INTRODUCTION

Systemic PLCs

Rick DuFour has spent a professional lifetime showing what well-implemented professional learning communities look like, how to create them, and why they are good for students and teachers. Hundreds of schools have experienced significant gains in student achievement by embracing the PLC process (as documented on allthingsplc.info). In 2011, three of the four finalists for national superintendent of the year in the United States attributed their district's success in raising student achievement to the PLC at Work™ process that Rick created with his colleagues Robert Eaker and Rebecca DuFour. He asserts that the best hope for sustained and substantive school improvement is to develop the capacity of educators to function as members of a PLC.

Michael Fullan has devoted his distinguished professional career to the exploration of how to best bring about meaningful change in schools, districts, and the educational system as an entity. Combining a focus on the moral imperative with how to change whole systems, Michael has helped lead large-scale successful reform in several countries.

In one of his latest works, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*, Michael and his coauthorAndy Hargreaves (2012) acknowledge the value of well-implemented PLCs. But they also observe that, too often, PLC strategies "have been imposed simplistically and heavy-handedly by overzealous administrators" (p. 128), that PLCs are sometimes viewed more favorably by those at the top (administrators) than they are by those on the ground (teachers), and that "the current PLC movement should be reconfigured and reconsidered" (p. 136).

With this book, *Cultures Built to Last: Systemic PLCs at Work™*, the two of us have teamed up in an effort to stress our continuing support for the PLC process, but we also recast PLCs from just another attractive innovation for individual schools to the central instrument for changing the culture of the education system: district-, state-, and nationwide. An orientation and commitment to whole-system reform are especially important for PLCs because they started as—and it is easy for them to be stuck at—being an individual-school phenomenon. To make PLCs systemic, leaders at all levels must see the strategy as tantamount to changing the culture of the system. They must abandon the perception that PLCs represent a program to be implemented and recognize that the PLC process is a cultural transformation that has lasting value.

The Challenge of Cultural Change

Structural change deals with policies, programs, rules, and procedures. A characteristic of structural change, one that political and educational leaders often find attractive, is that these changes can be mandated. A state government can increase graduation requirements, adopt the Common Core State Standards, or increase the number of required school days in a calendar year. A district can move its high schools to a block schedule, adopt a new language arts program, or require students to wear school uniforms as a matter of fiat.

Unlike structural change that can be mandated, cultural change requires altering long-held assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that represent the norm for people in the organization. These deeply held but typically unexamined assumptions help people make sense of their world. More simply put, culture is just "the way we do things around here." Systemic implementation of the PLC process requires changing the way things have typically been done at all levels.

Two things are true about cultural change: it is absolutely doable, but it is also undeniably difficult. Factors that contribute to the difficulty include the following:

- It requires significant changes to traditional schooling practices that have endured for over a century. In particular, it changes the way that just about everyone relates to each other in the school and across schools and the system.
- It is certain to create conflict.

- It is multifaceted. Leaders do not have the luxury of focusing on a single aspect of the organization that requires attention.
- It is a heuristic process of trial and error. There is no formula to be followed that guarantees the desired outcomes. Much of cultural change involves working through complexity by finding out what is working and what isn't, and by making adjustments based on the findings. The good news is that there are clear ideas for guiding the process.
- It never ends. Creating the commitment to continuous improvement inherent in the PLC process means you never "arrive."

But, although we acknowledge the difficulty of cultural change, we are convinced that unless leaders recognize the need for whole-system reform aimed at changing the very culture of the system, schools will be unable to meet the challenges they confront. Furthermore, even those individual schools that have implemented the PLC process successfully will find it difficult to sustain the process unless the larger system provides a more positive and supportive context.

On the other hand, PLCs as cultural change are exciting for people and can get initial results in fairly short order. They unleash energy and draw in the vast majority of people who begin to make fundamental changes never before thought possible.

When the PLC process drives an entire system, participants come to have a sense of identity that goes beyond just their own piece of the system. They identify in palpable ways with the overall organization, unleashing the energy of mutual allegiance and competition for the common good. This "systemness" exists in the hearts and minds of the people working together for the betterment of the system and is a defining characteristic of the culture.

So to be explicitly overt regarding our purpose in writing this book, we hope to convince readers of three things:

1. If the PLC process is going to impact education beyond the individual school or isolated district, the process must be the driving force of the entire system. It is time for PLCs to go big!
2. The PLC process is just that—a process, not a program. Educators don't "do PLC" one year and then move on to something else the following year. They will not get the lasting benefits from PLCs until they learn to implement the process deeply and widely as a

fundamental change in the culture of schools and school systems. We will elaborate on this distinction between process and program throughout the book.

3. Every person in the system has an obligation to be an instrument for cultural change—rather than waiting for others to make the necessary changes.

