

Professional Learning Communities at Work: Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Rebecca DuFour

The presenter might refer to page numbers for viewing information. For that reason, materials retain original numbering.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (Solution Tree Press, 1998) by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker. This seminal work culminated from years of research and implementation of the PLC process in numerous school settings.

Many books and resources, hundreds of events, and thousands of professional development days later, what have we learned from schools and districts around the world that have become high-performing PLCs? What are the next steps for educators who are committed to implementing and sustaining this powerful, continuous improvement process in their own schools and districts? In this keynote, Rebecca DuFour elaborates on lessons learned and provides recommendations for high-leverage next steps on the PLC at Work journey.

Outcomes include:

- Developing and reinforcing the common language of the PLC process
- Identifying characteristics of the PLC process that have remained constant over the decades
- Gaining new insights from practitioners who are implementing the PLC process
- Planning for high-leverage next steps on the PLC at Work journey



Solution Tree



Rebecca DuFour

Rebecca DuFour has served as a teacher, school administrator, and central office coordinator. As an elementary principal, she helped her school earn state and national recognition as a model PLC at Work and as a National Blue Ribbon School. She is coauthor of 12 books, numerous articles, and several video resources on the topic of PLCs.

A consultant for over 16 years, Becky brings more than 36 years of experience to educators around the world who are implementing the PLC process. She consults with organizations, schools, districts, universities, and departments of education.

Becky received the Evelyn P. Bickham Outstanding Undergraduate Alumni Award from Lynchburg College in 2008. The award is given to a Lynchburg College graduate who has shown distinction in the education profession.

Visit allthingsplc.info to learn more about Becky's work.

Solution Tree Resources:



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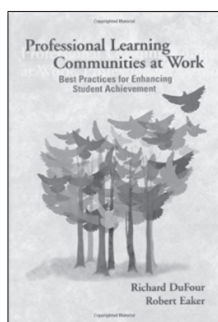
Professional Learning Communities at Work: Lessons Learned and Next Steps

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Objectives for This Keynote

- Explore a brief history of professional learning communities.
- Examine similarities and differences in the PLC at Work process in 2018 vs. 1998.
- Clarify why this process remains so important to our students and our profession.
- Celebrate lessons learned in the first twenty years of PLCs at Work.
- Identify high-leverage next-steps on the PLC journey.

Celebrating Professional Learning Communities at Work 1998–2018



www.AllThingsPLC.info

All Things PLC, All in One Place

This site is a collaborative, objective resource for educators and administrators who are committed to enhancing student achievement. We invite you to share your knowledge, ask questions, and get expert insight into the issues teachers face each day in the classroom.

ARTICLES AND RESEARCH

Includes more than thirty pages of quotes from more than seventy researchers and forty educational organizations that endorse the PLC process.

PLC BLOG & DISCUSSIONS

Connect with other PLC practitioners by sharing insights, offering tips, and asking questions.

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

Find and compare Evidence of Effectiveness data from PLC schools or districts like yours. Send your Evidence of PLC Effectiveness.

TOOLS & RESOURCES

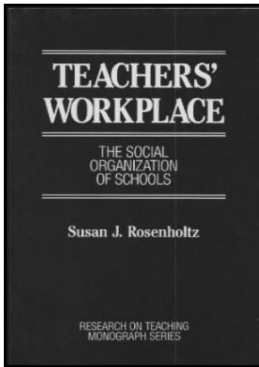
Download templates, resources, and activities, investigate a variety of helpful links, and more.

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): An Alternate to the Isolation Endemic to the Teaching Profession

1960s

1989



Teachers' Workplace: The Social Organization of Schools identified problems and successes that recurred in 78 diverse elementary schools.

Learning-enriched schools were characterized by:

- Making collective commitments to student learning
- Working in a collaborative setting

“Here it is assumed that improvement in teaching is a collective rather than individual enterprise, and that analysis, evaluation, and experimentation in concert with colleagues are conditions under which teachers improve ...”

