Professional Learning Communities at Work™

Building Powerful Professional Learning Teams

Presented by

Gavin Grift

24th & 25th June 2014
A message from Hawker Brownlow Professional Learning Solutions

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Hawker Brownlow Professional Learning Solutions
P.O. Box 580, Moorabbin, Victoria 3189, Australia
Phone: (03) 8558 2456 Fax: (03) 8558 2400
Website: www.hbpls.com.au
Email: info@hbpls.com.au

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Printed in Australia

Code: HA1224
0214
Gavin Grift

Biography

Gavin Grift is currently Director of Professional Learning for Hawker Brownlow Professional Learning Solutions. With experience as a teacher, assistant principal and educational coach, Gavin connects with audiences on topics ranging from Cognitive Coaching\textsuperscript{SM} and quality teacher practice to professional learning communities, collaboration and learning-centred leadership.

Gavin is an author of numerous articles and books including Assessing the Whole Child (2007) and Teachers as Architects of Learning (2014). As a PLC at Work\textsuperscript{TM} training associate he led the establishment of the Professional Learning Communities Network to Australian Schools, based on the foundational work of Dr. Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour and Bob Eaker. He also serves as a Global Outreach Consultant and training associate to Thinking Collaborative, which is the home of both Cognitive Coaching\textsuperscript{SM} (Costa, Garmston) and Adaptive Schools (Garmston, Wellman).

Gavin's combined passion, commitment and style has led him to conduct keynote presentations, workshops, seminars and in-school support days at the systems, school and classroom level both nationally and internationally. All of Gavin’s work is devoted to building an educator’s capacity to build success in others.
Building Powerful Professional Learning Teams

Gavin Grift

Desired outcomes
Ø Shared understanding of PLC concepts & characteristics
Ø Developing a deep understanding of collaboration
Ø Insights into current culture based on these concepts
Ø Commitment to the essential culture needed to grow a PLTs
Ø Deepening understanding of our role when using data and the subsequent professional support behaviours needed

Essential Questions
Ø Why should we participate as a member of a Professional Learning Community and the teams within it?
Ø How do the ideas of the Professional Learning Community model connect to my practices and beliefs?
Ø What are some of the strategies that PLTs have used to improve student learning and teacher professionalism?
Ø Where are we now and where will we go to from here?
A question to consider

What’s your sense of how a traditional school responds when it becomes apparent that students aren’t learning at the expected levels?

Traditional school’s response

No consistent, systematic response from the school

The school does not respond

Individual teachers are on their own

Traditional school’s message

The student is given choices and advised he will be held accountable for his decisions.

We will demonstrate little interest in the choices you make other than to hold you accountable for them.
Assumption driving a traditional school's culture

We provide students with the opportunity to learn. If students fail to take advantage of the opportunities, they must suffer the consequences of their decisions.

PLC's response

Provides the student with increasing levels of time and support when he experiences difficulty. It's timely (every 3 weeks), systematic and does not rely on the discretion of individual teachers. Student are not invited to seek help but are mandated to receive additional help.

PLC's message

Learning IS required. You CAN and WILL be successful here. You may NOT choose to FAIL. We want you to feel CONNECTED, Get INVOLVED, Be SUCCESSFUL.
Assumptions driving a PLC’s culture

Purpose is to ensure student learning

All of our practices, policies, and procedures must be assessed on the basis of their impact on learning.

Our collaborative efforts have an impact on student learning.

Send These Crucial “Engines of Hope” Messages

• What we are doing here is important
• You can do it!
• I’m not going to give up on you – even if you give up on yourself.

Jonathan Saphier
On Common Ground

Table Talk

To what degree are these messages being received by your students at this time?
Focus on Learning...
through....
Ø Our beliefs about learning
Ø Challenging our traditional perspectives
Ø Addressing 4 critical questions
Ø Developing a clear and compelling purpose
Ø Uncompromised and consistent reflection

Four Critical Questions
q What do we want students to learn?
q How do we know if they have learned it?
q What do we do if they don’t know it?
q What do we do if they already know it?

Focus on Learning

The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student.
The real voyage in discovery consists not of seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes

Marcel Proust

What if...?

The BIG IDEAS of a PLC

We accept learning as the fundamental purpose of our school and therefore are willing to examine all practices in light of their impact on learning.

We are committed to working together to achieve our collective purpose. We cultivate a collaborative culture through the development of high-performing teams.
“Creating a collaborative culture is the **single most important factor** for successful school improvement initiatives and the first order of business for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their schools.”

*Eastwood & Lewis*

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**Why should we collaborate?**

“The challenges of schooling are too great for individuals to shut themselves away behind closed classroom doors and try to resolve them alone. A concerted collaborative effort is necessary when teachers and other colleagues work and learn collaboratively with a clear focus on the learning of students as well as themselves.”

*Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Thomas, Wallace, Greenwood & Hawkey, 2006*

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**Keys to Effective TEAMs**

- Collaboration is embedded in routine practices - **Process**
- Time for collaboration is built into the school day and school calendar - **Process**
- Teams focus on key questions – **Process/Products**
- Products are made explicit – **Products**
- Team norms guide collaboration - **People**
- Teams pursue specific and measurable performance goals – **Process/Products**
- Teams have access to relevant information – **Process**
Increasing Professionalism

Creating your Norms
- We will arrive at meetings on time and stay fully engaged throughout
- We will actively & respectively listen to all participants
- We will confront ‘hard issues’
- We will create and ensure a positive environment
- All participants will contribute meaningful dialogue
- We will ensure mutual respect and validation of suggestions and ideas
- We will promote all ideas being heard
- We will ensure there is perspective taking

Flip it
- Individually write down three ineffective behaviours that you have witnessed in meetings
- Share your post it notes with your table
- Group for similarities
- As a table choose three that stand out as a priority
- **Flip it** - Write it down as a standard of behaviours by which the table agree to operate while we are in this group
**Tips for Implementation**

- Each team should develop their own norms
- Norms should be stated as commitments to act or behave in certain ways rather than as beliefs
- Norms should be reviewed at beginning and end of meetings for at least 6 months
- Teams should formally assess effectiveness at least once a term
- Some norms may require a 'defined as'...
- Less is better
- Norms live. They are not fixed
- Violation must be addressed

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**Why should we collaborate?**

- Gains in student achievement
- Higher quality solutions to problems
- Increased confidence among all staff
- More peer support of strengths and accommodation of weaknesses
- Ability to test new ideas
- More support for new teachers
- Expanded pool of ideas, materials, and methods

*Little, 1990*

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**Group IQ**

“There is such a thing as group IQ. While a group can be no smarter than the sum total of the knowledge and skills of its members, it can be much ‘dumber’ if its internal workings don’t allow people to share their talents.”

*Sternberg, 1988*
So what is collaboration?

What is Collaboration?

A systematic process in which we work together, interdependently to analyse and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results.

DuFour, Baker & DuFour

What is a Team?

A group of people working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are held mutually accountable. Collaborative teams are the building blocks of PLCs.

DuFour, Baker & DuFour
Compass Points Activity

North
Acting – Let’s do it like to act, try things, plunge in

West
Paying attention to detail – likes to know that who, what, when, where, why before acting

East
Speculating – likes to look at the big picture, the possibilities, before acting

South
Caring – likes to know that everyone’s feeling have been taken into consideration, that their voices have been heard, before acting

What are the strengths of your style?
(4 adjectives)

What are the limitations of your style?
(4 adjectives)

What style do you find the most difficult to work with?

What do other people need to know about you so that we can work together more effectively?

The BIG IDEAS of a PLC

We accept learning as the fundamental purpose of our school and therefore are willing to examine all practices in light of their impact on learning.

We are committed to working together to achieve our collective purpose. We cultivate a collaborative culture through the development of high-performing teams.

We assess our effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions. Individuals, teams and schools seek relevant data and information and use that information to promote continuous improvement.
Collaborate on what???

The Four Critical Questions....

q What do we want students to learn?
q How do we know if they have learned it?
q What do we do if they don’t learn?
q What do we do if they already know it?

PLT Process
• Agreement on essential learnings
• Agreement on the method of assessing those learnings (knowledge, reasoning, performance, product)
• Agreement on standard of measurement
• Agreement on level of proficiency
• Created in collaboration with team members
• Agreement to examine results to form instruction and design interventions for mastery.

PLC’s Approach
Assessment Differently

We believe that assessment can do more than merely document student achievement. We believe that assessment, if approached properly, can nurture the very achievement that we are trying to document.

