while being inattentive to *why*. Leaders at all levels must be prepared to anticipate and respond to the inevitable questions and concerns that arise when educators are called on to engage in new practices. We have included Part Three in each chapter to offer useful tools—research, reasoning, and rationale—to help clarify why the initiative should be undertaken.

Throughout the book we have provided a concise summary of research to assist in the consideration of the why question for a specific recommended action. Our review of research draws on, but is not limited to, the research base on education. We examine findings from studies in organizational development, change processes, leadership,

effective communication, and psychology because the challenges facing contemporary leaders demand that they look outside the narrow scope of their professional field for answers. We recommend that staff members be encouraged to review the summaries of research and to identify any research that refutes or contradicts it. In every case, the weight of the evidence should be apparent to all who consider it.

Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey

In each chapter of this handbook, we'll ask you to reflect on the current conditions in your school or district and assess the alignment of those conditions with the principles and practices of a PLC.

The assessment will present a five-point continuum.

1. **Pre-initiating stage:** The school has not yet begun to address this PLC principle or practice.
2. **Initiating stage:** The school has made an effort to address this principle or practice, but the effort has not yet begun to impact a critical mass of staff members.
3. **Implementing stage:** A critical mass of staff members is participating in implementing the principle or practice, but many approach the task with a sense of compliance rather than commitment. There is some uncertainty regarding what needs to be done and why it should be done.
4. **Developing stage:** Structures are being altered to support the changes, and resources are being devoted to moving them forward. Members are becoming more receptive to the principle, practice, or process because they have experienced some of its benefits. The focus has shifted from "Why are we doing this?" to "How can we do this more effectively?"
5. **Sustaining stage:** The principle or practice is deeply embedded in the culture of the school. It is a driving force in the daily work of staff. It is deeply internalized, and staff would resist attempts to abandon the principle or practice.

The continuum in each chapter is based on the premise that it is easier to get from point A to point B if you know where point B is and can recognize it when you get there. The sustaining stage of the continuum explains point B in vivid terms. It describes the better future your school is moving toward on its PLC journey. A journey from A to B, however, also requires some clarity regarding the starting point. The continuum is also a tool to help educators assess the current position of their school or team so that they can move forward purposefully rather than fitfully.

This continuum can be administered across a district, school, or team. Many districts have converted it to an electronic format and used simple survey tools, such as SurveyMonkey, to gather information on staff perceptions. Whatever format you use, we recommend that the process begins by asking each individual to make anonymous,

independent, and candid assessments and to offer evidence and anecdotes to support his or her conclusions on each characteristic presented.

Once members complete their individual assessments, the results should be compiled and shared with all participants. Staff members can then analyze the results and use them to begin dialogue to clarify the current reality of their team, school, or district. Participants should be particularly attentive to discrepancies in responses and explore reasons for the differences. Groups have a tendency to gloss over disagreements. One person contends the school is in the pre-initiating stage while another contends it is developing, and to avoid discussion, they merely compromise and settle for the initiating stage. Avoid that temptation. Delve into one another's thinking to see if you can clarify discrepancies and establish common ground.

Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward

Each chapter includes specific suggestions and strategies to assist with the implementation of particular PLC processes. The primary purpose of this handbook is to encourage people to act, to learn by doing. Random actions, however, do nothing to enhance the capacity of a staff to function as a PLC. The challenge facing leaders is to identify purposeful and focused actions that contribute to the goal of improved learning for students and staff alike. Part Five offers insight regarding which actions to take and which to avoid. It identifies tactics that offer the greatest leverage for implementing PLC processes and presents research-based and practitioner-proven tips for pursuing those tactics effectively.

Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

PLC team members engage in *collective* inquiry: they learn how to learn together. But only when they focus this collective inquiry on the right questions do they develop their capacity to improve student and adult learning.

It has been said that the leader of the past knew how to tell. The leader of the future, however, will have to know how to ask. Those who lead the PLC process should not be expected to have all the answers and tell others what they must do. Leaders should instead be prepared to ask the right questions, facilitate the dialogue, and help build shared knowledge. Part Six offers some of the right questions educators should consider as they work to drive the PLC process deeper into the culture of their schools and districts.

