

# Raising Academic Achievement with Professional Learning Communities

BY WILLIAM CAROZZA



**E**ducational reformers have borrowed regularly from the business world in an effort to improve work conditions and motivate teachers. The work of Mary Parker Follett nearly a century ago (1919) highlighted the need for companies to move away from “bossism” to a more collaborative workplace. In modern times, Rosenholtz and Simpson (1990) and others have observed that teachers’ professional satisfaction often results from feeling empowered in their school. Yet, as James H. Williams has stated, the concept of empowerment “means not only giving the teachers more power but also increasing their abilities: the emphasis is on truly empowering teachers by improving their abilities” (Song, 2012).

Schools have long recognized the need for collaboration. From the initiatives over the last 30 years, ranging from block scheduling in high schools to integrating units within middle and elementary schools, scores of educators have seen the value of cooperating and pooling physical and human resources. However, the watershed moment came with the publication of *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* by DuFour and Eaker (1998). The authors emphasized the major tenets of professional learn-

ing communities (PLCs) as team members collectively pursuing a shared mission, working interdependently in professional teams, while engaging in collective inquiry and maintaining a focus on results (All Things PLC, 2013). In addition, Rick DuFour has concisely emphasized the three PLC essential questions:

1. What do we want our students to learn?
2. How will we know if our students are learning?
3. What do we do if our students are not learning?

#### **Development of the PLC Model at Harold Martin School, Hopkinton, NH**

For the last three years, Harold Martin School, of which I am principal, has adopted the professional learning communities (PLC) model closely aligned with the work of Rick and Becky DuFour. The initiative has been led by our staff and was ignited by a two-day workshop, which included much of the current PLC steering group. The goal of developing PLCs came about when we realized our instruction was centered between the four walls of each classroom and that our school could move from “good to great” only if we began collegial discussions about our curriculum, instruction, assessment, and students. PLCs have grown gradually:

*Year 1:* Creation of PLC steering group and PLC groupings. Our discussions within PLCs were mostly adult centered, focusing on developing common assessments and sharing our best instructional strategies.

*Year 2:* We developed “What I Need” (WIN) groups. The goal was to provide, via PLCs, 30-minute WIN times at least three days a week in which students received specialized instruction based on their needs. Each grade-level PLC developed homogeneous groups based on sub-skills in reading that individual student’s need. Perhaps the greatest public success for PLCs was the effect our work had on the progress of our kindergarten and specifically our full-day kindergarten program.

*Year 3 (this year):* We adjusted the schedule so that nearly all specials (P.E., art, and music) occur at the same time during the day to allow greater possibilities for PLC collaboration. In addition, we added math and reading curriculum-based measures to provide information on student progress. Utilizing Google Docs, we designed our “Kid Grid,” which stores all pertinent student academic data.

The implementation of PLCs has been one of the most popular initiatives that school districts have undertaken in this new millennium. Many districts have touted the PLC process as a prom-

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ising strategy for sustained school improvement. But what does research indicate about its effectiveness as an action plan to raise student academic achievement?

#### **Research and Theories Supporting the PLC Concept**

Deming was best known for his consulting work with post-war Japan, which led to Japan’s emergence as a rebuilt nation that manufactured and exported high-quality products throughout the world. His theories, which have had a major impact on how businesses operate, support the notion that employees work better within teams. As part of Deming’s “14 Points,” Point 9 states: “Break down barriers between departments to enhance teams across internal borders” (Deming, 1982, p. 24). Stensaasen (1995), who has written on the comparisons of Deming’s work within schools, has stated that the “strength of the educational institution depends on how well all members cooperate to solve problems” and that “the educational institution should strive to build an organizational culture blessed with compatriot feelings, team spirit and cooperation” (p. 587). Another of Deming’s crucial points was that leaders must eliminate fear from their organizations in order to allow employees to reach their potential.

Pink (2009) has written extensively about motivation in the workplace. He states that companies must move beyond empowerment into employee autonomy and that the “drive” that pushes us is the ability to create and not just fulfill the wishes of others. He cites Google’s “20 percent time,” which gave employees the flexibility to use 20 percent of their work time to engage in whatever company-related initiative they would like. The revolutionary email application “Gmail” was developed during this 20 percent time.