Judy Arter and Bill Savard
Before They Can Assess, They Must Examine Their Curriculum

They Determine What Is Essential

- **Endurance**—Will this standard provide students with knowledge and skills that will be of value beyond a single test date?
- **Leverage**—Will this provide knowledge and skills that will be of value in multiple disciplines?
- **Readiness for the next level of learning**—Will this provide students with the essential knowledge and skills that are necessary for success in the next grade or the next level of instruction?


Essential Examples

- **Endurance**—The genre of an informative text over the formula for the area of a trapezoid
- **Leverage**—History: Knowledge of reading and writing, knowledge of map reading and understanding of democracy vs. authoritarianism is more important than reciting when World War 1 ended
- **Readiness for the next level of learning**—Internalisation of multiplication and division facts will support successful problem solving and algorithm work

YEAR 1 POWER STANDARDS

EVERY student will learn the following POWER STANDARDS in the area of Number:

1. COUNTING: Understand and reason with number sequences to and from 100 by ones from any starting point, and count number sequences of two, fives and tens starting from zero.
2. NUMERATION: Recognise, model and represent numbers to 100, and read, write and order those numbers.
3. PLACE VALUE: Understand and work fluently with counting collections to 100 by grouping in tens, and counting the tens, and use place value to partition and reassemble these numbers.
4. FRACTIONS: Understand one-half as one of two equal parts, and recognise and create halves of collections.
5. ADDITION – SUBTRACTION: Model, represent and solve, produce number sentences with whole numbers (eg 4) in the context of efficient strategies including counting on.
6. NUMBER PATTERNS: Count, continue, create and describe patterns with objects and numbers to 100.

Year 3

Power Standard:

1. COUNTING: Understand and reason with number sequences to and from 100 by ones from any starting point, and count number sequences of two, fives and tens starting from zero.

2. NUMERATION: Recognise, model and represent numbers to 100, and read, write and order those numbers.

Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a relationship between numbers within patterns.</td>
<td>One place value includes numbers to one hundred.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number patterns are counting by 2's, 5's and 10's.</td>
<td>Each number is written in different forms: symbols, words, value of integers, grouping of quantities, and equal groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers can be represented as one hundred.</td>
<td>Numbers are represented in standard and expanded forms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each number is written in different forms: symbols, words, value of integers, grouping of quantities, and equal groups.</td>
<td>Each number is written in different forms: symbols, words, value of integers, grouping of quantities, and equal groups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Year 3 Middle/Senior School Power Standard Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date and Time</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
<th>Year 5</th>
<th>Year 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MONDAY</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>Year 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUESDAY</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>Year 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEDNESDAY</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>Year 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>THURSDAY</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRIDAY</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>Year 6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Narrowing the Instructional Focus

“In the process we discovered that countless lessons from existing units could be eliminated because they did not address essential learnings...Our work finally had the kind of clarity and focus necessary to create new systems for responsible assessment!”

William Ferriter
Sixth Grade Teacher

Necessary, but sometimes difficult conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the embedded targets?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How will we measure the target?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What resources do we have to teach this concept?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When should we teach this concept?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will we communicate the learning expectations to our students?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clear Goals for Student Learning

• Classrooms where students understand the learning outcomes for daily lessons see performance rates 20 percent higher than those where learning outcomes are unclear.
• Students can compare their own performance
• Provides immediate, concrete, on-going feedback on the mastery of specific skills
• Assists in making self-assessment of learning manageable for students
TIPS TO MOVE FORWARD...

1. Agree on a unit or discipline area to begin.
2. Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.
3. Determine the best criteria for determining what is ESSENTIAL.
4. Collectively commit to the ‘what’ and be prepared to answer;
   a. What will they need to demonstrate in order to show us they understand this?
5. Protect your time to teach these ‘essentials’
6. Ensure you have in student friendly language explained to students what the learning goals are
7. Learn by Doing!

Collaborative Questions...

What questions might be surfacing for your table?

Collaborate on what???

The Four Critical Questions....
q What do we want students to learn?
q How do we know if they have learned it?
q What do we do if they don’t learn?
q What do we do if they already know it?
Types of Common Assessments

- Short quizzes
- Unit tests
- Midterms
- Finals
- Focus area assessments
  - Writing
  - Reading comprehension
  - Math concepts
  - Vocabulary

“You can enhance or destroy students’ desire to succeed in school more quickly and permanently through your use of assessment than with any other tools you have at your disposal.”

Richard J Stiggins
Assessment Training Institute

Assessment for Learning

One of the most significant findings in recent educational research is that formative assessment is the cause of the greatest gains in student achievement.

(Black & William, 1998)
Assessment

OF Learning = SUMMATIVE

AS Learning = FORMATIVE

FOR Learning = FORMATIVE

Formative assessment

Teachers refer to classroom formative assessments as assessments for learning and analyse the assessment results solely to inform instruction.

Formative Assessment is???
Summative Assessment is???
Formative Assessment is to summative assessment what a physical examination is to an autopsy

**Summative assessment**
Inform others about the students

**Formative assessment**
Informs teachers and students about the teaching and learning

**Traditional instruction assessment model**
- Pre-test [x] Teach [x] Teach [x]
- Teach [x] Teach [x] Teach [x]
- Post test [x] Assign results
Revised instruction assessment model

- Pre-assess
- Analyse results
- Plan for differentiated instruction
- Teach
- Monitor, Reflect, Adjust
- Teach
- Post-assess

Formative or summative?

- A balanced assessment system includes both assessments for learning and assessments of learning. “Although they are different, both assessments of and for learning are important (Stiggins, 2004).
- While they are not interchangeable, they must be compatible” (NEA, 2003)
- By doing a good job with our assessments for learning, the results of our assessment of learning are likely to follow!

Collaborate on what???

The Four Critical Questions....

q What do we want students to learn?
q How do we know if they have learned it?
q What do we do if they don’t learn?
q What do we do if they already know it?
Sharing Our Efforts

What do we want them to learn?
How will we know if they have learned it?
What will we do if they don't?

1. What are the purposes of assessment?
2. How can a team of teachers effectively create accurate assessments?
3. Where should we start when designing assessments?
4. What strategies do you use when designing your assessments?
5. How can we partner with students in the assessment process to promote continued learning?

Common Assessments Defined

Any assessment given by two or more instructors with the intention of collaboratively examining the results for:
- Shared learning,
- Instructional planning for individual students, and/or
- Curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment modifications.

How does the use of common assessments help everyone achieve more?
- Students
- Teachers
- Schools

Write a rationale for common assessments.

PLCs Create Common Formative and Summative Assessments?

- Efficiency
- Fairness
- Effective Monitoring
- Informed practice

- Assessment literacy
- Raised expectations
- Team capacity
- Collective Response

Modified from R. DuFour keynote address at PLC Institutes
Collaborate on what???

The Four Critical Questions....

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q What do we do if they don’t learn?
q What do we do if they already know it?

Analysing and Using Common Assessment Results

Year 6 Common Assessment Data Team Results

Data Protocols

protocols plural of protocol (Noun)
Noun
• The official procedure governing affairs of state or diplomatic occasions.
• The established code of procedure or behavior in any group, organization, or situation.

Data
/data/
Noun
• Facts and statistics collected together for reference or analysis.
• The quantities, characters, or symbols on which operations are performed by a computer, being stored and transmitted in the form of...
Common Assessment Protocol

1. **Was the Common Assessment valid?**
   - As a team, which targets require more attention?
   - As a team, which students did not master which targets?
   - As a team, which classrooms require additional support?
   - As an individual teacher, which area was my strength, and how can I support others in that?
   - As an individual teacher, which area was my lowest, and how can I improve in it?

2. **What will be your team’s action plan to address the results?**
   - How was it helpful to teacher success?
   - How was it helpful to student success?

3. **What will be your team’s action plan to address the results?**
   - As a team, which targets require more attention?
   - As a team, which students did not master which targets?
   - As a team, which classrooms require additional support?
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**PLT Process**

- Agreement on essential learnings
- Agreement on the method of assessing those skills (knowledge, reasoning, performance, product)
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- Agreement to examine results to form instruction and design interventions for mastery.

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**Feedback Exercise**

- Think about 3 instances when you have given feedback to someone or someone has given feedback to you.
- On a sticky note, record (as closely as possible) the exact words that were used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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**Flexible Grouping for Personalised Learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs Attention</th>
<th>Proficiency</th>
<th>Needs Challenge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
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**Student Goal Setting**

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My strengths (the targets I got right):

My areas for growth (the targets I got wrong):

My learning goal:

Strategies/activities I can do to address my goal:
When building a results-oriented culture, leaders must find a balance between the attainable goals teams feel they can achieve in the short term and stretch goals.”