Part Seven: Dangerous Detours and Seductive Shortcuts

It is the *process* of learning together that helps educators build their capacity to create a powerful PLC. One of the most common mistakes that they make on the journey is to seek ways to circumvent that process. This section alerts readers to some of the most common ways educators have attempted to avoid actually doing the work of a PLC so they won't fall victim to those mistakes.

It is the process of learning together that helps educators build their capacity to create a powerful PLC.

A Companion Book

This third edition of *Learning by Doing* is intended to offer a comprehensive rationale for implementing the PLC process, the research that supports the various elements of the process, common mistakes people make in implementation, and specific strategies and tools for overcoming those mistakes. The key word in this description is *comprehensive*. We recognize that there may be readers who get stuck on a specific problem who are looking for a quick answer to help them move forward. Therefore, we have created a companion book to this third edition, *Concise Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About Professional Learning Communities at Work* (Mattos, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2016), in an effort to meet their needs as well. This guide on the side is arranged in a question-and-answer format by topic for easy reference. For example, if you are looking for what the research indicates is the best way to organize teams, or how a school counselor could contribute to the PLC's collaborative process, or countless other specific questions, this book is the place to find what you need to know.

A Journey Worth Taking

We do not argue that the PLC journey is an easy one, but we know with certainty that it is a journey worth taking.

Despite the popularity of the term *professional learning community*, the *practices* of a PLC continue to represent the road less traveled in public education. Many teachers and administrators prefer the familiarity of their current path, even when it becomes apparent that it will not take them to their desired destination. We recognize it is difficult to pursue an uncharted path, particularly when it is certain to include inevitable bumps and potholes along the way. We do not argue that the PLC journey is an easy one, but we know with certainty that it is a journey worth taking. We have seen the evidence of improved learning and heard the testimonials of teachers and principals who have been renewed by establishing common ground, clear purpose, effective monitoring, and collaborative processes that lead to better results. They describe a heightened sense of professionalism and a resurgence of energy and enthusiasm that committed people have generated while working together to accomplish what could not be done alone. As Robert Evans (1996) writes:

> Anyone part of such a process, or anyone who has seen first-rate teachers engage in reflective practice together, knows its power and excitement. Opportunities to collaborate and to build knowledge can enhance job satisfaction and performance. At their best, they help schools create a self-reflective, self-renewing capacity as learning organizations. (p. 232)

The following chapters will not eliminate the bumps and potholes of the PLC journey, but they will offer some guidance as to how educators can maneuver their way around and through the rough spots on the road. It has been said that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. For those of you who are new to the PLC process, we urge you to take that step. And for those already on the journey, we hope the content in this new edition will assist your next steps. Let us begin together.

CHAPTER 1

A Guide to Action for Professional Learning Communities at Work

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 have 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 when it comes to 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 the importance of 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 processes because, as Mike Schmoker (2004) 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. In 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 on 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 itself. 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.

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 an essential part 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.

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.

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. The following section examines the elements of the PLC process more closely.

Three Big Ideas That Drive the Work of a PLC

There are three big ideas that drive the work of the PLC process. The progress a district or school experiences on the PLC journey will be largely dependent on the extent to which these ideas are considered, understood, and ultimately embraced by its members.

A Focus on Learning

The fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels.

The first (and the biggest) of the big ideas is based on the premise that *the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels (grade level or higher)*. This focus on and commitment to the learning of each student are the very essence of a *learning* community.

When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it. In order to achieve this purpose, the members of a PLC create and are guided by a clear and compelling vision of what the organization must become in order to help all students learn. They make collective commitments clarifying what each member will do to create such an organization, and they use results-oriented goals to mark their progress. Members work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, provide systematic interventions that ensure students receive additional time and support for learning when they struggle, and extend their learning when students have already mastered the intended outcomes.

A corollary assumption is that if the organization is to become more effective in helping all students learn, the adults in the organization must also be continually learning. Therefore, structures are created to ensure staff members engage in job-embedded learning as part of their routine work practices.

There is no ambiguity or hedging regarding this commitment to learning. Whereas many schools operate as if their primary purpose is to ensure that students are *taught* or are merely provided with *an opportunity* to learn, PLCs are dedicated to the idea that their organization exists to ensure that all students actually acquire the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions of each unit, course, and grade level. Every potential organizational practice, policy, and procedure is assessed on the basis of this question: Will this ensure higher levels of learning for our students? All the other characteristics of a PLC flow directly from this epic shift in assumptions about the purpose of the school.