Likewise, Dweck wrote in *Mindset* (2006) that intelligence is not a fixed asset but a muscle that people can grow. Her research has shown that one’s “mind” is on a continuum from “fixed” to “growth.” Those who believe in a fixed mind-set are convinced

that one's intelligence and ability will not change and that success is based on innate ability and genetics. However, those who believe in a "growth" mind-set are certain that hard work, determination, and learning can produce great success and overcome deficits in one's abilities—in fact, one's intelligence and ability can grow over time.

Deming, Pink, and Dweck all speak to the power of collaboration inherent in professional learning communities:

1. PLCs promote sharing of ideas and the power of synergy among professionals. (Deming)
2. Cooperation and collaboration among administration and staff far outweigh any hierarchical structure in a PLC environment. Teacher leadership is paramount to success and resulting academic growth in children. (Deming)
3. Teachers must have autonomy and freedom to create and share. Time must be found within the daily school schedule for adult creativity; in turn, this builds great motivation within a faculty. (Pink)
4. The shared mission and interdependency inherent in PLCs leads to a group growth mind-set where optimism and passion for student academic and social growth reigns supreme. Students are not grouped into binary "regular ed" and "special ed" categories but are simply "all our children." (Dweck)

### Professional Learning Communities and Academic Achievement

One of the most extensive overviews of PLCs on student achievement was conducted at the University of Florida, where researchers reviewed 10 American studies and 1 English study (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2006). The results were clear that well-developed PLCs had a positive impact on teaching practice and student achievement. The authors also cited the research of Supovitz (2002) that highlighted inconsistent academic results from their study of PLCs. Clearly, team-based collaboration that exists within PLCs resulted in a positive effect on the culture of schools. The educators in these schools felt they were more involved and collaborated to a high degree. However, this did not translate into great instructional focus, and the academic differences between the non-PLC schools and the PLC schools were negligible in this study, particularly at the elementary level.

With the release of such analysis as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), showing countries in Scandinavia and Asia performing higher than the United States, researchers have labored to find the magic bullet and transfer it to the American educational system (Ruddock, 2005). It appears that PLCs may be more effective depend-

ing on the culture or environment in which they are developed. In a review of Sahlberg's book *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* Adams-Budde, Crave, and Hegedus (2012) state that Sahlberg's message is compelling but may not be transferable to "larger, more diverse societies whose educational systems are not as amenable to breaking with tradition" as Finland's. Given the melting-pot nature of America, it is difficult to compete against more homogeneous societies, where culture plays a strong role in unifying a populace.

Academic achievement via PLCs can result from the contribution of non-classroom teachers as well. A recent study looked at the formation of school counseling collaborative teams (SCCTs), which the authors believe allow counselors to improve their "leadership capacity, increase collaborative relationships, and enhance their ability to use and analyze data." Working alongside principals, counselors can enhance learning outcomes for students (Young, Millard, & Kneale, 2013). Contribution from all phases of a school is at the heart of professional learning communities. This inclusive process ensures a greater chance of successful decision making on behalf of students

The implementation of PLCs generally includes professionals discussing student qualitative and quantitative data, developing common assessments, reaching conclusions on that data, and developing academic student groupings. This requires a high level of collaborative discussion among diverse professionals. Professors from the University of Central Arkansas suggest in a recent paper that "school personnel are not having the number or quality of meaningful conversations needed to move schools forward in a focused, cohesive manner" (Kohler-Evans, Webster-Smith, & Albritton, 2013). They believe that there is a "dearth" of PLCs and, where they exist, they are often dysfunctional. They argue that this isolation is deadly to schools. Rigelman and Ruben (2012) completed a study of a one-year, pre-service, teacher education program in two elementary schools. After analyzing 23 teacher classroom observations, reflections, and interviews, they found that every pre-service teacher developed the skills to teach each student "for understanding." Moving from isolation to collaboration makes all of the difference and is one of the key indicators of successful PLCs.