**PLT Process**

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**SMART GOALS**

- SMART Goals
  - Specific and strategic
  - Measurable
  - Attainable
  - Results oriented
  - Time bound

- All students by the end of semester 1 will effectively use compare and contrast as evidenced through the use of graphic organizers.
Team Goal

- SMART Goals
  - Specific and strategic
  - Measurable
  - Attainable
  - Results oriented
  - Time bound

- By the end of 6 weeks, 80% of students in English will score proficient (80%) or above on specific skill or concept as evidenced by a common assessment administered on agreed upon date.

School Based Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team SMART Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Reality:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 8 students are currently proficient in their times tables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 32 students are not yet proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- This gives us a current proficiency rate of 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Proficiency is completing all of the 180 problems in the allowed time (2 minutes) and get over 95% of them correct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal Metric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- By December, our goal is to have a proficiency rate of 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- We would love for new students to become proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Individual students have been identified and their progress tracked throughout the year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Other students within the group are also distributed to ensure the group as a whole reaches the target set, all including individual accountability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collaboration VS. Team

**TEAM**

A group of people working independently to achieve a common goal for which members are held mutually accountable

Collaborative teams are the fundamental building blocks of PLCs.
Response To Intervention Pyramid

Tier 1: Core Program

Tier 2: Supplemental Interventions

Tier 3: Intensive Intervention

• All students are screened to find students at risk (universal screening).
• All students receive core program which includes differentiated instruction.
• Responsive students remain in Tier 1.
• Unresponsive students move to Tier 2.
• Creative, flexible scheduling creates sufficient time for small-group instruction.
• Personnel are used creatively.
• Thirty minutes of additional time and support, three to four times per week.
• Progress is monitored more frequently than in Tier 1.
• Responsive students return to Tier 1.
• Unresponsive students move to Tier 3.

Supplemental Math and English classes based on proficiency assessment
• Math and science lunch labs
• RED (Remediation/Enrichment Days) after common assessments
• Directed learning for 30 minutes at end of day for study, homework completion, tutoring
Tier 2 Intervention Overview
- Tier 2 Intervention will always occur between 11.30am – 1.30pm.
- Learning Support Assistants will be involved in Tier 1 & 2 interventions.
- Tier 2 Intervention times will not include new learning.
- Focus: Literacy (2 x ½ hours), Numeracy (2 x ½ hours)
- LSAs will be involved in working with a specific group (identified through the year level data)
- Planning for these Tier 1 & 2 Intervention times will be allocated to members of each team during identified APT. This will include preparing the learning focus, tasks and resources for the LSA.
- Friday, 11.30 each week a meeting between LSAs and Nathan Jagoe will reflect on the progress and the adequacy of the Intervention Program.

Tier 3: Intensive Intervention
- It is more intensive, with frequent individualized intervention.
- Interventions are highly targeted, prescriptive-diagnostic, and focused on causes, not symptoms.
- Actual interventions may be the same as in Tier 2, but are more frequent and longer in duration.
- Progress is monitored even more frequently than in Tier 2.

Tier 3 - Reading P-2
- Small set of reading related skills (slow pace)
- Diagnostic assessment
  - Suggested Intervention Lesson Structure
    - 30 minute approx:
      - 20 min – reading appropriate new texts and re-reading known texts.
      - 5 min – word work or phonological skills
      - 5 min - comprehension
  - Other
- Multiple opportunities to practise
- Teaching students to mastery

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Response To Intervention Pyramid

Tier 1: Core Program

Tier 2: Supplemental Interventions

Tier 3: Intensive Intervention

Adlai Stevenson High School

- Eight 50-minute periods
- Students take six classes (50 minutes)
- Freshmen and sophomores have one study hall (50 minutes)
- Juniors and seniors passing all classes have one free period
- Freshmen have 25-minute advisory/25-minute lunch
- Sophomores, juniors, and seniors passing all classes have 50-minute lunch

Bernice MacNaughton High School

- Supplemental math and English classes based on proficiency assessment
- Math and science lunch labs
- RED (Remediation/Enrichment Days) after common assessments
- Directed learning for 30 minutes at end of day for study, homework completion, tutoring
- Hired full-time guided study teacher
- Seniors can carry lighter load if agree to tutor twice a week
In Summary

- Collective responsibility for all kids
- Need protocols for professional dialogue
- Systematic response to intervention

The school’s response

- Increased levels of time and support are given when the student is not being successful
- Response is timely
- Response is increasingly directive, not invitational
- Response is systematic

Prerequisites for systematic intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Necessary</th>
<th>When Missing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledging collective responsibility</td>
<td>No ownership, “not my issue”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification of essential knowledge, skills and dispositions all students must learn</td>
<td>different interpretations, indiscriminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common pacing guides and curriculum maps with a commitment from each teacher</td>
<td>varying &amp; haphazard emphasis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prerequisites for systematic intervention

**Necessary**

- Common formative assessments to monitor acquisition of essential knowledge, skills and dispositions

**When Missing**

- No basis for comparison to inform strengths & weaknesses; assessment may be regarded as a tool for assigning grades & promoting learning

PLC’s focus on results to identify...

1. Each student who has not yet learned the essential skills and concepts
2. Each student who has learned the essential skills and concepts
3. Strategies to improve upon our individual ability to teach each essential skill and concept
4. Strategies to improve upon our collective ability to teach each essential skill and concept

PLCs develop a system wide plan to help students who struggle

Consider three types of interventions

- Hold students accountable for their work
- Provide additional time
- Provide ‘different’ targeted instruction
Reflection on PLC Practices

- What are some things we are great at?
- What are some things we need to get better at?
- What are some things we need to start doing?
- Are there some things we need to stop doing?

“If you intend to introduce a change that is incompatible with the organisation’s culture, you have only three choices: modify the change to be more in line with the existing culture, alter the culture to be in line with the proposed change, or prepare to fail.”

Salisbury & Conner
What Is a “Professional Learning Community”?
Richard DuFour
(Professional Reading – Vol 1)

To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results.

The idea of improving schools by developing professional learning communities is currently in vogue. People use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education—a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, a national professional organization, and so on. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning.

The professional learning community model has now reached a critical juncture, one well known to those who have witnessed the fate of other well-intentioned school reform efforts. In this all-too-familiar cycle, initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative, followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform, and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative. Another reform movement has come and gone, reinforcing the conventional education wisdom that promises, “This too shall pass.”

The movement to develop professional learning communities can avoid this cycle, but only if educators reflect critically on the concept’s merits. What are the “big ideas” that represent the core principals of professional learning communities? How do these principles guide schools’ efforts to sustain the professional learning community model until it becomes deeply embedded in the culture of the school?

Big Idea #1: Ensuring That Students Learn
The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift—from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning—has profound implications for schools.

School mission statements that promise “learning for all” have become a cliché. But when a school staff takes that statement literally—when teachers view it as a pledge to ensure the success of each student rather than as politically correct hyperbole—profound changes begin to take place. The school staff finds itself asking, What school characteristics and practices have been most successful in helping all students achieve at high levels? How could we adopt those characteristics and practices in our own school? What commitments would we have to make to one another to create such a school? What indicators could we monitor to assess our progress? When the staff has built shared knowledge and found common ground on these questions, the school has a solid foundation for moving forward with its improvement initiative.

As the school moves forward, every professional in the building must engage with colleagues in the ongoing exploration of three crucial questions that drive the work of those within a professional learning community:

- What do we want each student to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?
The answer to the third question separates learning communities from traditional schools.

Here is a scenario that plays out daily in traditional schools. A teacher teaches a unit to the best of his or her ability, but at the conclusion of the unit some students have not mastered the essential outcomes. On the one hand, the teacher would like to take the time to help those students. On the other hand, the teacher feels compelled to move forward to “cover” the course content. If the teacher uses instructional time to assist students who have not learned, the progress of students who have mastered the content will suffer, if the teacher pushes on with new concepts, the struggling students will fall farther behind.

What typically happens in this situation? Almost invariably, the school leaves the solution to the discretion of individual teachers, who vary widely in the ways they respond. Some teachers conclude that the struggling students should transfer to a less rigorous course or should be considered for special education. Some lower their expectations by adopting less challenging standards for subgroups of students within their classrooms. Some look for ways to assist the students before and after school. Some allow struggling students to fail.