A Collaborative Culture and Collective Responsibility

The second big idea driving the PLC process is that in order to ensure all students learn at high levels, *educators must work collaboratively and take collective responsibility for the success of each student*. Working collaboratively is not optional, but instead is an

In order to ensure all students learn at high levels, educators must work collaboratively and take collective responsibility for the success of each student.

expectation and requirement of employment. Subsequently, the fundamental structure of a PLC is the collaborative teams of educators whose members work *interdependently* to achieve *common goals* for which members are *mutually accountable*. These common goals are directly linked to the purpose of learning for all. The team is the engine that drives the PLC effort and the primary building block of the organization.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of collaborative teams in the improvement process. It is even more important, however, to emphasize that collaboration does not lead to improved results unless people are focused on the right work. Collaboration is a means to an end, not the end itself. In many schools, staff members are willing to collaborate on a variety of topics—as long as the focus of the conversation stops at their classroom door. In a PLC, *collaboration* represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to *impact* their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school.

Working together to build shared knowledge on the best way to achieve goals and meet the needs of those they serve is exactly what *professionals* in any field are expected to do, whether it is curing the patient, winning the lawsuit, or helping all students learn. Members of a *professional* learning community are expected to work and learn together.

A Results Orientation

Educators in a PLC focus on results—evidence of student learning.

The third big idea that drives the work of PLCs is the need for a *results orientation*. To assess their effectiveness in helping all students learn, educators in a PLC focus on results—evidence of student learning. They then use that evidence of learning to inform and improve their professional practice and respond to individual students who need intervention or enrichment. Members of a PLC recognize that all of their efforts must ultimately be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions. Unless their initiatives are subjected to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark rather than purposeful improvement. As Peter Senge and colleagues (Senge, Ross, Smith, Roberts, & Kleiner, 1994) conclude, "The rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results" (p. 44).

This constant search for a better way to improve results by helping more students learn at higher levels leads to a cyclical process in which educators in a PLC:

- Gather evidence of current levels of student learning
- Develop strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implement those strategies and ideas
- Analyze the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Apply new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

The intent of this cyclical process is not simply to learn a new strategy, but instead to create conditions for perpetual learning—an environment in which innovation and experimentation are viewed not as tasks to be accomplished or projects to be completed but as ways of conducting day-to-day business, *forever*. Furthermore, participation in this process is not reserved for those designated as leaders; rather, it is a responsibility of every member of the organization.

This focus on results leads each team to develop and pursue measurable improvement goals for learning that align with school and district goals. It also drives teams to create a series of common formative assessments that are administered to students multiple times throughout the year to gather ongoing evidence of student learning. Team members review the results from these assessments in an effort to identify and address program concerns (areas of learning where many students are experiencing difficulty). They also examine the results to discover strengths and weaknesses in their individual teaching in order to learn from one another. Very importantly, the assessments are used to identify students who need additional time and support for learning. We will make the case that frequent common formative assessments represent one of the most powerful tools in the PLC arsenal.

The PLC Process Requires a Culture That Is Simultaneously Loose and Tight

The PLC process empowers educators to make important decisions and encourages their creativity and innovation in the pursuit of improving student and adult learning. As you read through this text you will discover that when a school functions as a PLC, teachers collectively make many of the important decisions including:

- What to teach
- The sequencing and pacing of content
- The assessments used to monitor student learning
- The criteria they will use in assessing the quality of student work
- The norms for their team
- The goals for their team

Teachers working in teams have primary responsibility for analyzing evidence of student learning and developing strategies for improvement. Each teacher is free to use the instructional strategies that he or she feels will be most effective in helping students learn. Teachers have the authority to make all of these important decisions because these aspects of the PLC process are said to be "loose."

At the same time, however, there are elements of the PLC process that are "tight," that is, they are nondiscretionary and everyone in the school is required to adhere to those elements. The tight elements of the PLC process are listed in the feature box on page 14.

Tight Elements in a PLC

1. Educators work collaboratively rather than in isolation, take collective responsibility for student learning, and clarify the commitments they make to each other about how they will work together.
2. The fundamental structure of the school becomes the collaborative team in which members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which all members are mutually accountable.
3. The team establishes a guaranteed and viable curriculum, unit by unit, so all students have access to the same knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned.
4. The team develops common formative assessments to frequently gather evidence of student learning.
5. The school has created a system of interventions and extensions to ensure students who struggle receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic, and systematic, and students who demonstrate proficiency can extend their learning.
6. The team uses evidence of student learning to inform and improve the individual and collective practice of its members.

