

Professional Learning Communities: What Are They and How Do They Work

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Professional Learning Communities at Work

*“So, what if there was, right now, a fairly straightforward, well-established way to appreciably improve both teaching quality and levels of learning? What if evidence from numerous schools and the research community points to proven structures and practices that (1) stand to make an immediate difference in achievement and (2) require reasonable amounts of time and resources? **The fact is that such structures and practices do exist and there is no reason to delay their implementation.**”*

*--Mike Schmoker, referring to
Professional Learning Communities at Work*

Professional Learning Communities at Work

What constitutes a professional learning community? The Professional Learning Communities at Work concept is not a “program” or a fad. Instead, the concept represents a new way of *thinking*—and, more importantly, *acting*—and, is grounded in *three fundamental shifts* from more traditional approaches to school improvement.

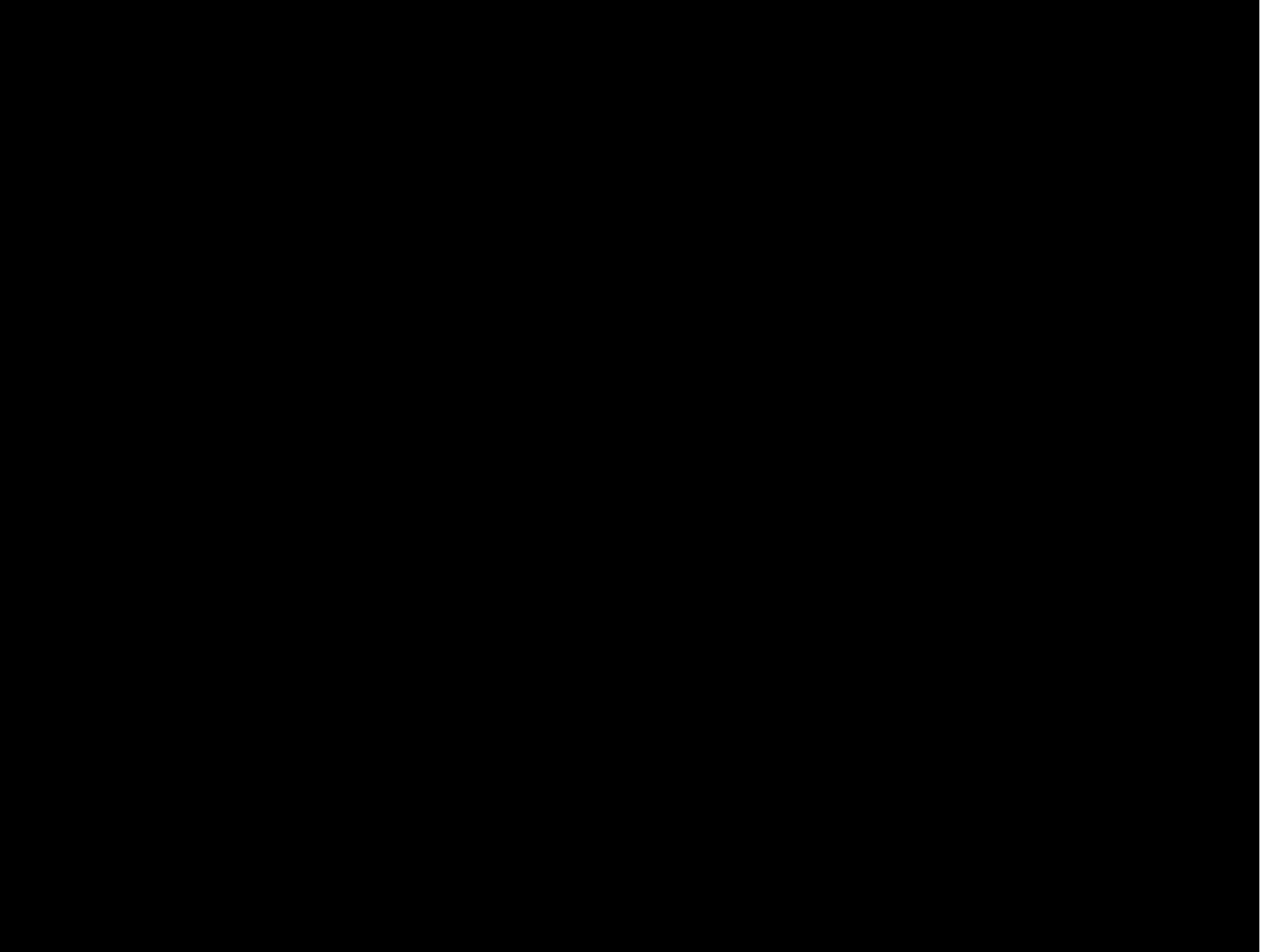
Three Big Cultural Shifts of a

Professional Learning Community

- A shift from a focus on “teaching”—making sure content gets “covered”—to a focus on Learning—***making sure the content is, in fact, learned.***
- From teachers working in isolation by themselves, to ***working in collaborative teams*** with their colleagues.
- From “intentions” to “results”—are the students learning—***student by student, skill by skill, name by name.***

Aligning the Effort

While it may seem like simple “common sense”, the Professional Learning Community at Work concept gets **everyone** *focused* on doing the “right work”--work that enhances the learning of *all* students.



The First “Big Cultural Shift”: A Focus on Learning

The first “big idea” of a professional learning community, and the idea on which all plc practices are based is this; ***the recognition that the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure that all students are learning, student by student—skill by skill.*** The recognition of this core purpose—***if we really mean it***—can significantly impact what goes on in every school—day in and day out.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

The research is clear; clarity of outcomes, checking student learning *along the way*, and providing students *additional time and support* when they struggle are the keys to enhancing student learning.

The Second “Big Cultural Shift” of a Professional Learning Community

The second cultural shift that characterizes a professional learning community is a shift from teachers working in *isolation* by themselves, to working with their colleagues as part of a *high-performing collaborative team*.

What Does the Research Tell Us?