When a school begins to function as a professional learning community, however, teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn. The staff addresses this discrepancy by designing strategies to ensure that struggling students receive additional time and support, no matter who their teacher is. In addition to being systematic and schoolwide, the professional learning community’s response to students who experience difficulty is:

- **Timely.** The school quickly identifies students who need additional time and support.
- **Based on intervention rather than remediation.** The plan provides students with help as soon as they experience difficulty rather than relying on summer school, retention, and remedial courses.
- **Directive.** Instead of inviting students to seek additional help, the systematic plan requires students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered the necessary concepts.

The systematic, timely, and directive intervention program operating at Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, provides an excellent example. Every three weeks, every student receives a progress report. Within the first month of school, new students discover that if they are not doing well in a class, they will receive a wide array of immediate interventions. First the teacher, counselor, and faculty advisor each talk with student individually to help resolve the problem. The school also notifies the student’s parents about the concern. In addition, the school offers the struggling student a pass from study hall to a school tutoring center to get additional help in the course. An older student mentor, in conjunction with the struggling student’s advisor, helps the student with homework during the student’s daily advisory period.

Collaborative teacher conversations must quickly move beyond “What are we expected to teach?” to “How will we know when each student has learned?”

Any student who continues to fall short of expectations at the end of six weeks despite these interventions is required, rather than invited, to attend tutoring sessions during the study hall period. Counselors begin to make weekly checks on the struggling student’s progress. If tutoring fails to bring about improvement within the next six weeks, the student is assigned to a
daily guided study hall with 10 or fewer students. The guided study hall supervisor communicates with classroom teachers to learn exactly what homework each student needs to complete and monitors the completion of that homework. Parents attend a meeting at the school at which the student, parents, counselor, and classroom teacher must sign a contract clarifying what each party will do to help the student meet the standards for the course.

Stevenson High School serves more than 4,000 students. Yet this school has found a way to monitor each student’s learning on a timely basis and to ensure that every student who experiences academic difficulty will receive extra time and support for learning.

Like Stevenson, schools that are truly committed to the concept of learning for each student will stop subjecting struggling students to a haphazard education lottery. These schools will guarantee that each student receives whatever additional support he or she needs.

**Big Idea #2: A Culture of Collaboration**

Educators who are building a professional learning community recognize that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all. Therefore, they create structures to promote a collaborative culture.

Despite compelling evidence indicating that working collaboratively represents best practice; teachers in many schools continue to work in isolation. Even in schools that endorse the idea of collaboration, the staff’s willingness to collaborate often stops at the classroom door. Some school staffs equate the term “collaboration” with congeniality and focus on building group camaraderie. Other staffs join forces to develop consensus on operational procedures, such as how they will respond to tardiness or supervise recess. Still others organize themselves into committees to oversee different facets of the school’s operation, such as discipline, technology, and social climate. Although each of these activities can serve a useful purpose, none represents the kind of professional dialogue that can transform a school into a professional learning community.

The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.

**Collaborating for School Improvement**

At Boones Mill Elementary School, a K-5 school serving 400 students in rural Franklin County, Virginia, the powerful collaboration of grade-level teams drives the school improvement process. The following scenario describes what Boones Mill staff members refer to as their teaching-learning process.

The school’s five 3rd grade teachers study state and national standards, the district curriculum guide, and student achievement data to identify the essential knowledge and skills that all students should learn in an upcoming language arts unit. They also ask the 4th grade teachers what they hope students will have mastered by the time they leave 3rd grade. On the basis of the shared knowledge generated by this joint study, the 3rd grade team agrees on the critical outcomes that they will make sure each student achieves during the unit.

Next, the team turns its attention to developing common formative assessments to monitor each student’s mastery of the essential outcomes. Team members discuss the most authentic and valid
ways to assess student mastery. They set the standard for each skill or concept that each student must achieve to be deemed proficient. They agree on the criteria by which they will judge the quality of student work, and they practice applying those criteria until they can do so consistently. Finally, they decide when they will administer the assessments.

After each teacher has examined the results of the common formative assessment for his or her students, the team analyzes how all 3rd graders performed. Team members identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning and begin to discuss how they can build on the strengths and address the weaknesses. The entire team gains new insights into what is working and what is not, and members discuss new strategies that they can implement in their classrooms to raise student achievement.

At Boones Mill, collaborative conversations happen routinely throughout the year. Teachers use frequent formative assessments to investigate the questions “Are students learning what they need to learn?” and “Who needs additional time and support to learn?” rather than relying solely on summative assessments that ask “Which students learned what was intended and which students did not?”

Collaborative conversations call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private—goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers—individually and collectively.

For teachers to participate in such a powerful process, the school must ensure that everyone belongs to a team that focuses on student learning. Each team must have time to meet during the workday and throughout the school year. Teams must focus their efforts on crucial questions related to learning and generate products that reflect that focus, such as lists of essential outcomes, different kinds of assessment, analyses of student achievement, and strategies for improving results. Teams must develop norms or protocols to clarify expectations regarding roles, responsibilities, and relationships among team members. Teams must adopt student achievement goals linked with school and district goals.

Removing Barriers to Success
For meaningful collaboration to occur, a number of things must also stop happening. Schools must stop pretending that merely presenting teachers with state standards or district curriculum guides will guarantee that all students have access to a common curriculum. Even school districts that devote tremendous time and energy to designing the intended curriculum often pay little attention to the implemented curriculum (what teachers actually teach) and even less to the attained curriculum (what students learn) (Marzano, 2003). Schools must also give teachers time to analyze and discuss state and district curriculum documents. More important, teacher conversations must quickly move beyond “What are we expected to teach?” to “How will we know when each student has learned?”

A group of staff members who are determined to work together will find a way.
In addition, faculties must stop making excuses for failing to collaborate. Few educators publicly assert that working in isolation is the best strategy for improving schools. Instead, they give reasons why it is impossible for them to work together. “We just can’t find the time.” “Not everyone on the staff has endorsed the idea.” “We need more training in collaboration.” But the number of schools that have created truly collaborative cultures proves that such barriers are not insurmountable. As Roland Barth (1991) wrote,

Are teachers and administrators willing to accept the fact that they are part of the problem?...God didn’t create self-contained classrooms, 50-minute periods, and subjects taught in isolation. We did—because we find working alone safer than preferable to working together. (pp. 126-127)

In the final analysis, building the collaborative culture of a professional learning community is a question of will. A group of staff members who are determined to work together will find a way.

**Big Idea #3: A Focus on Results**

Professional learning communities judge their effectiveness on the basis of results. Working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the school. Every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress. The focus of team goals shifts. Such goals as “We will adopt the Junior Great Books program” or “We will create three new labs for our science course” give way to “We will adopt the Junior Great Books program” or “We will create new labs for our science course” give way to “We will increase the percentage of students who meet the state standard in language arts from 83 percent to 90 percent” or “We will reduce the failure rate in our course by 50 percent.”

Schools and teachers typically suffer from the DRIP syndrome—Data Rich/Information Poor. The results-oriented professional learning community not only welcomes data but also turns data into useful and relevant information for staff. Teachers have never suffered from a lack of data. Even a teacher who works in isolation can easily establish the mean, mode, median, standard deviation, and percentage of students who demonstrated proficiency every time he or she administers a test. However, data will become a catalyst for improved teacher practice only if the teacher has a basis of comparison.

When teacher teams develop common formative assessments throughout the school year, each teacher can identify how his or her students performed on each skill compared with other students. Individual teachers can call on their team colleagues to help them reflect on areas of concern. Each teacher has access to the ideas, materials, strategies, and talents of the entire team.

Freeport Intermediate School, located 50 miles south of Houston, Texas, attributes its success to an unrelenting focus on results. Teachers work in collaborative teams for 90 minutes daily to clarify the essential outcomes of their grade levels and courses and to align those outcomes with state standards. They develop consistent instructional calendars and administer the same brief assessment to all students at the same grade level at the conclusion of each instructional unit, roughly once a week.

Each quarter, the teams administer a common cumulative exam. Each spring, the teams develop and administer practice tests for the state exam. Each year, the teams pore over the results of the state test, which are broken down to show every teacher how his or her students performed on every skill and on every test item. The teachers share their results from all of these assessments.
with their colleagues, and they quickly learn when a teammate has been particularly effective in teaching a certain skill. Team members consciously look for successful practice an attempt to replicate it in their own practice; they also identify areas of the curriculum that need more attention.

