

Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD and Susan Sparks



“There’s a difference between a philosophy and a bumper sticker.” - Charles M. Schulz

Bumper stickers—those short, succinct, sometimes clever or humorous quips and quotes we notice while driving—can help us think about big and important ideas. Some bumper stickers make a statement about people, politics, culture, art, places and society in general. Others can be the way we express ourselves or tell a story about a moment where everything either went good or bad. A few have been around long enough to become part of our everyday vocabulary. Honestly, who hasn’t heard that, “PLC is not something you do, PLC is something you are!”

While the message might differ from one person to the next, bumper stickers do help us communicate with others about what we value. So, in no particular order of importance, here are a few of our favorite bumper stickers to inspire your PLC.

A child’s zip code should not determine their destiny.

Evidence from a growing number of researchers continue to point towards the fact that an effective teacher can

overcome almost all of the negative influences children from less advantaged backgrounds bring to school. To paraphrase Barbara Coloroso, “Students from advantaged backgrounds make our jobs easier, students from disadvantaged backgrounds make our jobs important.” It is true that if we collaborate around the right work in the right ways, the school a kid goes to is more impactful than the home a kid comes from.

We are not responsible for the data; we are responsible for how we respond to the data.

In a PLC, assessment data is not used to rank or evaluate the effectiveness of individual teachers. It also should not be used to blame teachers, students or demographics. In a PLC, data serves two important purposes: it identifies which students need more time and support, and it highlights which instructional practices should be retained, refined or replaced. As Anthony Muhammed points out, “Data is information not condemnation.”

Show me a school where students are learning, and I'll show you a school where adults are learning too.

The most effective leaders understand that becoming a PLC is a journey and there are no shortcuts; teams need to work on the work. Engaging in action research to identify promising practices will be messy but if you take the work away from teachers, you take the learning away from teachers. As Doug Reeves says, "The PLC process is about improving practice, not attaining perfection."

There is always room for improvement, in fact it's the biggest room in our school.

Continuous improvement is one of the essential elements of the PLC process and the best teachers are constantly looking for better ways to help their students learn. While it may be difficult to accept that some pressure is healthy and a sense of urgency is necessary to improve, educators must recognize that if there were no chance of failure, there would be no opportunity for growth and improvement. To be successful, we have to become comfortable with being uncomfortable.

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

Since highly effective collaborative teams are the engine that drive PLCs and the foundation upon which successful PLCs are built, we believe it is time to re-examine the traditional role of instructional coaching and shift the emphasis from individual teachers to collaborative teams. According to Ann Delephant, "We have great success when coaches work with individuals, but we go further faster when we work with teams."

The biggest school improvement gap is the 12" between a person's head and their heart.

The PLC process is not about working harder, it's about working differently. Experience has shown that successfully implementing the basic tenets and big ideas of Professional Learning Communities depends largely on implementing what teachers already know. Rick DuFour often asked faculties if they were willing, "to give priority to implementing a process that improves student and adult learning or to one that preserves traditional structure and culture?" For most faculties the question is not *can* you, but *will* you do whatever it takes to ensure all students learn.

We must adjust to changing times but cling to unchanging principles.

A strong school culture is built on certain non-negotiables—such as the belief that all students can learn—and

when an individual's beliefs are incongruent with the organization's beliefs, those individuals tend to leave for "health" reasons. According to Rick DuFour, "They just get sick and tired of being at odds with what the rest of the faculty believes is best for kids." Anthony Muhammed makes the choice even clearer for leaders when he says, "It is important to hold resisters accountable. They will either change or they will leave and as leaders, we should be OK with either outcome."

Keep Calm and PLC On.

We have some other favorites such as, "*The smartest person in the room is the room*" (building shared knowledge), "*There is a difference between finding your groove and getting stuck in a rut*" (continuous improvement), or "*If you're too busy to reflect, you're too busy to improve*" (collective inquiry), but when it comes to the PLC process, Charles Schulz has a point! We would never suggest that the PLC process could be reduced to a pithy slogan stuck on the back of someone's car, but bumper stickers can be a great way to spark a conversation, cause us to reflect, or make the point that we care about something or someone.

Try posting some of your favorite "bumper stickers" in the teachers' lounge or conference room. Ask others to add their favorite motivational "bumper stickers" about teaching and learning and create a graffiti wall as a way to inspire your PLC! Share photos of your graffiti wall on social media and tag @tmany96, @TEPSAtalk, #WeLeadTX.



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