By *system*, we mean multiple schools and communities that are tied together within a single authority. The school district is the minimum size for us, but increasingly we mean all the districts in a given province or state, and in some cases, we mean the entire country. If the overall system is not the focus of ongoing improvement, it will be extremely difficult for schools or districts to sustain continuous development.

Why We Need Systemic PLCs

At a time when the link between education and lifetime opportunity is stronger than ever before, the United States continues to score low on measures of education performance, and the gap between high and low performance is growing. The United States scores twentieth or worse among the thirty-four countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In addition, studies show that American students are increasingly bored as they move up the grade levels. A study by Lee Jenkins (2012) found that 95 percent of kindergarteners like school, but by grade 9, this percentage has decreased to 37. The news is not much better for teachers. A 2012 MetLife Survey (Markow & Pieters, 2012) shows that teachers are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their jobs, with almost one in three teachers contemplating leaving the profession. Equally shocking is the rapidity of the decline. The survey found that 39 percent of teachers in 2012 were satisfied compared to 62 percent only two years earlier. We have to contemplate what kind of places our schools really are if so many people would rather be somewhere else.

PLCs can play a central role in dramatically improving the overall performance of schools, the engagement of students, and the sense of efficacy and job satisfaction of educators. Furthermore, this improvement can occur not just in isolated individual schools, but across entire districts, states, and provinces. To do this, leaders must grasp the underlying principles of PLCs and realize that changing culture in systemic ways is at the heart of any successful large-scale education reform.

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Why Systemwide Reform Is Best

In the late 1970s and 1980s, researchers Ron Edmonds, Wilbur Brookover, Larry Lezotte, Michael Rutter, and others presented evidence that some schools were significantly more effective than others in helping students learn when external factors such as the socioeconomic status or family background of students were held constant. The focus of their research was the individual school, and they concluded that the school, rather than the district, should serve as the primary unit for reform. In fact, Lezotte (2011) acknowledged that early in their research, he and his colleagues leading the effective schools movement concluded that the district was "irrelevant" when it came to promoting effective practices in schools. They pointed to the fact that, while a district typically provided similar policies, programs, materials, and resources to all of their schools, some of the schools in the district were highly effective and some were not. Their conclusion reflected popular opinion at the time: the central office has little impact on student achievement.

Over time, Lezotte and his colleagues changed their view. They recognized that without central-office support, other schools in a district were unable to learn from an effective school. Furthermore, the effective school was unlikely to sustain a commitment to continuous improvement. As Lezotte (2011) notes:

> If creating and maintaining schools as effective isn't a districtwide priority, the school will likely not be able to maintain its effectiveness status. Without broader based organizational support, school effectiveness tends to depend too heavily on the heroic commitment of the school leader or only a few staff. We have [seen] numerous cases where the principal of any effective school moved on for one reason or another and was replaced by someone who did not share the passion, vision or values. When this happened the school usually, and quickly I might add, returned to its earlier state. (p. 15)

Numerous other studies have now affirmed that an effective central office can play a major role in improving schools throughout the system. When Robert Marzano and Tim Waters (2009) conducted one of the largest-ever quantitative research studies on superintendents, they found a statistically significant relationship between district leadership and student achievement. Another study (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), funded by the Wallace Foundation, demonstrated the link between effective school leadership and established the vital role of the central office in creating the conditions that promote and support such leadership at the school level.

We embrace the premise that districts can support and sustain higher levels of learning throughout *all* of their schools, not only because of the research base, but also because we have repeatedly witnessed it in the real world of education.

- How did Adlai E. Stevenson High School District 125 in Lincolnshire, Illinois, become one of the highest-performing districts in the United States, and then continue to improve student achievement each year for over a quarter of a century under the leadership of four different superintendents?
- How did Sanger Unified School District in California, located in the congressional district with the highest level of poverty in the United States, move from one of the first districts in the state assigned into program improvement because of low student achievement to a district that now exceeds state goals and has become a national model for districtwide reform?
- How did Schaumburg District 54 in Schaumburg, Illinois, increase the percentage of its students demonstrating proficiency on the state assessment from 75 percent to over 90 percent in five years? How did this district, where no school had ever helped 90 percent or more of its students achieve proficiency in mathematics and language arts, transform itself into a system where nineteen of its twenty-seven schools achieved this benchmark goal in just a few years?
- How did Whittier Union High School District in California steadily improve student achievement in all of its schools at the same time the percentage of its students living in poverty skyrocketed from 40 percent to 80 percent?
- How did Blue Valley School District in Kansas move student achievement from good to great—and then sustain greatness year after year?