—Rosenholtz, p. 73

Teacher collaboration linked to shared goals focused on student achievement would lead to:

- Improved teacher learning
- Greater certainty about what was effective
- Higher levels of teacher commitment
- Greater gains in student achievement

1993

The most effective schools, and the most effective departments within schools, operated as strong professional communities characterized by:

- Shared norms and beliefs
- Collegial relations
- Collaborative cultures
- Reflective practice
- Ongoing technical inquiry regarding effective practice
- Professional growth
- Mutual support and mutual obligation



Milbrey McLaughlin



Judith Warren Little

1995 NSDC Conference

“We are closer to the truth about school improvement than ever before. The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is building the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community.

The path to change in the classroom lies within and through professional learning communities.”

—McLaughlin, 1995

1995

Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage reported on research of more than 1,200 schools.



Fred Newmann

“The most successful schools were those that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional learning communities.”

- Engaged in a collective effort to achieve a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning
- Created a collaborative culture to achieve the purpose
- Took collective—rather than individual—responsibility for the learning of all students



Gary Wehlage

Schools most effective in terms of student achievement operated as PLCs characterized by:

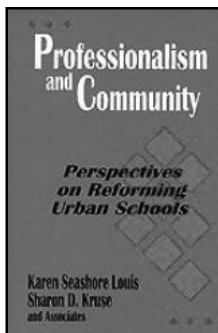
- Reflective dialogue
- Deprivatization of practice
- Collective focus on student learning
- Collaboration
- Shared norms and values



Anthony Bryk



Sharon Kruse



“Professional community within schools has been a minor theme in many educational reform efforts since the 1960s. **Perhaps it is time it became a major rally cry among reformers, rather than a secondary whisper.**”



Karen Seashore Louis

1998



Intensive study of 24 schools (8 elementary, 8 middle, and 8 high schools) to reaffirm that schools operating as PLCs had a significant impact on both the classroom practice of teachers and student achievement.



Sharon Kruse



Helen Marks

Six Characteristics of PLCs at Work

- Collectively pursue a shared mission, vision, values, and goals.
- Work interdependently in collaborative teams focused on learning.
- Engage in ongoing collective inquiry into best practice and the “current reality” of student achievement and the prevailing practices of the school.
- Demonstrate an action orientation and experimentation.
- Participate in systematic processes to promote continuous improvement.
- Maintain an unrelenting focus on results.

—DuFour & Eaker, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, 1998

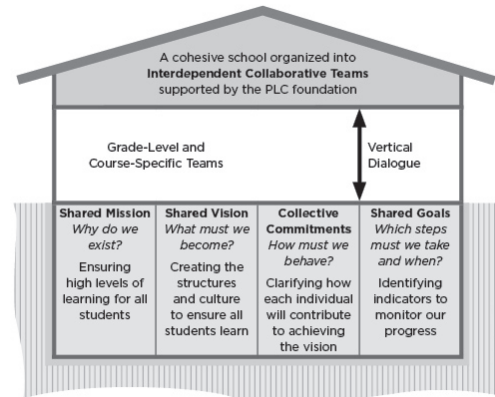
Mission Pillar	Vision Pillar	Values Pillar	Goals Pillar
Why Do We Exist?	What Must We Become?	How Must We Behave?	Which Steps When?
Define Fundamental Purpose.	Describe Compelling Future.	Collective Commitments	Targets and Timelines
Clarify Priorities. Create Focus.	Gives School Direction	Guides Individual Behavior	Establish Incremental Steps.