The debate that has raged about whether or not school improvement should be top-down and driven by administrative mandates or bottom-up and left to the discretion of individuals or groups of teachers has been resolved. Neither top-down nor bottom-up works. Top-down fails to generate either the deep understanding of or commitment to the improvement initiative that is necessary to sustain it. The laissez-faire bottom-up approach eliminates the press for change and is actually associated with a decrease in student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). High-performing PLCs avoid the too-tight/too-loose trap by engaging educators in an improvement process that empowers them to make decisions at the same time that they demand adherence to core elements of the process (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). We will reference this simultaneously loose and tight culture throughout this book.

The Importance of Effective Communication

The keys to creating a PLC culture that is simultaneously loose and tight are first, getting tight about the right things (as listed in the feature box), and then communicating what is tight clearly, consistently, and unequivocally. Marcus Buckingham (2005) contends that the "one thing" leaders of any organization must know to be effective is the importance of clarity. Powerful communication is simple and succinct, driven by a few key ideas, and is repeated at every opportunity (Collins, 2001; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Leaders must realize, however, that the most important element in

communicating is congruency between their actions and their words. It is not essential that leaders are eloquent or clever; it is imperative, however, that they demonstrate consistency between what they say and what they do (Collins & Porras, 1994; Covey, 2006; Erkens & Twadell, 2012; Fullan, 2011; Kanold, 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 1987). When leaders' actions are inconsistent with what they contend are their priorities, those actions overwhelm all other forms of communication (Kotter, 1996).

One of the most effective ways leaders communicate priorities is by what they pay attention to (Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Peters & Austin, 1985). Subsequent chapters provide specific examples of leaders communicating what is valued by creating systems and structures to promote priorities, monitoring what is essential, reallocating time, asking the right questions, responding to conflict in strategic ways, and celebrating evidence of collective commitments moving the school closer to its vision.

It is important to help your staff build shared knowledge regarding your school's current status for effective communication. Addressing this critical component of a PLC helps in establishing a solid foundation. The need for clear communication is so vital to the PLC process that we present a continuum of effective communication for your consideration. "The Professional Learning Communities at Work® Continuum: Communicating Effectively" is on pages 16–17 and online at **go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks** as a free reproducible. Once your staff have established greater clarity regarding the current status of your communication practices, we urge you to turn your attention to the "Where Do We Go From Here?" worksheet that accompanies the continuum (on page 18 and also available for free to download at **go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks**). It will prompt you to take the action necessary to close the knowing-doing gap.

Why Don't We Apply What We Know?

As we have shared our work in support of PLCs with educators from around the world, we have become accustomed to hearing the same response: "This just makes sense." It just makes sense that a school committed to helping all students learn at high levels would focus on learning rather than teaching, would have educators work collaboratively, would ensure students had access to the same curriculum, would assess each student's learning on a timely basis using consistent standards for proficiency, and would create systematic interventions and extensions that provide students with additional time and support for learning. It just makes sense that we accomplish more working collaboratively than we do working in isolation. It just makes sense that we would assess our effectiveness in helping all students learn on the basis of results—tangible evidence that they have actually learned. It just makes sense! In fact, we have found little overt opposition to the characteristics of a PLC.

So why don't schools *do* what they already *know* makes sense? In *The Knowing-Doing Gap*: *How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge Into Action*, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton (2000) explore what they regard as one of the great mysteries of organizational management: the disconnect between knowledge and action. They ask, "Why does knowledge of what needs to be done so frequently fail to result in action or behavior that is consistent with that knowledge?" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000, p. 4).

The Professional Learning Communities at Work® Continuum: Communicating Effectively

DIRECTIONS: Individually, silently, and *honestly* assess the current reality of your school's implementation of each indicator listed in the left column. Consider what evidence or anecdotes support your assessment. This form may also be used to assess district or team implementation.

We understand the purpose and priorities of our school because they have been communicated consistently and effectively.