In each case, district leaders maintained a commitment to and focus on building the individual and collective capacity of educators throughout the district. In each case, the district provided educators with the ongoing clarity and support to help them succeed at what they were being asked to do. In short, they worked to ensure that every school in their districts was functioning as a PLC.

It is revealing that successful districts—those effective at districtwide reform within all of their schools—not only have used PLC principles in their reform, but have also tended to be committed to larger-scale reform efforts within their

states. This is a crucial point. Successful districts think bigger—beyond their boundaries—and could become great resources for statewide reform. Indeed, our message is that the entire system—whole-system reform—must become the focus of future change efforts.

There are fewer examples of statewide or provincewide reform efforts involving all the schools and districts in the system. The Wallace Foundation study (Louis et al., 2010) concluded that few states in the United States had developed comprehensive approaches to education reform, that they tended to focus on mandates rather than capacity building, and that they offered very limited guidance for specific approaches to improving teaching and learning. On the other hand, a series of reports on the most effective school systems in the world conducted over several years by Sir Michael Barber, Mona Mourshed, and Chinezi Chijioke (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, 2009; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010) for the McKinsey Group identified provincial and national policies that led to higher levels of student learning.

Ontario provides one case study. From 2003 to the present, the province has engaged in deliberate strategies for system reform across its 72 districts, which include 4,000 elementary schools and 900 secondary schools. A focus on learning, capacity building, wise and thorough use of data, and identifying and spreading good practice are all integrated in the Ontario strategy. Fostering leadership at all levels has been a core part of Ontario's success that includes a substantial increase in literacy learning across the 4,000 schools, as well as major gains in high school graduation rates—from 68 percent to 83 percent in the 900 secondary schools (Fullan, 2013a).

Delaware offers an example of a statewide attempt to implement the PLC process on a systemic basis. In 2009, then state Secretary of Education Lillian Lowery worked with the state's forty-one Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to gain support for building educator capacity by using PLCs as a cornerstone of Delaware's educational agenda. The commitment to PLCs was evident in Delaware's application for a Race to the Top (RTTT) award in 2010. It stipulated that the state's instructional improvement system would include "*collaborative planning time* in which teachers analyze student data, develop plans to differentiate instruction in response to data, and review the effectiveness of prior actions" (Delaware Department of Education [DDOE], 2010, p. c27, emphasis in original). The application also explained that the system was to "provide teachers, principals, and administrators with meaningful support and

actionable data to systematically manage continuous instructional improvement, including such activities as instructional planning, gathering information with the support of rapid-time reporting; using this information to inform decisions on appropriate next instructional steps; and evaluating the effectiveness of the action taken. Such systems promote collaborative problem solving and action planning" (DDOE, 2010, p. c27).

The application also stipulated specific action steps that would be taken to support PLCs. Included among those steps were the following (DDOE, 2010):

- All core subject teachers of grades 3 through 12 would be organized into "small relevant groups such as six third- and fourth-grade teachers" to work collaboratively toward "instructional improvement."
- These collaborative groups would receive at least ninety minutes of collaborative time per week, and teachers would be required to attend.
- Collaborative time would be considered sacred and not used for other purposes.
- Teachers in these groups would examine achievement data on their own students and use the data to inform, adjust, and improve their instruction and accelerate student learning.
- The state would provide data coaches for two years to support schools throughout the state in implementing the initiative and building their internal capacity to continue creating a collaborative culture focused on evidence of student learning.
- School administrative teams and data coaches would meet monthly to discuss the status of the work.
- Administrators would take steps to remediate a teacher or teachers who did not participate in the collaborative team or were disruptive to the team process.

The application articulated three specific goals the state hoped to achieve by providing educators with time to collaborate:

1. Creating cultural acceptance for sharing data among peers and leaders
2. Helping educators build the necessary technical skills to access and analyze achievement data from a variety of sources

3. Ultimately to improve the content knowledge and pedagogical skills of teachers so they could revise instructional strategies in response to evidence of student learning (DDOE, 2010)

When Delaware was named one of the first two states to receive the RTTT award, every district and charter school in the state, as well as their education associations, agreed to implement common weekly planning time for at least core content teachers. Furthermore, the department stipulated that the collaborative team meetings were to be considered sacred time that would never be pre-empted by other meetings or activities. State and district leaders were convinced, however, that providing teacher teams with coaching and building the capacity of school leaders to effectively coach were critical to the success of the initiative. So DDOE contracted with an education software and assessment company to provide twenty-nine data coaches to support schools throughout the state. These coaches not only modeled effective coaching language and strategies but also supported professional learning by facilitating nonthreatening data conversations with both teachers and administrators.

Between February and June of 2011, the state piloted the program with over five hundred teachers in twenty schools in seven LEAs and held focus groups with those involved to get feedback on ways to improve. With the beginning of the 2011–2012 school year, the program was implemented throughout the nearly two hundred schools in the state.