One of the most negative reviews of PLCs in literature comes from Tarnoczi (2006), who criticizes the DuFour model of PLCs. The Alberta sociologist is particularly critical of the imbalance of power PLCs create. Given the lockstep nature of developing a learning community where everyone shares in common goals and mission, Tarnoczi believes that DuFour and participating admin-

istrators in both Canada and America are fashioning teachers into the image leaders want as opposed to allowing educators to mature naturally as professionals. He believes that any blame for our educational system is shifted to teachers within a PLC and, generally speaking, PLCs allow teachers to be managed more effectively. The problem with Tarnoczi's assertions is that he does not cite any data to support his claim, only a review of the literature with his own interpretation of when DuFour, Eaker, and others make irrational claims. From a sociologist's point of view, his work would have benefitted from an examination of the view of Alberta teachers themselves. Did they feel exploited by their administrators? By having to agree to norms and mission statements, did they feel professionally emasculated?

It is ironic that PLCs are gaining influence right at the time when curriculum and learning in general are being legislated to a high degree due to the Common Core State Standards and the resulting computerized and standardized assessments debuting in the spring of 2015. Giles and Hargreaves (2006) studied innovative schools that contain PLCs and whether they have the power to offset forces that threaten the sustainability of innovation. They found PLCs were successful in two of three areas:

1. *Halting the "evolutionary attrition of change."* A school that has functioning PLCs can more easily handle the succession of administrators and the revision of a faculty.
2. *Managing "foreign relations."* The educational community outside the school can be involved to a greater degree in decision making and feel more a part of the school itself when PLCs are working well.

In the third area Giles and Hargreaves studied, however, they found the level of creativity and innovation that exists in PLC schools tends to wane over time due to the pressures of standardization. The authors place responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the North American governments to relax standardization and promote ingenuity and inventiveness.

While there tends to be greater focus in PLCs on the "community" component, the professional "learning" that occurs is just as significant to the process. In this style of learning, the traditional practice of knowledge acquisition from experts is synthesized with collaborative inquiry. However, researchers have highlighted a caveat in this model. Vescio et al. (2006) cite research that suggests groups can be limited by one's own "horizons of observation." A PLC group can become insulated from outside research and thought when the group's discourse stays only within the experience of its members. Thus, it is important that we gain perspective from external perspectives, including par-

ents, community members, educational research, and colleagues in other schools. However, these authors admit that raised student achievement was still the largest single factor within their study of 11 PLC programs. Working collaboratively is not the goal of the PLC; increased student achievement is.

### Conclusion

While the research is not conclusive, the reality is that professional learning communities in schools do raise student achievement, given a series of important factors that must be met:

**Administrators need to provide time and autonomy for teachers.** In the spirit of Pink (2009), PLCs will only work if time is created in the master schedule for teacher collaboration. It is naive to think PLCs will create real change without the resource of time to work together and create the synergy that only happens when two or more professionals collaborate.

**All professional staff must be included in the building and sustaining of PLCs.** Despite the assertions of Tarnoczi (2006) that the DuFour model of PLCs coerces teachers to follow the party line, it is crucial for sustainability that a very high percentage of a school's professional staff is passionate about the work of PLCs. In fact, it is the administrator's ultimate responsibility to address a teacher's conduct when he or she doesn't meet the expectations or norms laid out by the PLC (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

**Teams must develop a shared vision and engage in collaborative discourse.** To avoid what Giles and Hargreaves (2006) fear as the waning of a PLC's power over time, teams and schools must develop a vision that stands the test of time as well as faculty and administrative turnover. The role of the central office is also crucial in providing continuity over the continuum.

**Team members must develop a growth mind-set.** Inherent in the collaboration of PLCs and the resulting differentiation of academic support within sub-skill instruction is the belief that *all students can learn*. Strong PLCs can only be established if team members truly believe in the power of teaching and learning to move students beyond what is seen at first glance.

**Leaders must be vigilant to guard against the dangers of standardization.** In the era of Common Core State Standards, building and district leaders, teacher leaders, and school boards must be courageous in implementing standards so that innovation and inspiration are not squelched. Otherwise, the power of PLCs will be reduced to nothing more than a time for teachers to talk grade level or department logistics.

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**PLCs must not be isolated by their "horizons of observation"** (Vescio et al., 2006). Schools can fail under the weight of their own safe cocoon. PLC members must visit other schools, involve non-educators in the discussion, and constantly evaluate their own practices.

"Professional learning communities" is a term that appears to define itself by its mere mention. However, effective PLCs take great care in the masterful development of teams that not only share their instructional knowledge but also rely on each other's expertise for the betterment of all students. PLCs can raise student achievement, but only when they are carefully constructed and nurtured.

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