

It's Not a Meeting; It's a Way of Being!

By Brian Butler, PLC associate

I want to share the temporary soap box that I got on last week when addressing a group of teachers and administrators about the term professional learning community. If we continue to use the term PLC in the way that it is being used in many quarters, then it truly has lost its original meaning and power.

This is the most promising school reform concept ever (not just my words, but the words of many highly respected experts (see *On Common Ground* and *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work™*, among others), but if we continue to treat the term PLC as something we have to do as opposed to how we do business, then it is reduced to an add-on, a meeting, or a program. We don't need or want any more unnecessary add-ons, programs, or meetings in our already busy school days.

Assistant Principal Dawn Hendrick and I are still learning as an administrative team, but we do buy into the PLC concept. When I was an assistant principal at Lemon Road Elementary School only six years ago, I was taught by Principal Carolyn Miller and former Assistant Superintendent Ellen Schoetzau about what a true PLC is. I observed and learned from Dr. Robyn Hooker and Shirley McCoy, two other wonderful principals who truly understand the PLC concept. By listening, watching, and studying the words, work, and wisdom of Richard and Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Lillie Jessie (principal of Elizabeth Vaughan Elementary School) and others, I immediately knew this model or way of doing business made sense. I also found out that some of us wanted a quick fix, a program, a meeting, or a silver bullet that would cure all of our educational ills. The PLC concept is not linear and it is messy, but when done in a collaboratively focused manner around the right things, it is immensely rewarding.

Educators work too hard and do too many wonderful things in our schools every single day to allow this model or way of doing business to be reduced to a *meeting* as opposed to a way of *being*. Please don't allow our efforts and great work to be overlooked because of a lack of will to, as Robert Eaker says, go from *knowing* to *doing* to *being*. In a keynote address that I had the privilege to witness, Dr. Eaker said that the term PLC does not even need to be used if a school is a true PLC. If you hold to the three big ideas (learning, collaboration, and results), and if you use the critical questions of learning to drive your conversations, then I say don't even use the term PLC during the day.

Once you get to the point of *being*, as soon as someone walks in the front door of your school they will know that something is different. What they will notice are the *cultural shifts*. A school that operates as a PLC has, as cited in the book *Learning by Doing*, shifted from:

- A focus on teaching to a focus on learning
- Infrequent summative assessments to frequent common formative assessments
- Individual teachers determining the appropriate response when students don't learn or already know it to a systematic response that ensures support for every student no matter who the teacher may be
- Isolation to collaboration around the right things
- Each teacher clarifying what students must learn to collaborative teams building shared knowledge and understanding about essential learning
- An assumption that these are my kids, those are your kids to an assumption that these are our kids

- An external focus on issues outside the school to an internal focus on steps staff can take to improve the school
- Teachers gathering data from their individually constructed tests in order to assign grades to collaborative teams acquiring information from common assessments in order to (1) inform their individual and collective practices and (2) respond to students who need additional time and support
- Independence to interdependence
- A language of complaint to a language of commitment
- External training (workshops and courses) to job-embedded learning
- Assessing impact on the basis of teacher satisfaction (Did you like it?) to assessing impact on the basis of improved student learning
- Learning by listening to learning by doing
- Using inaccurate language to define a PLC and its relating concepts (e.g., the inaccurate term PLC meeting) to becoming students of PLCs and collectively understanding and embedding its meaning and all the concepts surrounding this way of doing business

The deep understanding of this way of doing business has got to come from the bottom up. It will only happen when we become students of the term PLC, and realize that it is a continuous learning journey with no end.

However, I would suggest that you get rid of the term PLC in your daily conversations and start to build common language around the kinds of collaborative team meetings that you have every day. A PLC is a school made up of collaborative teams. Collaborative teams are *not* PLCs.

If you are reading this, then it is highly likely that you are interested in becoming or are already a student of the term PLC as defined by Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour. You are also most likely an educator who deeply cares about making sure your staff, students, parents, and community members get the most accurate information possible.

If a parent or another educator came up to you and said, I heard about this PLC thing. It sounds like a great way to do meetings, what would you say? Would you go along to just get along and talk about it as if it was a meeting? Or, would you take the time to build shared knowledge with this individual to help deepen understanding around what a PLC is and what it is not? Better yet, if Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour came to your school and asked you to make the case for your school being a true PLC, would you start by talking about your PLC meetings? Remember, precision in language is critical!

Would we, as teachers, allow our students to continue to incorrectly define a term without giving them corrective feedback? Why do we allow each other as professional educators to change, misuse, and redefine terms without holding each other accountable? We are too good for that! If we want to be taken seriously, let at the very least do our homework to ensure that common language, common knowledge, and common expectations are at the core of how we do business in our schools and districts.

A good place to start may be to say, it's not a meeting; it's a way of being! Then ask that person if he or she would be interested in learning about PLCs with you by reading and discussing an article or a book or by visiting a school that is well into its journey.

What are you prepared to do?