Although the DDOE stipulated the conditions listed earlier as prerequisites for participation, LEAs had considerable discretion regarding implementation. Some provided teachers with one ninety-minute block for collaboration while others used two forty-five-minute blocks. Some organized teachers into teams by content, others by grade level, and still others created interdisciplinary teams. Some districts assigned data coaches to work directly with their schools, while other districts used the coaches to train their own staff to facilitate team meetings. The DDOE used broad guidelines to clarify the focus and purpose of the meetings, but meetings were not scripted, nor were teachers asked to adhere to a single agenda template for meetings.

At the end of the first full year of implementation, the percentage of students in the state scoring proficient in reading increased from 61 percent to 68 percent and in mathematics from 62 percent to 69 percent. Every grade level and every subgroup experienced improvement, and the percentage of students scoring advanced proficient increased in both subject areas (DDOE, 2012b). As Donna

Lee Mitchell of the DDOE's Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Unit reports, "Everyone from the Governor Jack Markell, to our new Secretary of Education Mark Murphy, to administrators, and teachers throughout the state attribute much of our improvement to the collaborative PLC process. PLCs are becoming part of our culture. Now it's just the way we do things here" (personal communication, March 15, 2013).

Delaware has kept the lines of communication open with teachers throughout the state during implementation. At the conclusion of the 2011–2012 school year, the department of education sent surveys to the state's 8,800 educators in an effort to get feedback on the program. Almost 5,700 responded, with 95 percent of the responses coming from teachers. Eighty-seven percent of respondents indicated that the data-analysis process helped them to identify patterns of student need in their classroom and to differentiate their instruction. Seventy-seven percent reported that their team was characterized by a transparent, collaborative culture. The survey also included a section for open-ended responses that invited educators to present their impressions and recommendations for improvement of the process. Over 1,000 Delaware teachers offered their ideas. Once again, the department of education held focus groups of educators throughout the state to hear concerns, answer questions, and solicit ideas for improving the process (DDOE, 2012a).

The DDOE has continued to support LEAs and modeled the collaborative team process by scheduling monthly meetings with chief school officials. Superintendents agreed that they wanted these meetings to be devoted primarily to working in collaborative teams across LEAs. DDOE leadership or individual districts share their data with the group, identify concerns and challenges, and present their action steps for improvement. After the presentation, participants work in teams across LEAs to analyze the data and develop recommendations to support the presenting district or to consider how they might implement some of the ideas in their own districts. Superintendents have committed to learn together and help each other improve education throughout the state.

Delaware's ultimate success will depend on quality implementation that focuses on changing the *culture* of the entire system—focused collaboration within schools, within districts, across districts, and between districts and the state. At the end of the day, systemic PLCs are just that—they fundamentally alter the entire culture of the system. Delaware has decidedly started down such a pathway to sustained improvement.

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A Roadmap for Going Big

In this book, we present a roadmap for going big with PLCs. We begin with a focus on clarifying the meaning of the term *professional learning community* in chapter 1. We review the six characteristics, three big ideas, and four critical questions of a PLC. The main point of the chapter, however, and a point that we will reiterate throughout the book, is that the PLC *process* is specifically intended to impact the traditional culture of schooling in profound ways; it is an ongoing endeavor rather than a program to be implemented.

In chapter 2, we examine a critical challenge of any systemic reform: how do we achieve coherence and clarity? We address the elements of coherence, barriers to achieving coherence, strategies for achieving coherence, and the impact of strong coherence. We lay the foundation of systemic reform so that we can position PLCs as a crucial piece within whole-system reform.

In chapter 3, we examine the too-tight/too-loose dilemma. Should systemic change come from the top of the organization, or should it percolate from the bottom upward? We explore the rationale for both approaches and examine their impact, using real examples from the education landscape.

Chapter 4 provides leaders with guidelines for simultaneously loose and tight leadership. Our goal in this chapter is to help educators find and navigate in a loose and tight way using a real-world challenge facing educators in the United States today: how to effectively implement the Common Core State Standards within a systemic PLC.

Leaders often ask us how to sustain PLCs. This is the subject of chapter 5. We take what we have learned from experience and share the conditions for sustainability and how to recognize the warning signs that your PLC is faltering from day one onward.

In the afterword, we conclude with some key thoughts for taking action that will help you work on making PLCs systemic.

Making PLCs systemic requires people throughout the system to act in new ways and to contribute to the collective effort to make schools a better place for both student and adult learning. People must be willing to look in the mirror for solutions, rather than out of the window while waiting for others in the system to save them. As the Persian poet Rumi wrote in the 13th century, "Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself" (Goodreads, 2013). Changing the world of education will require us to be wise. Let's begin.