

# What's on Your Refrigerator Door?

## Clarifying What Really Matters in Your School

Here's a question: When was the last time you looked—I mean *really* looked—at what's on the door of your kitchen refrigerator? My guess is that most refrigerator doors probably look a lot alike, busy and covered with papers, pictures and notes. Although you might characterize it as clutter, in fact, you can tell a lot about what is important to someone simply by seeing what is on his or her refrigerator door.

For a moment, extend the metaphor of the refrigerator door to your school. Obviously, we are not talking about what's on the door of the refrigerator in the teachers' lounge, but about using the metaphor to examine what is important in your school. For example, does a look at the refrigerator door reveal that your school values teaching or learning? Working in isolation or on collaborative teams? What *really matters* in your school?

### Defining What is Important

Becoming a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is not something a faculty engages in for a year or two, only to abandon before moving on to a new initiative. Principals recognize that becoming a PLC cannot be reduced to a recipe or a prescriptive set of activities. As Andy Hargraeves observed, "Becoming a PLC [is a process that] creates an ethos that permeates a school." Simply put, becoming a PLC is not something you do; it is something you are.

Schools working to become PLCs are clear about what is important. Principals in these schools focus on the essence of a PLC as captured in three big ideas: a focus on learning, a collaborative culture, and a results orientation. Rick and Becky DuFour have created a set of operational definitions for each of these big ideas that principals can use to reflect on what is important in their schools.

A school with a focus on learning is committed to helping all students learn to high levels. This principal engages teachers in a collaborative process of seeking answers to the critical questions of learning. Teachers in these schools work to 1) clarify the knowledge, skills and dispositions all students must acquire; 2) monitor each student's learning on a timely basis; 3) provide systematic, timely and directive interventions when students do not learn; and 4) develop strategies to enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient. They search for answers to the critical questions of learning.

Principals working to foster a more collaborative culture in their schools realize that the fundamental building block of a PLC is a team of teachers "in which members work together interdependently to achieve a common goal for which they are mutually accountable." (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many, *Learning By Doing*, p. 98.) In schools with collaborative cultures, teacher teams focus on clarifying the essential outcomes by grade or course. They develop common assessments and establish learning targets. They analyze assessment results and plan for interventions. They draft SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) goals as a team and create schedules that support protected time for teacher collaboration during the regular school day.

Schools in which principals have created a results orientation constantly seek evidence that students are learning at high levels. Faculty members encourage the efficient and effective use of data as part of a continuous improvement process—a process solely devoted and designed to provide timely and accurate information about student learning to individual teachers, teacher teams and the school. Teachers in schools with a results orientation embrace the belief that their policies, practices and procedures are aligned to promote the idea that all students can learn.

### Clarifying What is Important

Sometimes principals assume the PLC model is more deeply embedded than it really is. By gathering





work products and producing a portfolio of artifacts, a principal can become more aware of the level of implementation of PLCs in his or her school. Here again, the DuFours have provided a valuable list of specific work samples or artifacts that reflect a commitment to and an understanding of each of the big ideas. By collecting and reviewing these products, principals can confirm the current reality of their school's development as a PLC.

Artifacts principals can collect as evidence of a focus on learning include a list of the essential outcomes for each grade level in reading, writing and math, team-developed pacing guides and common assessments. Principals may also ask teachers for a description of how each team is systematically providing time for intervention and enrichment.

Principals can identify the current reality of the collaborative relationships in their schools by collecting the meeting agenda, norms and SMART goals created by each team or gathering evidence of how teams are organized, when they are provided with time to meet, and how the work of the teams is monitored and supported.

Finally, principals can assess their school's results orientation by collecting descriptions of how data generated by common assessments is presented to each teacher, by reviewing analysis sheets indicating team conclusions and strategies for improvement, and by seeking evidence that teacher teams are using protocols that promote the efficient and effective analysis of data.

As Dennis Sparks said, understanding what really is important in your school "is essential because individuals and organizations move toward that which they are clearest about. It is very difficult for leaders to lead in the creation of that which they cannot describe in some detail." (Dennis Sparks, *Leading for Results*, 2004, p. 148.) Having evidence—in the form of products that support the presence of each of these big ideas—helps principals clarify how deeply each is embedded in their schools.



### So what's on the refrigerator door?

Focusing effort and energy on looking—*really* looking—at what your school values is worth doing. By first defining what is important (the three big ideas) and then clarifying the level of implementation by gathering products or artifacts related to the big ideas, Rick and Becky DuFour have given principals the tools to cut through confusing clutter on the "refrigerator door" and clearly articulate what really matters in their school. ■

*During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level.*