Professional Learning Community (PLC) Defined

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

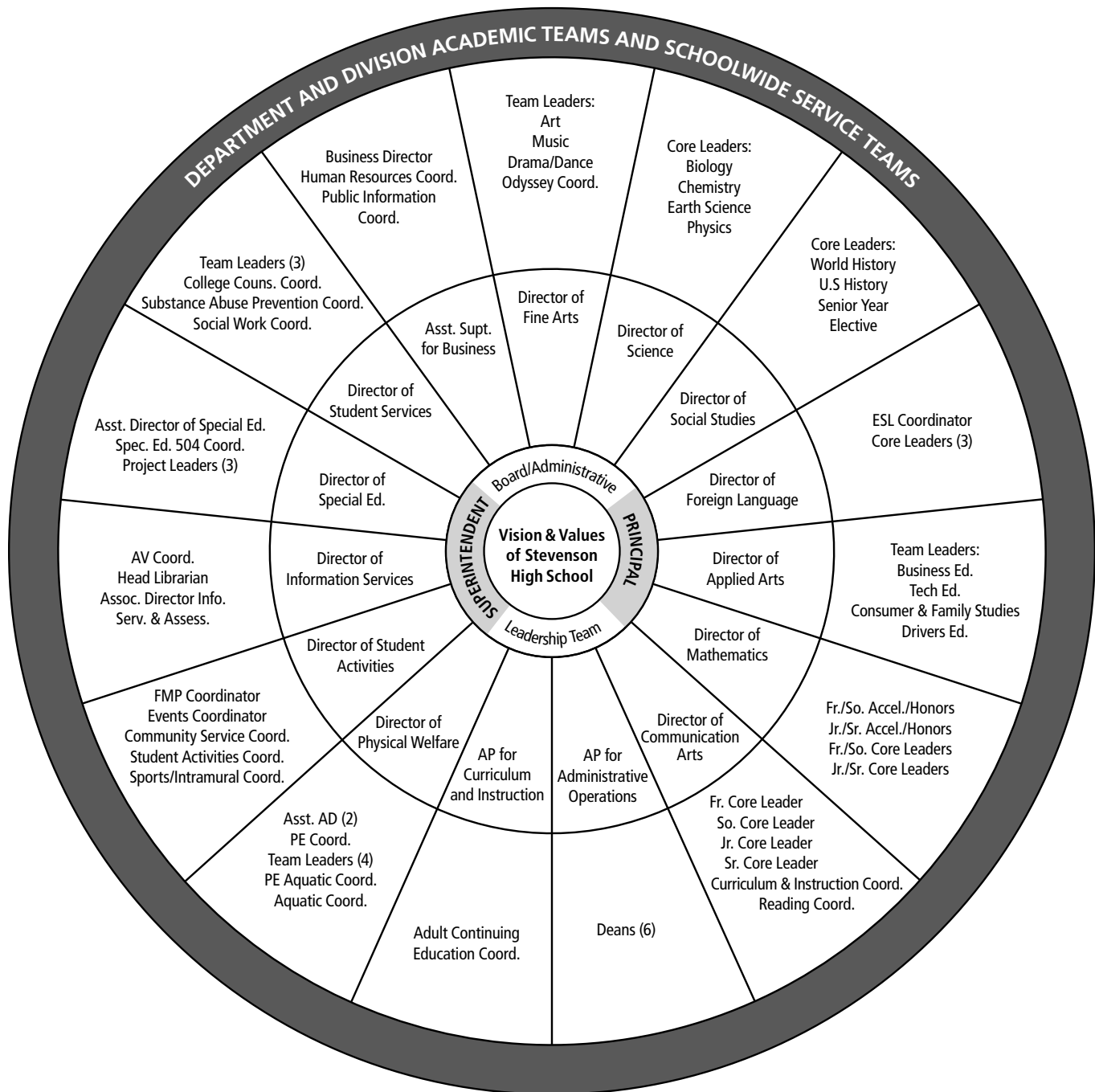
“PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved **learning** for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators.”

—DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, 2016

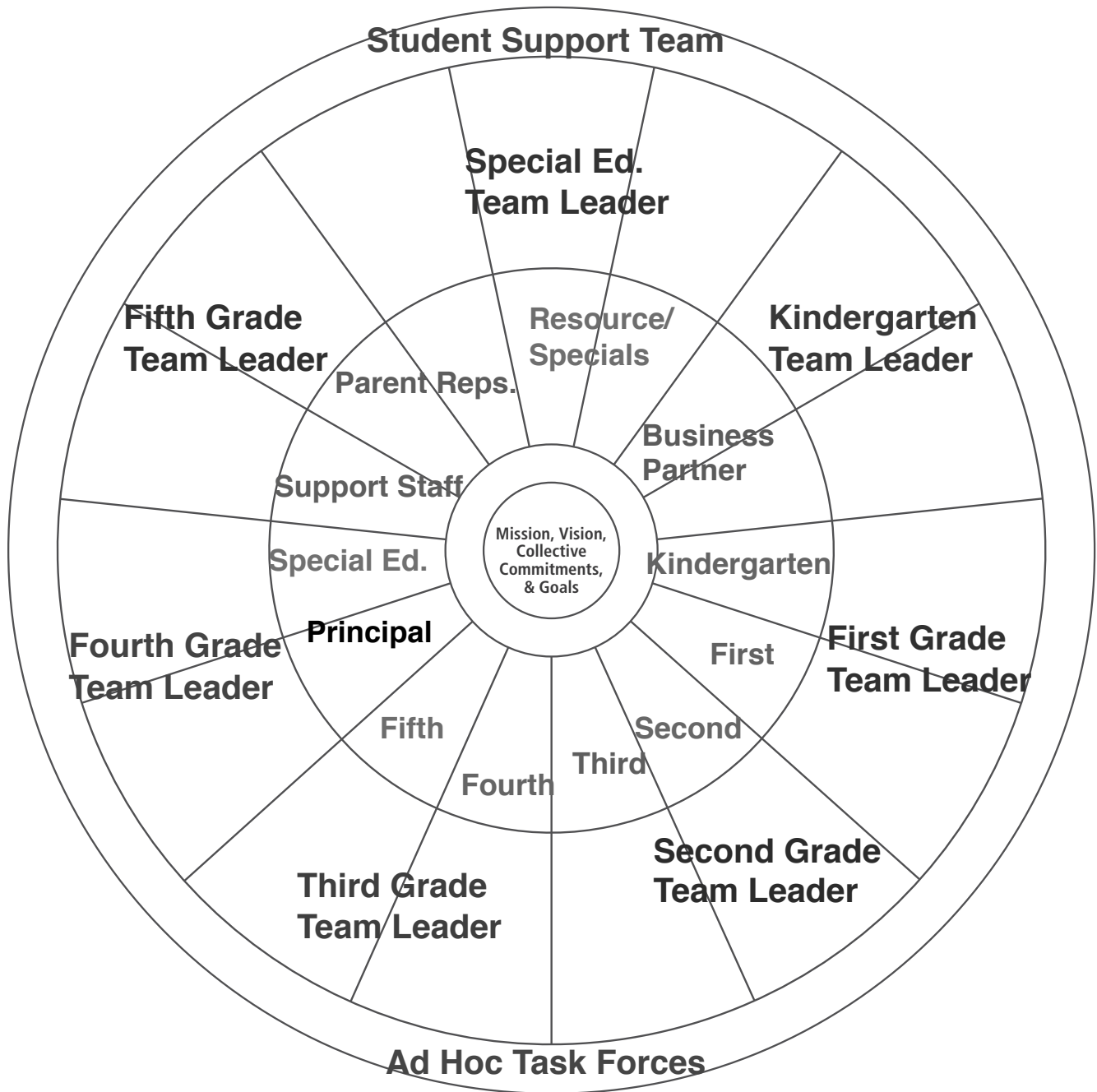


Stevenson High School District 125

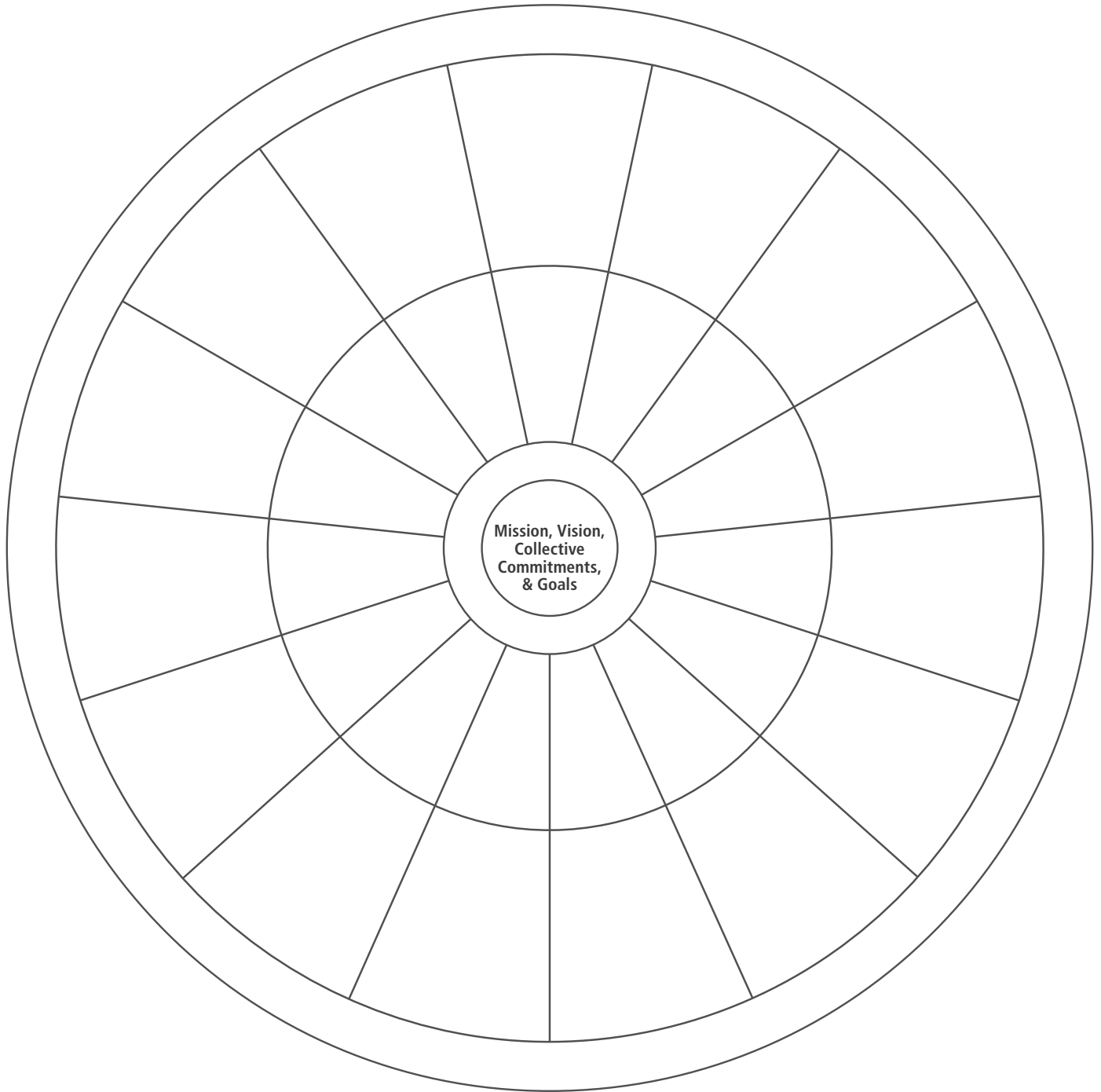
Leadership Structure



Note: The Board/Administrative Leadership Team consists of 7 board members, 12 directors, 2 assistant principals, the principal, assistant superintendent for business, and the superintendent. Each division has a team of leaders who, in turn, influence and are influenced by the outer circle of division teams. Rather than a top-down structure, this model reflects the ideal of reciprocal adult relationships, as ideas and actions can flow from the outer circle to the inner circle and back again. Ideas within any of the circles can move across division areas.



Leadership Structure



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.

Step One in the PLC Process: Build Shared Knowledge

- A cardinal rule: Professional learning communities always attempt to answer critical questions by first building shared knowledge—engaging in collective inquiry—and learning together.
- If people make decisions based on the collective study of the same pool of information, they increase the likelihood that they will arrive at the same conclusion.

Why Should We Commit to Learning for All?