There is virtual unanimous agreement among researchers and practitioners alike regarding the power of high-performing, collaborative teams.

“Interdependence is what organizations are all about. Productivity, performance, and innovation result from *joint* action, not just individual efforts and behavior.”

--Pfeffer & Sutton, *The Knowing-Doing Gap*

A High-Performing Collaborative Team

Teacher teams work *interdependently* to achieve *common* goals for which they hold each other *mutually* accountable.

This is not a new idea, nor is it limited to educational organizations. In fact, *the use of high-performing collaborative teams is so widely used by organizations of all kinds around the world, it is hardly discussed anymore.* It's just the way things are done in today's world!

- [Apollo 13](#)

The Third “Cultural Shift” Is A Focus on Results

Professional learning communities are passionate and persistent in their focus on results. Faculty and staff focus their energy and efforts on the learning of *each* student—*kid by kid, skill by skill!, name by name!*

*The question that drives teams in a professional learning community is this: “is **each** student learning, and how do we know?”*

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Research findings points to the importance of collaboratively developed common *formative* assessments. Formative assessments represent perhaps the single most important tool in a teacher's toolbox. And, the power of formative assessments are enhanced when collaboratively developed and *utilized* by teacher teams.

Formative and Summative Assessments

A *“check-up”* vs an *“autopsy”*

--Doug Reeves

Capturing the Power of Professional Learning Communities Through The Work of Teams

Simply organizing schools into teams in and of itself will do little to improve student learning. The key is what teams *do*, day-in and day-out. ***This requires that the work of teams be highly organized, directed, and the work of teams be carefully monitored. This point cannot be over-emphasized!***

What Teams Do

In addition to developing norms—shared commitments—regarding how they will work together as a team and what they are willing to do in order to enhance student achievement, teams also:

- Collaboratively focus on the four critical questions of learning.
- Collaboratively plan units of instruction
- Collaboratively analyze and *use* the results of their commonly developed formative assessments to plan for additional time, support or extension of student learning.

Critical Questions for Enhancing Learning

Schools that function as Professional Learning Communities at Work shift their focus from merely “watching teachers teach” and making sure the correct content is “covered”, to a passionate and persistent focus on four critical questions that directly affect student learning.