Indicator	Pre-Initiating	Initiating	Implementing	Developing	Sustaining
The school has established a clear purpose and priorities that have been effectively communicated. Systems are in place to ensure action steps aligned with the purpose and priorities are implemented and monitored.	There is no sense of purpose or priorities. People throughout the school feel swamped by what they regard as a never-ending series of fragmented, disjointed, and short-lived improvement initiatives. Changes in leadership inevitably result in changes in direction.	Key leaders may have reached agreement on general purpose and priorities, but people throughout the organization remain unclear. Furthermore, if asked to explain the priorities of the school or the strategies to achieve those priorities, leaders would have difficulty articulating specifics. Staff members would offer very different answers if pressed to explain the priorities of the school.	There is general understanding of the purpose and priorities of the school, but many staff members have not embraced them. Specific steps are being taken to advance the priorities, but some staff members are participating only grudgingly. They view the initiative as interfering with their real work.	Structures and processes have been altered to align with the purpose and priorities. Staff members are beginning to see benefits from the initiative and are seeking ways to become more effective in implementing it.	There is almost universal understanding of the purpose and priorities of the school. All policies, procedures, and structures have been purposefully aligned with the effort to fulfill the purpose and accomplish the priorities. Systems have been created to gauge progress. The systems are carefully monitored, and the resulting information is used to make adjustments designed to build the collective capacity of the group to be successful.

Indicator	Pre-Initiating	Initiating	Implementing	Developing	Sustaining
The leaders in the school communicate purpose and priorities through modeling, allocation of resources, what they celebrate, and what they are willing to confront.	There is no sense of purpose and priorities. Different people in the school seem to have different pet projects, and there is considerable in-fighting to acquire the resources to support those different projects.	Leaders can articulate the purpose and priorities of the school with a consistent voice, but their behavior is not congruent with their words. The structures, resources, and rewards of the school have not been altered to align with the professed priorities.	The school has begun to alter the structures, resources, and rewards to better align with the stated priorities. Staff members who openly oppose the initiative may be confronted, but those confronting them are likely to explain they are doing someone else's bidding. For example, a principal may say, "The central office is concerned that you are overtly resisting the process we are attempting to implement."	People throughout the school are changing their behavior to align with the priorities. They are seeking new strategies for using resources more effectively to support the initiative, and are willing to reallocate time, money, materials, and people in order to move forward. Small improvements are recognized and celebrated. Leaders confront incongruent behavior.	The purpose and priorities of the school are evident by the everyday behavior of people throughout the school. Time, money, materials, people, and resources have been strategically allocated to reflect priorities. Processes are in place to recognize and celebrate commitment to the priorities. People throughout the school will confront those who disregard the priorities.

Where Do We Go From Here? Worksheet
Communicating Effectively

Indicator of a PLC at Work	What steps or activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each step or phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
The school has established a clear purpose and priorities that have been effectively communicated. Systems are in place to ensure action steps aligned with the purpose and priorities are implemented and monitored. The leaders in the school communicate purpose and priorities through modeling, allocation of resources, what they celebrate, and what they are willing to confront.				

Learning by Doing is intended to help educators close the knowing-doing gap by transforming their schools into PLCs. It reveals purposeful, realistic, actionable steps educators can take to develop their capacity to function as a PLC. It is designed to accomplish the following objectives.

1. To help educators develop a common vocabulary and a consistent understanding of key PLC processes
2. To present a compelling argument that American educators have a moral imperative to improve their individual and collective practice
3. To help educators assess the current reality in their own schools and districts
4. To offer tools, templates, protocols, and sample products to help educators on their journey
5. To eliminate excuses for inaction and convince educators that the best way to become more effective in the PLC process is to begin doing what PLCs do

Learning by Doing is intended to help educators close the knowing-doing gap by transforming their schools into PLCs.

To Help Educators Develop a Common Vocabulary and a Consistent Understanding of Key PLC Processes

Michael Fullan (2005) observes that "terms travel easily . . . but the meaning of the underlying concepts does not" (p. 67). Terms such as *professional learning community*, *collaborative teams*, *goals*, *formative assessments*, and scores of others have indeed traveled widely in educational circles. They are prevalent in the lexicon of contemporary "educationese." If pressed for a specific definition, however, many educators would be stumped. It is difficult enough to bring these concepts to life in a school or district when there *is* a shared understanding of their meaning. It is impossible when there is no common understanding and the terms mean very different things to different people within the same organization.