- We must prepare students for their future, not our past.
- Those who have not learned how to learn will be left behind in the American economy.
- To sustain access to the American Dream as the land of opportunity and social mobility
- We are falling behind the rest of the world.
- Our current system isn't working.
- There are serious implications for those who fail. (*In Praise of American Educators*, pp. 105–107.)

Why Should We Commit to Learning for All?

Implications for those who drop out:

- Three times more likely to be unemployed
- More likely to live in poverty; annual salary \$20,241
- Earn 33 cents for every dollar of a college graduate—highest discrepancy in the world
- More prone to ill health
- Life expectancy an average of 10.5 fewer years for women and 13 years for men—and the gap is widening
- 63 times more likely to be incarcerated
- Will cost taxpayers \$292,000 over their lifetime

If Our Shared Mission is to Ensure High Levels of Learning for All ...

... then we must create systems to engage every team in every PLC school in collectively answering four critical corollary questions:

- What is it we expect students to learn?
- How will we know when they have learned it?
- How will we respond when they don't learn?
- How will we respond when they already know it?

The Second Big Idea of a PLC

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

Seven Keys to Effective Teams

1. Ensure every educator is on a meaningful collaborative team **focused on learning**.
2. Schedule time for collaboration into the school day and school calendar.
3. Focus collaboration on critical questions/issues.
4. Make products of collaboration explicit.
5. Establish team norms to guide collaboration.
6. Pursue specific and measurable team performance goals.
7. Provide teams with evidence of student learning to inform and improve professional practice.

Hand in Hand, We All Learn

Ultimately there are two kinds of schools: learning-enriched schools and learning-impooverished schools. I have yet to see a school where the learning curves [...] of the adults were steep upward and those of the students were not. **Teachers and students go hand in hand as learners, or they don't go at all.**

—Barth, *Learning by Heart*, 2004 (p. 23)

Critical Issues for Team Consideration

Team Name:

Team Members:

Use the following rating scale to indicate the extent to which each statement is true of your team.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not True of Our Team

Our Team Is Addressing This

True of Our Team

1. _____ We have identified team norms and protocols to guide us in working together.
2. _____ We have analyzed student achievement data and established SMART goals to improve on this level of achievement we are working interdependently to attain (SMART goals are specific and strategic, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound. SMART goals are discussed at length on page 89).
3. _____ Each team member is clear on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions (that is, the essential learning) that students will acquire as a result of our course or grade level and each unit within the course or grade level.
4. _____ We have aligned the essential learning with state and district standards and the high-stakes assessments required of our students.
5. _____ We have identified course content and topics we can eliminate to devote more time to the essential curriculum.
6. _____ We have agreed on how to best sequence the content of the course and have established pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learning.
7. _____ We have identified the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need in order to master the essential learning of each unit of instruction.
8. _____ We have identified strategies and created instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.
9. _____ We have developed strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking in those areas.
10. _____ We have developed frequent common formative assessments that help us determine each student's mastery of essential learning.
11. _____ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our common assessments.

page 1 of 2

12. _____ We use the results of our common assessments to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.
13. _____ We use the results of our common assessments to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learning, and we work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.
14. _____ We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learning of our course, and we continually practice applying those criteria to ensure we are consistent.
15. _____ We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and provided them with examples.
16. _____ We have developed or utilized common summative assessments that help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of our program.
17. _____ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our summative assessments.
18. _____ We formally evaluate our adherence to team norms and the effectiveness of our team at least twice each year.

The Third Big Idea of a PLC

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.

Results-Oriented Goals: Keys to Effective Teams

Leaders foster effective teams when they help teams establish specific, measurable, results-oriented, performance goals. Promoting teams for the sake of teams or focusing on team-building exercises does little to improve the effectiveness of the organization.

“There is nothing more important than each team member’s commitment to a common purpose and set of related performance goals for which the group holds itself jointly accountable.”

—Katzenbach & Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*, 1993

SMART Goals

A team SMART goal is:

- **S**trategic and specific
- **M**easurable
- **A**ttainable
- **R**esults-oriented
- **T**ime-bound

(Conzemius & O’Neill, *The Handbook for SMART School Teams*, 2002)

Pursuing Attainable Goals and Stretch Goals

“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—goals so ambitious they could not possibly be achieved unless practices within the organization change significantly.”