Freeport Intermediate has been transformed from one of the lowest-performing schools in the state to a national model for academic achievement. Principal Clara Sale-Davis believes that the crucial first step in that transformation came when the staff began to honestly confront data on student achievement and to work together to improve results rather than make excuses for them.

Of course, this focus on continual improvement and results requires educators to change traditional practices and revise prevalent assumptions. Educators must begin to embrace data as a useful indicator of progress. They must stop disregarding or excusing unfavorable data and honestly confront the some-times-brutal facts. They must stop using averages to analyze student performance and begin to focus on the success of each student.

Educators who focus on results must also stop limiting improvement goals to factors outside the classroom, such as student discipline and staff morale, and shift their attention to goals that focus on student learning. They must stop assessing their own effectiveness on the basis of how busy they are or how many new initiatives they have launched and begin instead to ask, “Have we made progress on the goals that are most important to us?” Educators must stop working in isolation and hoarding their ideas, materials, and strategies and begin to work together to meet the needs of all students.

**Hard Work and Commitment**

Even the grandest design eventually translates into hard work. The professional learning community model is a grand design—a powerful new way of working together that profoundly affects the practices of schooling. But initiating and sustaining the concept requires hard work. It requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement.

When educators do the hard work necessary to implement these principles, their collective ability to help all students learn will rise. If they fail to demonstrate the discipline to initiate and sustain this work, then their school is unlikely to become more effective, even if those within it claim to be a professional learning community. The rise or fall of the professional learning community concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the commitment and persistence of the educators within it.

**References:**


Copyright 2004 Richard DuFour. Richard DuFour recently retired as Superintendent of Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois. He currently resides in Moneta, Virginia, and may be reached at (540) 721-4662; rdufour@district125.k12.il.us. His forthcoming book is *Whatever It Takes: How a Professional Learning Community Responds When Kids Don’t Learn* (National Educational Service, in press).
Teachers work in isolation from one another. They view their classrooms as their personal domains, have little access to the ideas or strategies of their colleagues, and prefer to be left alone rather than engage with their colleagues or principals. Their professional practice is shrouded in a veil of privacy and personal autonomy and is not a subject for collective discussion or analysis. Their schools offer no infrastructure to sup-
port collaboration or continuous improvement, and, in fact, the very structure of their schools serves as a powerful force for preserving the status quo. This situation will not change by merely encouraging teachers to collaborate, but will instead require embedding professional collaboration in the routine practice of the school.

Sound familiar? These were the conclusions of John Goodlad’s study of schooling published in Phi Delta Kappan in 1983. Unfortunately, these findings have been reiterated in countless studies from that date to the present. The reason for the persistence of this professional isolation — not merely of teach- ers, but of educators in general — is relatively simple. The structure and culture of the organizations in which they work haven’t supported, required, or even expected them to collaborate.

Attempts to promote collaboration among educators inevitably collide with this tradition of isolation. Defenders of this tradition argue that professional autonomy gives each educator the freedom to opt in or out of any collaborative process. Requiring educators to work together violates their right as professionals to work in isolation and can result only in “contrived congeniality” rather than a true collaborative culture (Hargreaves 1991). Some critics of systematic collaboration even offer a conspiracy theory, arguing that any effort to embed collaborative processes into the school day represents an ad- dendum to their education to empowering teachers. Thus proponents of volunteerism greet any attempt to ensure that educators work together with the addendum, “but only if they want to.”

I’ve searched for the dictionary that defines “professional” as one who is free to do as he or she chooses. I can’t find it. I see references to occupations in which people must engage in specialized training in order to enter the field and are expected to stay current in the practices of the field. I see references to expertise and to an expectation that members will adhere to certain standards and an ethical code of conduct. I simply cannot find any dictionary that defines a professional as someone who can do whatever he or she pleases.

PROFESSIONAL DOESN’T MEAN AUTONOMOUS

Time spent in collaboration with colleagues is considered essential to success in most professions. When professional airline pilots prepare to take off, they coordinate their work with air traffic control. If the tower informs a pilot that he or she is to move to runway 24L and be fourth in line for takeoff, the pilot does not, as a professional, have the autonomy to declare, “I prefer runway 25 and I refuse to wait.” He or she is not merely expected, but is actually required to work interdependently with others to achieve the common goal of a safe takeoff.

The law firm that represented our school district when I was superintendent required all of its attorneys to meet on a weekly basis to review the issues and strategies of various cases assigned to individual members. Each attorney presented the facts of the case and his or her thoughts on how to proceed. The others offered advice, suggested relevant precedents, and shared their experience and insights. Attending the meetings was not optional. One might say this law firm coerced its members to attend. The firm, however, believed that all of its clients should have the benefit of the collective expertise of the entire firm, not merely the single attorney to whom the case had been assigned.

When our school district underwent a major construction project, the professionals engaged in the project always worked as a team. Each week, architects, engineers, and the construction manager convened in a collaborative meeting to make certain they were pursuing a common objective according to their established plan. They monitored progress toward clearly defined benchmarks and observed agreed-on protocols for identifying and solving problems. The meetings were not optional, and it might be said that members were compelled to be there.

When I went for a comprehensive physical examination, a doctor who reviewed one of the tests initially recommended that I undergo an immediate angioplasty. The hospital protocol, however, demanded that his recommendation be reviewed by two specialists. Those specialists examined the data from the...
test, but they also sought additional information. Based on that information, the team concluded that the procedure was not necessary as long as I engaged in alternative treatments.

In each of these instances, the professional is expected to collaborate with others. In fact, collaborating effectively with others is a condition for membership in their profession. Certainly, they will spend a great deal of their time working individually and autonomously. The pilot will work in isolation during some portions of a flight. A lawyer in the courtroom must be able to respond to the immediate situation. The engineers, architects, and construction managers return to their individual realms to work at their respective tasks in the joint effort to complete their project. And the cardiologist will make decisions based on his or her individual judgment when in the operating room. In every case, however, these professionals are required to work with others on a regular basis, and a structure is created to ensure that they do so.

When schools are organized to support the collaborative culture of a professional learning community, classroom teachers continue to have tremendous latitude. Throughout most of their workday and work week they labor in their individual classrooms as they attempt to meet the needs of each student. But the school will also embed processes into the routine practice of its professionals to ensure that they co-labor in a coordinated and systematic effort to support the students they serve. Like the professionals described above, they work interdependently in the pursuit of common purposes and goals. They share their expertise with one another and make that expertise available to all of the students served by the team. They establish clear benchmarks and agreed-on measures to monitor progress. They gather and jointly examine information regarding student learning to make more informed decisions and to enhance their practice. They will not have the opportunity to opt out, because the entire structure of the school will be designed to ensure that they collaborate with their colleagues.

THE WEIGHT OF THE EVIDENCE

Professionals make decisions based on the evidence of the most promising strategy for meeting the needs of those they serve. In a profession, evidence trumps appeals to mindless precedent (“This is how I have always done it”) or personal preference (“This is how I like to do it”). So, let’s apply the standard of the “weight of the evidence” to the question, “Do schools best serve their students when educators work collaboratively or when each educator can elect to work in isolation?”

Professional organizations. Almost all of the professional organizations in education, including the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, have specifically endorsed the premise that educators should work collaboratively. In addition, advocacy organizations, such as the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF), also call on educators to work as members of a professional learning community. NCTAF’s president wrote:

Quality teaching is not an individual accomplishment, it is the result of a collaborative culture that empowers teachers to team up to improve student learning beyond what any of them can achieve alone.

The idea that a single teacher, working alone, can know and do everything to meet the diverse learning needs of 30 students every day throughout the school year has rarely worked, and it certainly won’t meet the needs of learners in years to come. (Carroll 2009: 13)

Principals have been advised by their professional organizations that one of their key responsibilities and a core strategy for improving student achievement is building the capacity of staff to work as members of a collaborative professional learning commu-
nity. When advocating collaboration, neither principal nor teacher professional associations have added the caveat, “but only if each person wants to.”

