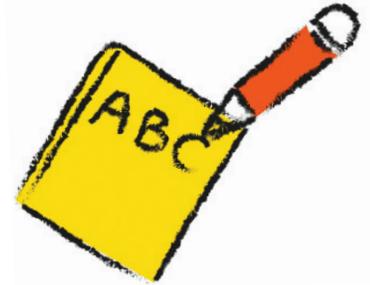


TEPSA News

Texas Elementary Principals
& Supervisors Association

Serving Texas PreK-8 School Leaders | August 2014 | Vol. 71, No. 4 | www.tepsa.org

Best Practices/Tom W. Many, EdD



Why Professional Learning Communities Are More Relevant Than Ever

The question whether PLCs are still relevant caused me to reflect on talks with teachers and principals about why they should embrace the PLC process as a way to improve their schools. These conversations sometimes end with comments like, “Oh, we’ve heard all that PLC stuff before” or “We already read that PLC book” or my favorite, “We did PLCs last year. This year we’re doing teacher evaluation and the Common Core.” Comments like these make me wonder why so many schools *talk* about the PLC process, but continue to engage in practices that have proven to be ineffective? Why is it that some teachers are allowed to ignore the value of a guaranteed and viable curriculum, timely feedback from formative assessments or additional help when students need more time and support to learn? How can anyone justify teachers working in isolation when the evidence supporting collaboration is so overwhelming? I haven’t discovered answers to these questions and despite the fact that the PLC process has emerged as the most effective strategy for achieving long-term and sustained school improvement, the successful implementation of PLCs remains an elusive goal in many schools. So, to reconcile my colleague’s question with questions of my own, I offer six reasons why the PLC process is more relevant today than ever before.

Why Professional Learning Communities Are Relevant

Reason #1: Because We Need to Prepare Our Students for the 21st Century

The PLC process embodies some of the most important 21st century skills students will need to succeed. Bill Ferriter argues that in order to help students prepare for future, it is far more important for teachers to be “learning savvy” than “tech savvy.” Technology can facilitate and accelerate learning but students will need skillful teachers to help them “learn how to learn” using these powerful new tools. The PLC process promotes the kind of job embedded professional development teachers need to sharpen their pedagogy, deepen their content knowledge, and create, collaborate, and communicate with each other while becoming learners themselves.

Reason #2: Because We Need a New Definition of Success

The PLC process promotes the belief that all kids can learn. Have you ever stopped to think about the fact that traditional schools are based on a statistical construct called the “normal curve?” In the past, it was assumed that not all students would (or could) learn to high levels. It was expected that some students would succeed, some would fail



and most would fall somewhere in the middle. Schools were expected to rank and sort kids across a “normal distribution.” As Benjamin Bloom observed, the problem with this notion is that, “the normal curve describes the outcome of a *random process*. Since education is a purposeful [intentional] activity in which we seek to have students learn what we teach, each achievement distribution should be very different from a normal curve if our instruction is effective.” The PLC process promotes high expectations by encouraging teachers to collaborate around results and identify which practices should be retained, refined and/or rejected. The result of this continuous improvement process is a “new normal” for the traditional normal curve—one that is skewed to the right and reflects all students learning.

Reason #3: Because Every Child Deserves a Quality Education

The PLC process promotes a commitment to equity and fairness. Some children come from learning enriched backgrounds, others from learning impoverished backgrounds. In learning enriched homes, parents are involved and expose their children to a variety of experiences that create a predisposition to learning. The opposite is true in learning impoverished homes. If education is to fulfill its essential role in America as the great equalizer, significant achievement and opportunity gaps must close to allow all students access to the kind of world-class education that will prepares them for college and careers in the 21st century. In schools functioning as PLCs, teachers embrace their responsibility to create high quality learning experiences for *all* children, regardless of their background. They accept the challenge posed by Barbara Coloroso who said, “Children from learning enriched homes may make our jobs easier but children from learning impoverished homes make our jobs important.”

Reason #4: Because What We Do as Teachers Does Matter

The PLC process promotes teacher efficacy. Inherent in the belief that all kids can learn is a belief that as teachers, we can teach all kids. We know differences in children’s backgrounds exist but the more important question is, “What are we doing about those differences?” Almost five decades of Effective Schools research and Bob Marzano’s meta-analysis of What Works in Schools show that effective schools almost entirely mitigate the influence of negative demographic factors. John Hattie found 32 factors more impactful than the home a child comes from, and Rick DuFour observed, “The collective efficacy [belief] of a staff is a better predictor of their students’ success than the socioeconomic status of the students.” In a PLC, teachers understand that the school a child goes to is more important than the home a child comes from.

Reason #5: Because Our Kids will Compete in a Global Economy

The PLC process supports the kinds of schools that will enhances our nation’s economic competitiveness. In 2011, results showed the U.S. made statistically significant gains on international assessments and scored above the international average in all subjects. Yet students from several countries (including Finland) continued to outperform American students. Finland’s performance has drawn the attention of educators from around the world. Experts have identified several attributes of the Finnish educational system that are distinctive and contribute to their success. For example, the Finnish school system uses the same curriculum for all students. Finland uses very little standardized testing and relies instead on early and frequent diagnostic testing of students. If students need extra help, intensive intervention is provided. Groups of teachers regularly visit each other’s classes to observe their colleagues at work and teachers typically receive one afternoon per week of professional development. These same practices are closely aligned with the PLC process.

Reason #6: Because as Good as We are, We Need to be Even Better

Even the best schools need to keep improving. The PLC process helps align what we do with what we know is effective. Nearly every school’s mission statement identifies learning as their fundamental purpose so if that is true, the question then becomes how committed are we to that mission? As Ken Blanchard said, “There is a difference between interest and commitment. When you are interested in doing something, you do it when circumstances permit. When you’re committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results.” When schools are *committed* to learning, teachers embrace the notion of continuous improvement. They guard against becoming complacent, question the “precedent of past practice,” and reject ineffective policies, practices and procedures just because “that’s the way we’ve always done it around here.” Schools functioning as a PLC understand that past practice represents history, not prophecy and rely on the Critical Questions of Learning to guide their improvement efforts. ■



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