THE POWER OF HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY
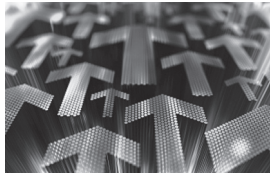
IMPROVED LEARNING FOR ALL

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You could say that professional learning communities are not created simply by forming teacher teams, but by what those teams do

Pictured above:
Whited School third-grade teachers Andree Moll, Debby Perry, and Susie Souza have created a high-performing PLC team. A video of one of their meetings is online at www.scoe.org/leadership.
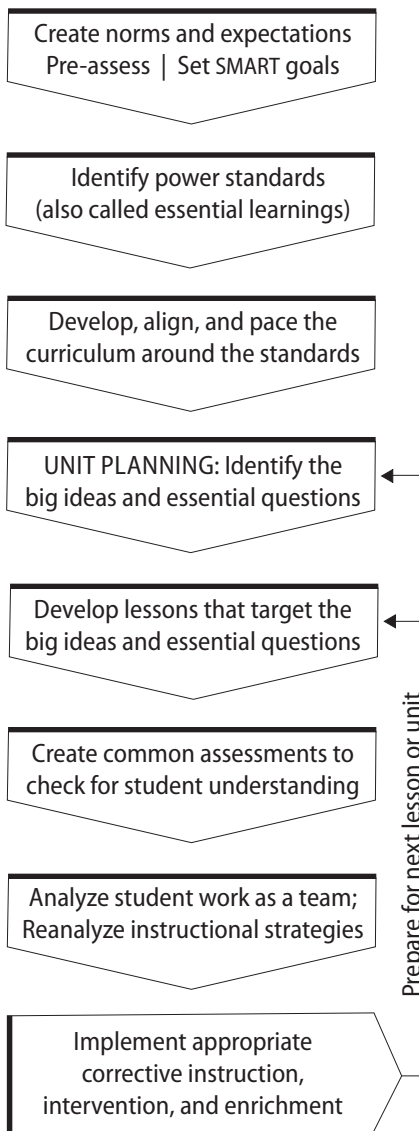
History was made at Douglas Whited School in the Rincon Valley Union School District this year. For the first time since tracking school achievement scores, an entire grade level at a Sonoma County school achieved 100 percent proficiency in a core content area. Every third-grade student at Whited School scored proficient or above on the 2009 STAR test in mathematics, including all special education students, students with economic disadvantages, and English-language learners. This achievement is particularly impressive given Whited's demographics: 43 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals and 20 percent are English learners.

Principal Tom Castagnola and his staff, including teachers Andree Moll, Debby Perry, Susie Souza, and Adele Daw, credit this success to their work as a professional learning community (PLC). As a PLC, they created and implemented a plan that called for teacher leadership and collaborative planning to ensure high levels of learning for all students. And it worked.

Today, everyone in education is talking about the power of professional learning communities. That's because there is extensive research showing that schools operating as PLCs can realize impressive and enduring student achievement gains. Milbrey McLaughlin, a Stanford University researcher who has studied high-performing schools throughout California, writes that "the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities. Indeed, every high-performing school we studied, without exception, functions as a professional learning community."

HIGH-PERFORMING TEAM WORK PLAN FLOW CHART

Create norms and expectations
Pre-assess | Set SMART goals

Identify power standards
(also called essential learnings)

Develop, align, and pace the
curriculum around the standards

UNIT PLANNING: Identify the
big ideas and essential questions

Develop lessons that target the
big ideas and essential questions

Create common assessments to
check for student understanding

Analyze student work as a team;
Reanalyze instructional strategies

Implement appropriate
corrective instruction,
intervention, and enrichment

Prepare for next lesson or unit

But there is also a risk associated with popularizing PLCs, says Michael Fullan, a recognized authority on education change. "We have many examples of superficial PLCs—educators simply calling what they are doing professional learning communities without going very deep into learning and without realizing they are not going deep. So problem one is the danger and likelihood of superficiality."

WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN TO BE A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY?