Research. There is abundant research linking higher levels of student achievement to educators who work in the collaborative culture of a professional learning community. A recent study of schools and districts that doubled student achievement concluded, “it should be no surprise that one result of the multiplicity of activities was a collaborative, professional school culture. . . what is commonly called a ‘professional learning community’ today” (Odden and Archibald 2009: 78). A study of the best school systems in the world found that schools in those systems focused on providing the “high-quality, collaborative, job-focused professional development” characteristic of “professional learning communities” in which teachers work together to help each other improve classroom practice (Barber and Mourshed 2009: 30). The most comprehensive study of factors affecting schooling ever conducted concluded that the most powerful strategy for helping students learn at higher levels was ensuring that teachers work collaboratively in teams to establish the essential learnings all students must acquire, to gather evidence of student learning through an ongoing assessment process, and to use the evidence of student learning to discuss, evaluate, plan, and improve their instruction (Hattie 2009).

A useful exercise for a school or district that claims its purpose and priority is to help students learn at high levels is to gather all the evidence faculty can find that supports the idea that students learn better if educators work in isolation. At the same time, gather all the evidence that students learn at higher levels when educators work as members of collaborative teams. The web site www.allthingsplc.info provides specific quotes from organizations and researchers who have concluded that a collaborative school culture raises student achievement. I’m unable to include research indicating students learn at higher levels when educators work in isolation, because I’m unaware of any.

If the group determines that the preponderance of evidence indicates the school will be more successful if its members work together rather than in isolation, then structures should be created to support collaboration, and all members of the staff should be required to participate. An individual’s desire to work in isolation does not trump a professional’s obligation to apply what is considered the most effective practice in his or her field.

The fact that schools create the infrastructure to ensure educators work as members of collaborative teams does not preclude those educators from forming additional, voluntary collaborative communities. Many educators use technology to form virtual communities based on common interests. However, these voluntary communities should not substitute for school structures and cultures in which working together interdependently is the norm.

**ONLY ON WHAT WE WANT**

A corollary to the volunteerism argument is that if educators work in collaborative teams, each team must have the autonomy to determine the focus of its work. The issue is presented as a question of power — who will have the authority to decide what we will collaborate about. In a mature profession united in a joint effort to best meet the needs of those it serves, the more relevant questions are: Can we agree that the purpose of our collaboration is to improve our professional practice and the learning of our students? Do we recognize that we must resolve certain critical questions if we are to accomplish that purpose? Can we demonstrate the discipline to focus on the right work?

**FOCUSBING ON THE RIGHT WORK**

Collaboration is a means to an end. Collaboration alone will not improve a school, and in a toxic school culture, providing educators with time to collaborate is likely to reinforce the negative aspects of the culture and deteriorate into complaint sessions. Team meetings that focus on the deficiencies of students, better strategies for punishing students who wear hats, or determining who will pick up the field trip forms will not improve student achievement; however, in many schools topics like these dominate
the discussion. Providing educators with structures and time to support collaboration will not improve schools unless that time is focused on the right work.

What is the right work? As members of collaborative teams, educators in a PLC work collectively to develop a guaranteed and viable curriculum to ensure that students have access to the same essential knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned. The team gathers ongoing information regarding the learning of their students through a comprehensive, balanced assessment process that includes common formative assessments developed by the team. The team then jointly analyzes the evidence of student learning from the assessments and uses the information to improve the professional practice of individual members and collective effectiveness of the team. As members look at actual evidence of student proficiency in the knowledge and skills the team has deemed essential, on an assessment the team has agreed is valid, they are able to learn from one another and continually enhance their ability to meet the needs of their students.

Finally, in a professional learning community, the school creates a systematic process that ensures that students who are struggling receive additional time and support for learning. Rather than continuing with the education lottery, where what happens when a student experiences difficulty will depend almost solely on the individual teacher to whom that student is assigned, the school will create a multi-tiered, coordinated, and collective response to support that student.

Schools committed to higher levels of learning for both students and adults will not be content with the fact that a structure is in place to ensure that educators meet on a regular basis. They will recognize that the question, “What will we collaborate about,” is so vital that it cannot be left to the discretion of each team. Educators in these schools will collectively identify the right work and then create processes to support teams as they focus their efforts on those matters that improve student learning.

POWERFUL CONCEPTS CAN BE APPLIED BADLY

The concept of a collaborative culture of a professional learning community is powerful, but like all powerful concepts, it can be applied badly. Schools can create artificial, rather than meaningful and relevant, teams. Educators can make excuses for low student achievement rather than develop strategies to improve student learning. Teams can concentrate on matters unrelated to student learning. Getting along can be a greater priority than getting results. Administrators can micro-manage the process in ways that do not build collective capacity, or they can attempt to hold teams accountable for collaborating while failing to provide the time, support, parameters, resources, and clarity that are crucial to the success of teams.

Creating a PLC is fraught with difficulty, but that doesn’t mean educators should reject the concept or allow individuals to opt out. If they are to be members of a profession, educators must work together in good faith to develop their collective capacity to implement this powerful concept effectively.

More than a quarter century has passed since Goodlad warned that overcoming the tradition of teacher isolation will require more than an invitation. We must do more than exhort people to work together. In order to establish schools in which interdependence and collaboration are the new norm, we must create the structures and cultures that embed collaboration in the routine practice of our schools, ensure that the collaborative efforts focus on the right work, and support educators as they build their capacity to work together rather than alone.

REFERENCES


“Daydreaming is a serious problem in my classroom. I can’t stop thinking about retirement, summer vacation, winter break, snow days . . .”
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## Essential Standards Chart

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<th>Semester:</th>
<th>Team Members:</th>
<th>What Is It We Expect Students to Learn?</th>
<th>What does proficient student work look like?</th>
<th>Provide an example and/or description.</th>
<th>What prior knowledge, skills, and/or vocabulary are needed for a student to master this standard?</th>
<th>What will this standard be taught?</th>
<th>What assessment(s) will be used to measure student mastery?</th>
<th>What will we do when students have already learned this standard?</th>
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<td>What is the essential standard to be learned?</td>
<td>Describe in student-friendly vocabulary</td>
<td>Provide an example and/or description.</td>
<td>Common Summative Assessment</td>
<td>Extension Standards</td>
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Process- vs. Results-Oriented Goals

- Identify and level expectations for writing an expository paragraph for grade 10.

- Focus staff development on number sense in mathematics.

- Increase math achievement of lowest 20% of students in grade 8.

- Decrease the number of students below level in reading in grade 2 by 20% in the next 6 months.

You try it!

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SMART Goals

• Specific or strategic

• Measurable

• Attainable

• Results oriented

• Timebound

Adapted from: Conzemius & O’Neill, The Handbook for Smart School Teams, 2001
SMART Goal Examples

- During the 2007–2008 school year, student scores will increase 30% as determined by teacher developed writing prompts.

- By the end of the second trimester, student scores will increase by moving eight students from the non-proficient list to the proficient list as measured by the Developmental Reading Assessment.

- Each quarter, two students will move and stay off of the grade D and F lists.

- At the end of the semester, there will be a 30% increase of students in the proficient column.

You try it!

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Three Rules Help Manage Assessment Data

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...”
-Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

We live in the Information Age, when never before has so much data on student learning been so readily available. It is the best of times...

And yet, to harried principals struggling to make sense of the mountains of assessment data, the Information Age may feel like the worst of times...

Mining those data mountains for information that teachers can use to improve student learning is a daily challenge for principals. The problem is not a lack of data, but rather managing all the data in a way that is meaningful to teachers. I am not aware of any guidelines about how to process all the information— that is, how to decide exactly what information is needed or who needs the information to make decisions; however, I did encounter “rules” for using data during a conversation with Damon Lopez, former principal of Los Penasquitos Elementary School in San Diego.

Lopez believes that in order for teachers to maximize the impact of data gleaned from assessments, principals should honor three rules and ensure that data is 1) easily accessible, 2) purposefully arranged, and 3) publicly discussed. In those schools where “making meaning” of assessment data is a powerful experience, principals take responsibility for creating the necessary structures associated with the first two rules and insist that teachers commit to the last. Rather than working individually to make meaning of assessment data, the most successful principals have discovered it is far more productive to create the conditions under which teams of teachers can make meaning of the data.

Easy Access
For data to add value to our efforts to improve student learning, teachers’ access to the data must be timely. In addition to figuring out who needs to know what and when, the key question for principals to ask is, “What is the most efficient way to get assessment data back to teachers?”

As Kim Marshall, publisher of the highly regarded Marshall Memo, suggests, “When turnaround time after interim assessments is long, the results are stale and outdated by the time teachers sit down and discuss them.” Data loses its impact whenever it takes more than 48 hours to return the results of a common assessment to teachers.