Developmental psychologists Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2001) contend that the transformation of both individuals and organizations requires new language. They write, "The places where we work and live are, among other things, places where certain forms of speech are promoted and encouraged, and places where other ways of talking are discouraged or made impossible" (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, p. 7). As educators make the cultural shift from traditional schools and districts to PLCs, a new language emerges. Therefore, we have highlighted and defined key terms used in implementing PLC processes to assist in building shared knowledge of both critical vocabulary and the concepts underlying the terms. We have also included an online glossary at **go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks** that readers can freely download and distribute. We hope it will add to the precision and clarity of the emerging language that accompanies the transformation of traditional schools and districts into high-performing PLCs.

We have included an online glossary at* go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks *that readers can freely download and distribute.

To Present a Compelling Argument That American Educators Have a Moral Imperative to Improve Their Individual and Collective Practice

Americans have always been critical of their public schools. But since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, the media and politicians seemed to be waging an increasingly aggressive war not just on the public school system but also on the educators within it. The alleged "failure" of American schools has become a cliché. In a single month (January 2012) the term *failing schools* was used 544 times in different newspapers, magazines, and wire stories. Twenty years earlier, the phrase appeared only thirteen times (Farhi, 2012).

We reject both the notion that American schools are failing and that educators are the cause of that failure. In fact, we contend that the current generation of educators has achieved some of the best results in our history. Consider the following.

- We now have the highest high school graduation rates in American history, and the rates have improved for every subgroup of students.
- More high school students are succeeding in rigorous college-level work than ever before in our history.
- The scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have improved steadily since that test was first administered in the 1970s (Ravitch, 2014).
- American students score in the top ten in the world and considerably above the international mean on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) exams (Martin, Mullis, Foy, & Stanco, 2012; Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Arora, 2012).
- Since 2009, parent satisfaction with their local schools has been among the highest ever recorded in the more than four decades since *Phi Delta Kappan* and the Gallup Poll began conducting the survey (*Phi Delta Kappan*/Gallup Poll Archive, 2014).
- One in five American schools has more than 75 percent of their students living in poverty. When American schools with low poverty are compared to the highest performing countries in the world with similar poverty rates, American students outperform their international peers (Shyamalan, 2013).
- American students consistently rate their teachers among the highest in the world on such qualities as fairness and willingness to provide them extra support (DuFour, 2015).

Contemporary American educators have accomplished more, with a more diverse student population, than any previous generation.

Contemporary American educators have accomplished more, with a more diverse student population, than any previous generation. They warrant respect rather than condemnation. But they also must recognize that the need to help every student

succeed in school has never been greater because the consequences of failure in the K–12 system have never been more dire.

Throughout most of the 20th century, a student could withdraw from high school and still have access to the middle class. In 1970, 74 percent of the middle class was composed of high school graduates and dropouts. By 2007, the middle class was composed of 31 percent high school graduates and only 8 percent dropouts (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010).

Furthermore, many high school graduates seem unprepared for the rigors of higher education. More than one-third of students entering college require remedial courses (Strong American Schools, 2008), and 34 percent drop out of college by the end of their first year (ACT, 2013). Only 36 percent of students who enter a public college have earned a degree within five years (ACT, 2013).

These statistics are alarming because men and women who are not prepared to continue learning beyond high school will be increasingly left behind in the American economy (Carnevale et al., 2010). Consider the implications for students who are unsuccessful in the K–12 system.

- Students who fail school are three times more likely to be unemployed (Breslow, 2012).
- These students are more likely to live in poverty, earning an annual salary of $20,241 or less (Breslow, 2012).
- High school dropouts in the United States earn thirty-five cents for every dollar a college graduate earns and sixty cents for every dollar a high school graduate earns. The United States has one of the largest income discrepancies between college graduates and high school dropouts of all the major economies in the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014).
- Female dropouts will live an average of ten and a half fewer years than females who graduate from college. Male dropouts will live an average of thirteen fewer years than males who graduate from college. The gap for both sexes is widening (Tavernise, 2012).
- High school dropouts are sixty-three times more likely to be incarcerated (Breslow, 2012).
- On average, each high school dropout costs taxpayers $292,000 over his or her lifetime (Breslow, 2012).

So while we reject the idea that American schools are terrible and getting worse, we also acknowledge the moral imperative for improving schools so that all students are prepared for postsecondary learning. American educators must view every student as if he or she were their own child and provide the same education they would want for their own (DuFour, 2015).