—Tichy, *The Leadership Engine: How Winning Companies Build Leaders at Every Level*, 1997

A Data Picture of Our School

School Name:

Student Achievement Results

Indicator	Year 20__-20__	Year 20__-20__	Year 20__-20__	Facts About Our Data
Based on Our School Assessment Data				
Based on Our District Assessment Data				
Based on Our State or Provincial Assessment Data				
Based on Our National Assessment Data				

Student Engagement Data

Average Daily Attendance				
Percentage of Students in Extracurricular Activities				
Percentage of Students Using School's Tutoring Services				
Percentage of Students Enrolled in Most Rigorous Courses Offered				
Percentage of Students Graduating Without Retention				
Percentage of Students Who Drop Out of School				

page 1 of 3

A Data Picture of Our School

Student Engagement Data (continued)

Indicator	Year 20__-20__	Year 20__-20__	Year 20__-20__	Facts About Our Data
Other Areas in Which We Hope to Engage Students, Such as Community Service				
Discipline				
Number of Referrals / Top Three Reasons for Referrals				
Number of Parent Conferences Regarding Discipline				
Number of In-School Suspensions				
Number of Detentions / Saturday School				
Number of Out-of-School Suspensions				
Number of Expulsions				
Other				
Survey Data				
Student Satisfaction or Perception Assessment				
Alumni Satisfaction or Perception Assessment				

page 2 of 3

A Data Picture of Our School

Survey Data (continued)

Indicator	Year 20__-20__	Year 20__-20__	Year 20__-20__	Facts About Our Data
Parent Satisfaction or Perception Assessment				
Teacher Satisfaction or Perception Assessment				
Administration Satisfaction or Perception Assessment				
Community Satisfaction or Perception Assessment				

Demographic Data

Percent Free and Reduced Lunch				
Percent Mobility				
Percent Special Education				
Percent English as a Second Language				
Percent White (Not of Hispanic Origin)				
Percent Black				
Percent Hispanic				
Percent Asian				
Percent Native American				

page 3 of 3

Simultaneous Loose AND Tight Cultures

Simultaneous loose *and* tight cultures establish clear parameters and priorities that enable individuals to work within established boundaries in a creative and autonomous way. They are characterized by “directed empowerment” or what Marzano and Waters refer to as “defined autonomy”—freedom to act and lead within clearly articulated boundaries.

(Marzano & Waters, *District Leadership That Works: Striking the Right Balance*, 2009)

What’s Tight in a PLC School?

- Educators work in collaborative teams and take collective responsibility for student learning.
- Collaborative teams implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum, unit by unit.
- Collaborative teams monitor student learning through an ongoing assessment process that includes frequent, team-developed common formative assessments.
- Educators use the results of common assessments to:
 - Intervene/extend on behalf of students.
 - Improve individual practice.
 - Build the team’s capacity to achieve its goals.
- The school provides a systematic process for intervention/extension.

—Richard DuFour, “In Praise of American Educators”
(keynote session, 2016)

Fostering Collective Teacher Efficacy: Three Enabling Conditions

“Rachel Jean Eells’ (2011) meta-analysis demonstrated that collective efficacy and student achievement were strongly related with an effect size of 1.57. According to the Visible Learning Research (Hattie, 2012), this is more than double the effect size of feedback (0.75).

“Collective teacher efficacy is beyond three times more powerful and predictive than socio-economic status (0.52). It is also greater than three times more likely to influence student achievement than student motivation and concentration, persistence, and engagement (0.48).”

—Donohoo, “Fostering Collective Teacher Efficacy: Three Enabling Conditions,” *CorwinConnect* (2016, July 13)

Three Conditions That Enable Collective Teacher Efficacy to Flourish

- 1. Advanced Teacher Influence:** “Providing teachers greater autonomy and influence over important decisions will help build collective efficacy.”
- 2. Goal Consensus:** “Setting measurable and appropriately challenging school goals helps educators achieve purposeful results.”
- 3. Responsiveness of Leadership:** “Responsive leaders demonstrate an awareness of the personal aspect of teachers and protect teachers from issues and influences that detract from their teaching time or focus.”