Outdated information makes it more difficult for teachers to be effective in adjusting instruction, identifying students who need more time and support or coordinating remedial or enrichment programs among teachers on the team. To improve the accessibility of data, principals need to shorten the turnaround time for reporting data. ➤ page 9

During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level. With a passion for promoting the development of high performing schools, his district was recently recognized as one of the highest achieving—lowest spending elementary school districts in Illinois.
Manage Assessment Data continued from page 7

Purposeful Arrangement
The second rule for maximizing the impact of data calls for assessment data to be purposefully arranged, that is, for the assessment data delivered to teacher teams to be presented in a format that is complete, accurate, and straight-forward.

Data should be organized in simple—not simplistic—ways. There are many software packages that quickly, almost instantaneously, provide assessment results in tables, charts, or graphs and make it easy for teachers to digest the results of interim assessments. Author D. M. Griffith observed, “If the message the information is trying to communicate fails to get through to the reader, [the information] is useless. It’s better to be simple and understood than complex and ignored.” What is important is that the data is returned to teachers in a format conducive to further discussion.

From time to time, teachers may create their own tables or graphs or request additional formats for organizing assessment results, but the initial data should be received in an arrangement that allows teachers to focus on the results—not the presentation format.

Public Discussion
While principals can address the logistics of making data easily accessible and arranging it purposefully, teacher teams are uniquely equipped to meaningfully engage in the public discussion of assessment data. Indeed, teachers and principals need to embrace the critical importance of publicly discussing the results of assessments. Each time they discuss an assessment together, teachers benefit from the collective wisdom of their team. Not only do they gain deeper insight into how their students are learning, but also reviewing results as a team has the added benefits of allowing teachers to deepen their content knowledge and to sharpen their pedagogy.

To paraphrase Griffith, assessment data and information on student achievement are relevant, and therefore needed, only if they are used to make a decision. In fact, nothing justifies the giving of an interim assessment—and with it the associated loss of instructional time—unless teachers discuss the results of the assessment and adjust their instruction accordingly.

The Age of Wisdom or Foolishness?
To be sure, the ready availability and discerning management of assessment data can go a long way in contributing to making this the Age of Wisdom for educators seeking to improve students’ learning. Principals who are successful focus their energies on ensuring that the data is 1) easily accessible and 2) purposefully arranged and insist that teachers spend their time 3) publicly discussing the results to ensure that all students learn.

References

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### Professional Community Leader:

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<td>Required action:</td>
<td>Facilitator's professional learning requirements:</td>
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Leading Teacher (Becc Garrow):
- Classroom support focus

### Issues:

### Actions:

### Artefacts and Timelines:

### Other:
### Necessary, but sometimes difficult conversations

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Answer</th>
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<td>How will we measure the targets?</td>
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<td>What resources do we have to teach this concept?</td>
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<td>When should we teach this concept?</td>
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<td>How will we communicate the learning expectations to our students?</td>
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Common Assessment Protocol

1. Was our assessment task valid and fair?
2. Examine data, and identify areas for discussion. Ask:
   - As a team, which targets require more attention?
   - As a team, which students did not master which targets?
   - As a team, which classrooms require additional support?
   - As an individual teacher, which area was my lowest, and how can I improve in it?
3. What will be your team’s action plan be to address the results?
4. What happened during the conversation you just had?
   - How was it helpful to teacher success?
   - How was it helpful to student success?
### Flexible Grouping for Personalised Learning

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<th>Needs</th>
<th>Proficiency</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
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<td>Attention</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>How will we know our intervention strategy worked?</td>
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What activities or direct instruction can we employ to help each category of student learn?
Key Terms and Concepts in a PLC

**action orientation:** A predisposition to learn by doing; moving quickly to turn aspirations into actions and visions into realities. Members of PLCs understand that the most powerful learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and reflective experience as the most effective teachers.

**adaptive challenges:** Challenges for which the solution is not apparent; challenges that cause us to experiment, discover, adjust, and adapt (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Adaptive challenges may also be described as second-order change.

**attainable goals:** Goals perceived as achievable by those who set them. Attainable goals are intended to document incremental progress and build momentum and self-efficacy through short-term wins.

**balanced assessment:** An assessment strategy that recognizes no single assessment yields the comprehensive results necessary to inform and improve practice and foster school and system accountability; therefore, balanced assessments utilize multiple measures of student achievement including formative assessments for learning and summative assessments of learning. Balanced assessment also refers to using different types of formative assessments based upon the knowledge and/or skills students are called upon to demonstrate. Rather than relying exclusively on one kind of assessment, schools and teams develop multiple ways for students to demonstrate proficiency.
**building shared knowledge:** Learning together. When members of PLCs are called upon to resolve an issue or make a decision, they consistently attempt to learn together by clarifying questions and accessing the same information and knowledge base. Members of a PLC, by definition, will learn together.

**capacity building:** Developing the collective ability—the dispositions, knowledge, skills, motivation, and resources—to act together to bring about positive change (Fullan, 2005a, p. 4).

**collaboration:** A systematic process in which people work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results. In a PLC, collaboration focuses on the critical questions of learning: What is it we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?

**collective inquiry:** The process of building shared knowledge by clarifying the questions that a group will explore together. In PLCs, collaborative teams engage in collective inquiry into both best practices regarding teaching and learning as well as the reality of the current practices and conditions in their schools or districts.

**common formative assessment:** An assessment typically created collaboratively by a team of teachers responsible for the same grade level or course. Common formative assessments are used frequently throughout the year to identify (1) individual students who need additional time and support for learning, (2) the teaching strategies most effective in helping students acquire the intended knowledge and skills, (3) program concerns—areas in which students generally are having difficulty achieving the intended standard—and (4) improvement goals for individual teachers and the team.
Key Terms and Concepts in a PLC

**community:** A group linked by common interests. Whereas the term “organization” tends to emphasize structure and efficiency, “community” suggests shared purpose, mutual cooperation, and supportive relationships.

**consensus:** Consensus is achieved when (1) all points of view have been heard and (2) the will of the group is evident even to those who most oppose it.

**continuous improvement process:** The ongoing cycle of planning, doing, checking, and acting designed to improve results—constantly. In a PLC, this ongoing cycle includes gathering evidence of current levels of student learning, developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning, implementing those strategies and ideas, analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not, and applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement.

**criterion-referenced assessment:** An assessment used to determine if a student or group of students have met a specific standard or intended learning outcome (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006).

**crucial conversation:** Dialogue in which “the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong” (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002, p. 3).

**curriculum leverage:** The skills, knowledge, and dispositions that will assist the student in becoming proficient in other areas of the curriculum and other academic disciplines (Reeves, 2002).

**data versus information:** Data represent facts or figures that, standing alone, will not inform practice or lead to informed decisions. To transform data into information requires putting data in context, and this typically requires a basis of comparison.
dispersed leadership: Leadership that is widely distributed throughout a school rather than vested in an individual person or position. Emphasis is placed on developing the capacity of people throughout the school to assume leadership roles and to become “leaders of leaders.”

DRIP Syndrome (Data Rich/Information Poor): The problem of an abundance of data that does nothing to inform practice because it is not presented in context through the use of relevant comparisons.

essential learning: The critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions each student must acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction. Essential learning may also be referred to as essential outcomes or power standards.

first-order change: Innovation that is incremental, representing the next step on an established path and operating within existing paradigms. The change can be implemented by using the existing knowledge and skills of the staff. The goal of first-order change is to help us get better at what we are already doing (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

formative assessment: An assessment for learning used to advance and not merely monitor each student’s learning (Stiggins, 2002). Formative assessments are used to ensure any student who experiences difficulty reaching or exceeding proficiency is given additional time and support as well as additional opportunities to demonstrate his or her learning. Formative assessments are also used to help students monitor their own progress toward an intended standard of proficiency.

foundation of a professional learning community: PLCs rest upon a shared mission of high levels of learning for all students. In order to achieve that mission, educators create a common vision of the school they must create, develop values or collective commitments regarding what they will do to create such a school, and use goals as measurable milestones to monitor their progress.
“Genius of And”: The ability to reject the “Tyranny of Or” and embrace paradox. Embracing the Genius of And allows an individual to avoid the choice between A or B and to choose both A and B at the same time (Collins & Porras, 1997). A commitment to simultaneous loose and tight leadership serves as an example of the Genius of And.

**goals:** Measurable milestones that can be used to assess progress in advancing toward a vision. Goals establish targets and timelines to answer the question, “What results do we seek, and how will we know we are making progress?”