These questions form the core work that occurs in districts and schools that function as professional learning communities, and how well these questions are addressed determines a team’s impact on student learning.

Drilling Deeper into the Critical Questions Student for Learning

1. What do we expect students to learn?

Essential outcomes, what would the standard—if met—look like in student work, daily learning targets, pacing, common scoring

2. How will we know if they learn it?

Common formative assessments, collaborative analysis of results—kid by kid, skill by skill, district benchmark assessments, school review processes.

3. How do we respond when students experience difficulty in learning?

Pyramids of intervention, response to intervention (RTI), positive behavior intervention systems (PBIS), etc.

4. How do we respond when students *do* learn?

Extending and enriching the learning of students who demonstrate proficiency, coupled with frequent recognition and celebration.

Collaboratively Analyzing Student Learning Data: Kid by Kid, Skill by Skill

- Teams monitor the learning of each student, skill by skill through *collaborative analysis of results* from commonly developed formative assessments.
- They *plan* additional time, support or extension of learning for students that occurs during the school day, regardless of the teacher to whom students are assigned.
- They reflect on their own instructional planning and instructional effectiveness.
- They engage in a process of continuous improvement with depth, specificity, and fidelity through a process of collaborative goal setting.

Required: A Systematic Plan to Provide Additional Time and Support

The power of formative assessments lies in *how they are used*. Unless collaborative analysis of the results of formative assessments leads to providing students with meaningful *additional time and support* student learning will *not* be impacted in any significant way.

Time and Support

Plans to provide students with additional time and support must be required of each school and they must be:

- **Written, systematic, school-wide**
- **Within the school day**
- **Timely**
- **Directional (rather than invitational)**
- **Flexible (kids move in and out as needed)**
- **Continually monitored for effectiveness**
- **In addition to Core Instruction, not in place of Core Instruction.**

Implications for State-Wide Implementation

- Building shared knowledge with a smaller, diverse group of individuals from key stakeholder groups.
- Connect with the “why” —improving student learning—kid by kid, skill by skill—every step along the way. A constant drip, drip, drip!
- Each district should provide evidence as to how each school is organized into collaborative teams.

- **Each district should provide evidence as to how teams:**

- 1. Have clarified learning outcomes for students?*
- 2. Collaboratively developed and are utilizing common formative assessments.*
- 3. Collaboratively developed a school-wide plan to provide students with additional time and support when they experience difficulty.*
- 4. Developed a plan to extend the learning of students who are have demonstrated proficiency.*

- Educators at all levels—districts, schools, teams—must be provided high quality resources and training necessary for them to do what is expected of them.
- Districts, schools, and teams must provide evidence of student learning, linked to collaboratively developed SMART goals designed to enhance student learning in targeted areas.
- Recognize and celebrate short-term wins and improvement.
- Limit initiatives.

Resources: Take a Look

***Professional Learning Communities at Work:
A Proven Path for Improving Student Learning***

(A “white paper” by Dr. Richard DuFour)

www.Solution-Tree.com

www.allthingsplc.info

What Would Be Good Enough For Our Own Kids?

- **Wouldn't we expect schools to be crystal clear about what students should learn and be able to do?**
- **Wouldn't we expect teachers to check along the way and see if our children were, in fact, learning?**
- **Wouldn't we expect the school to have a *system* in place to help our children if they struggle with their learning?**
- **Wouldn't we expect the school to extend and enrich the learning of our children if they demonstrate proficiency?**

In short, wouldn't we expect schools to be a place where our children feel special because they are learning at high levels?



It's Up To Us

The point is *we know more than we need to know* in order to enhance the learning of every student by improving every school. ***The issue is not a lack of knowledge, but rather one of leadership and will.*** The question is this; are we doomed to passively accept mediocre schools or abandon public schools altogether? This is a false choice! The evidence is clear. ***We can, if we choose to do so, create excellent public schools by implementing Professional Learning Community at Work concepts and practices in every district, every school, every team, and every classroom.*** The stakes are tremendously high. The questions facing us are simply these: ***Why not us? Why not now?***

**A Sincere and Appreciative
Thank You!**