—Donohoo, “Fostering Collective Teacher Efficacy: Three Enabling Conditions,” *CorwinConnect* (2016, July 13)

High-Leverage Next Steps for Sustaining the PLC at Work Process

- Disperse leadership widely across your organization.
- Welcome and support new members into the PLC culture.
- Honor and support veteran staff members.
- Celebrate short-term wins and long-term successes.

Strategies for Dispersing and Developing Leadership

- Create a guiding coalition.
- Designate team leaders.
- Promote situational leadership.
- Utilize task forces.
- Make developing leaders an explicit expectation and responsibility.

Bringing New Members Into the PLC Culture

- Provide a mentor from the same field.
- Schedule common planning time with collaborative team.
- Ensure ongoing supportive communication from the principal.
- Arrange for a reduced course load or the support of a teacher aide.
- Offer ongoing professional development geared specifically toward new teachers' needs, for example:
 - Effective classroom management
 - Effective grading practices
 - How to engage the unmotivated student
 - Effective questioning in the classroom

—DuFour, DuFour, Baker, Many, & Mattos, *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, 2016, pp. 193–196

Honor and Support Veteran Staff Members in Your PLC PLC Culture

- Conduct *stay interviews* to express appreciation, discover concerns, and jointly plan how to enrich their job. (Kay & Jordan-Evans, 2014)
- Provide meaningful professional learning experiences.
- Tap into expertise and experience through leadership opportunities.
- Create conditions that allow for success.
- Recognize, appreciate, and celebrate progress when it occurs.

—DuFour, DuFour, Baker, Many, & Mattos, *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, 2016, pp. 200–202

Why Is a Focus on Hiring and Retaining Practices Important?

“Almost every other profession has a better system of induction for new members than teachers . . . beginning teachers need a chance to learn what constitutes good practice with the help of accomplished colleagues instead of being forced to figure everything out for themselves” (Shanker, 1995, as cited in Consortium on Productivity in the Schools, 1995, p. 53).

“Schools with greater staffing stability are more interdependent organizations. These schools have strong leaders, and the teachers work together in professional communities” (Johnson, 2011, p. 24).

“Teachers who work in supportive contexts stay in the classroom longer, and improve at faster rates, than their peers in less-supportive environments.” (Papay & Kraft, 2015).

“The need to hire and support well-prepared teachers is clear. But to sustain the growth of those teachers over time, they should be inducted into a genuine learning organization. In such an organization, the expectation is that *all* members of the school’s community share responsibility for each other’s continued growth and success, as well as for the success of all students in the school. Transforming a school into a genuine learning organization calls for the creation of a school culture in which novice and experienced teachers work together to improve student achievement” (Carroll, 2007, p. 8).

“Schools with high stability cultivate a strong sense of collaboration among teachers and their principal. Teachers are likely to stay in schools where they view their colleagues as partners with them in the work of improving the whole school and the conditions are well-suited for them to have the potential to be effective” (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009, as cited in Haynes, 2014, p. 4).

“Schools with integrated professional cultures, cultures that structured ongoing professional exchanges among teachers of various experience levels, were far more likely to have a positive impact on the satisfaction, retention, and self-efficacy of new teachers. These cultures offer new teachers inclusion and support [and] are grounded in the belief that ‘students are best served when teachers assist each other and share responsibility for their students’ learning as well as their own. . . .’ Structures are in place that further facilitate teacher interaction and reinforce interdependence. Schools with integrated professional cultures explicitly value teachers’ professional growth and renewal [and] benefit both new teachers and their veteran colleagues. New teachers are supported in their efforts to teach their students well, veteran teachers are continually renewing themselves, and the entire faculty is united in its pursuit of student success and school improvement” (Johnson & Kardos, 2006, pp. 159–160).

“The key difference between teachers who have good beginnings and those who have painful ones, between those who feel they are getting better and those who are not, is the quality of the school’s culture and level of support” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 69).