**guaranteed and viable curriculum:** A curriculum that (1) gives students access to the same essential learning regardless of who is teaching the class and (2) can be taught in the time allotted (Marzano, 2003).

**guiding coalition:** An alliance of key members of an organization who are specifically charged to lead a change process through the predictable turmoil. Members of the alliance should have shared objectives and high levels of trust.

**high expectations:** The confident belief that all students can attain mastery of the essential learning and that the staff has the capability to help all students achieve that mastery. “High expectations for success will be judged, not only by the initial staff beliefs and behaviors, but also by the organization’s response when some students do not learn” (Lezotte, 1991, p. 4).

**knowing-doing gap:** The disconnect between knowledge and action, the mystery of why knowledge of what needs to be done so frequently fails to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000).

**Law of the Few:** The ability of a small close-knit group of people to champion an idea or proposal until it reaches a tipping point and spreads like an epidemic throughout an organization (Gladwell, 2002).
**learning:** The acquisition of new knowledge or skills through ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. Members of a PLC engage in the ongoing study and constant reflective practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement.

**learning organization:** “Organizations where people continually expand their capacities to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3).

**mission:** The fundamental purpose of an organization. Mission answers the question, “Why do we exist?”

**moral purpose:** “Acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of employees, customers, and society as a whole” (Fullan, 2001, p. 3). Fullan lists a commitment to moral purpose as a critical element of effective leadership and contends leadership must be ultimately assessed by the extent to which it awakens and mobilizes the moral purpose of those within the organization.

**norm-referenced assessment:** An assessment designed to compare the performance of an individual or group with a larger “norm” group typically representing a national sample with a wide and diverse cross-section of students (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006).

**positive deviants:** Individuals, schools, and districts “whose behavior and practices lead to solutions to problems that others in the group who have access to exactly the same resources have not yet been able to solve. . . . They provide demonstrable evidence that a solution exists within the community for the problem” (Jerry Sternin of Save the Children, quoted in Richardson, 2004).

**power standard:** The knowledge, skills, and dispositions that have endurance, leverage, and are essential in preparing students for readiness at the next level (Reeves, 2002); the most essential learning or outcomes.
Key Terms and Concepts in a PLC

**professional**: Someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base.

**professional development**: A lifelong, collaborative learning process that nourishes the growth of individuals, teams, and the school through a daily job-embedded, learner-centered, focused approach (National Staff Development Council, 2001).

**professional learning community (PLC)**: Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators.

**readiness for the next level of learning/prerequisite knowledge**: The skills, knowledge, and dispositions essential for success in the next unit, course, or grade level (Reeves, 2002).

**reciprocal accountability**: “For every increment of performance we ask of educators, there is an equal responsibility to provide them with the capacity to meet that expectation” (Elmore, 2006, p. 93). For example, principals of professional learning communities recognize they have an obligation to provide staff with the resources, training, mentoring, and support to help them successfully accomplish what they have been asked to do.

**results orientation**: A focus on outcomes rather than inputs or intentions. In PLCs, members are committed to achieving desired results and are hungry for evidence that their efforts are producing the intended outcomes.

**school culture**: The assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norm for the school and guide the work of the educators within it.
school structure: The policies, procedures, rules, and hierarchical relationships within the school.

second-order change: Innovation that represents a dramatic departure from the expected and familiar. It is perceived as a break from the past, is inconsistent with existing paradigms, may seem to be at conflict with prevailing practices and norms, and will require the acquisition of new knowledge and new skills (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Also called “disruptive change.”

simultaneous loose and tight leadership: A leadership concept in which leaders encourage autonomy and creativity (loose) within well-defined parameters and priorities that must be honored (tight). The concept has also been referred to as “directed empowerment” (Waterman, 1987) and a “culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship” (Collins, 2001, p. 124).

SMART goals: Goals that are Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Timebound (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2005).

stretch goals: Goals intended to inspire, to capture the imagination of people within the organization, to stimulate creativity and innovation, and to serve as a unifying focal point of effort. Stretch goals are so ambitious that they typically cannot be achieved without significant changes in practice. Stretch goals are also referred to as BHAGs: Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals (Collins & Porras, 1997).

summative assessment: An assessment of learning (Stiggins, 2002) designed to provide a final measure to determine if learning goals have been met (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006). Summative assessments yield a dichotomy: pass or fail, proficient or not proficient. Additional support is typically not forthcoming.

systematic intervention: A school-wide plan that ensures every student in every course or grade level will receive additional time and support
for learning as soon as he or she experiences difficulty in acquiring essential knowledge and skills. The intervention occurs during the school day, and students are required rather than invited to devote the extra time and secure the extra support for learning.

**systematic process:** A specific effort to organize the combination of related parts into a coherent whole in a methodical, deliberate, and orderly way toward a particular aim.

**teachable point of view:** A succinct explanation of an organization’s purpose and direction that can be illustrated through stories that engage others emotionally and intellectually (Tichy, 1997).

**team:** A group of people working *interdependently* to achieve a *common goal* for which members are held *mutually accountable*. Collaborative teams are the fundamental building blocks of PLCs.

**team norms:** “Ground rules or habits that govern a group” (Goleman, 2002, p. 173). In PLCs, norms represent protocols or commitments developed by each team to guide members in working together. Norms help team members clarify expectations regarding how they will work together to achieve their shared goals.

**time management:** The ability to organize and execute one’s time around priorities (Covey, 1989).

**“Tyranny of Or”:** “The rational view that cannot easily accept paradox, that cannot live with two seemingly contradictory forces at the same time. We must be A or B but not both” (Collins & Porras, 1997, p. 44).

**values:** The specific attitudes, behaviors, and commitments that must be demonstrated in order to advance the organization’s vision. Articulated values answer the question, “How must we behave in order to make our shared vision a reality?”
vision: A realistic, credible, attractive future for an organization. Vision answers the question, “What do we hope to become at some point in the future?”
Our PLC training associates are able to work with your school or organisation to embed the key concepts and characteristics for becoming a Professional Learning Community. Each training associate has worked extensively with schools to support them in becoming a PLC national model and had intensive training through the pioneers of this work, Richard and Rebecca DuFour.

Our associates can provide workshops, coaching support and act as a critical friend as you embark on your PLC journey.

Some of the key understandings your school or organisation can receive support in include:

- Developing an understanding of key PLC concepts
- Create a common vocabulary for PLCs
- Discovering the difference between collegiality and collaboration
- Creating structures that support the work and get results
- Establishing a focus on Common Formative Assessments and SMART goals
- Understanding what it means to be learner centred and results oriented
- Recognising a systematic approach to interventions, from the classroom to whole school setting

Meet some of our PLC Training Associates

**Jeff Wait**

Jeff Wait has more than 25 years experience in education. As a primary school principal, Jeff has served large and small schools across South Australia. He has been a principal in disadvantaged communities, led schools through school mergers and newly formed schools. Jeff has also held positions as a curriculum consultant and school reviewer for the Department of Education. Jeff led his last school in becoming a Professional Learning Community at Work™. He focused his leadership work on achieving whole school change and improvement by building the capacity of teachers and leaders to work collaboratively to make a positive difference for all students. Jeff is currently the President of the South Australian State Schools Leaders Association.

**Cath Hogan**

Cath Hogan is an experienced teacher and consultant with a teacher background in primary, secondary, special and gifted education. Starting life as a primary teacher Cath has always been passionate about ensuring the inclusivity of all students both academically and culturally. Studying and working in London, Zimbabwe, Hong Kong and Australia in primary and secondary settings, Cath has qualifications in special education, gifted and a Masters in Human Relationships.

Cath's passion for teaching and learning led her to consultancy work, creating opportunities to share best practice with teachers with a focus on maximising learning opportunities for all students. She currently works at as an educational consultant with much of her consultancy centering on Professional Learning Communities at Work™, 21st Century Thinking Skills, Curriculum Design through inclusive practice and coaching.

**Kylie Lipscombe**

Kylie Lipscombe, formerly a classroom teacher, has fulfilled a range of roles all focusing on teaching and learning and building teacher capacity across both primary and secondary, public and Catholic schools. These include Regional Literacy Coach and Project Officer, Assistant Principal, Educational Consultant and currently lecturer/tutor at the University of Wollongong.

Her research, academic study and practice focus on the implementation of training programs and networks, coaching, and facilitation in schools on building school capacity.

Contact Hawker Brownlow Professional Learning Solutions

E: info@hbpls.com.au
W: www.hbpls.com.au
P: 03 8558 2456