When schools become PLCs, they undergo a cultural shift. Teacher isolation, which is common in many schools, gives way as teachers join together to take on the challenge of raising student achievement. They form teams that meet regularly and work collaboratively to plan, implement, and refine instruction so that learning for all students rises to a new level.

In their 2002 book, *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities*, Robert Eaker, Richard DuFour, and Rebecca DuFour describe three big ideas that are the foundation of an effective PLC. The work of teacher teams flows from these ideas.

❶ **Focus on learning.** The fundamental purpose of school is to ensure that all students learn, not to ensure that they are taught—and the distinction is significant. By shifting the focus to learning, educators see their work in a new light. They are motivated to examine the impact their practices have on learning, then to establish specific, measurable goals to heighten the quality and quantity of learning in their schools.

❷ **Collaborative culture.** Helping students learn requires a collaborative effort, especially when schools make a commitment to focus on all students. Teachers and administrators organize into teams to bring the power of collaboration to this work. As team members join together to achieve their collective purpose, they learn from each other, work interdependently to meet common goals, and hold themselves mutually accountable for the success of their students.

❸ **Focus on results.** In PLCs, individuals, teams, and schools monitor their effectiveness based on results rather than intentions. They seek relevant data and information, then use it to promote continuous improvement, identify individual and team strengths, and address areas of concern. Most importantly, they use results from common assessments to identify students who are experiencing difficulty, as well as those who are proficient, so that instruction can be targeted to their specific needs.

It's important to note that a professional learning community is not a program. It is a process, a way for the adults in a school to work together. As PLC expert Tom Many writes, "Becoming a PLC is not something a faculty engages in for a year or two, only to abandon before moving on to a new initiative. Becoming a PLC cannot be reduced to a recipe or a prescriptive set of activities. Simply put, becoming a PLC is not something you do; it is something you are."

The concepts and practices of a professional learning community are *a means to an end*. Forming a PLC is not the goal; attaining high levels of learning for all students is the goal. In fact, some schools have deliberately stopped using the term "professional learning community" because striving to become a model PLC was getting in the way of their efforts to really concentrate on student learning.

Most schools already schedule time for teachers to meet together

and plan. Yet, for schools operating in a traditional model, it's estimated that about 80 percent of this meeting time is spent discussing issues only distantly related to student learning—operational details, the budget, field trips, behavior problems, etc. In a PLC, the reverse is true. The majority of team meeting time is strictly focused on student learning. Clarifying learning outcomes, setting goals, monitoring student progress, and developing strategies to intervene or enrich instruction form the agendas of these meetings.

Thus, you could say that professional learning communities are not created simply by forming teacher teams, but by what those teams *do*.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A PLC TEAM

What distinguishes a group from a team? Richard DuFour defines a team as a group of people working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are held mutually accountable. Effective teams incorporate the elements of interdependence, common goals, and mutual accountability into the work they do and the actions they take. A team differs from a group in that teams require the efforts of every member to be successful.

The PLC model takes the idea of teamwork to another level by focusing attention on *high-performing* teams. These teams set goals and achieve them, function effectively and efficiently, and realize results in terms of higher student achievement. The third-grade teachers at Whited School are an example of a high-performing team. A video showing them in action is available online at **www.scoe.org/leadership**.

While each PLC team is unique, the Whited team and other high-performers share specific characteristics and ways of working. First, they establish "norms" or ground rules for their work as a team. These guidelines clarify expectations and define how the team will function. They hold team members accountable and keep discussions focused, inclusive, and respectful.

Team norms can define procedural details (when to meet, how often, and who will take notes) or they can address interpersonal functioning: how to deal with disagreements or ensure equal participation. Teachers on high-performing teams say that establishing explicit guidelines for collaboration results in increased trust, fewer conflicts, and more thoughtful and productive meetings.

Second, high-performing teams are clear about why they're meeting and what they're seeking to accomplish. This means that these teachers have not simply agreed to collaborate, they know what they are collaborating about. As they conduct their

meetings, they establish learning-focused goals for their collaboration, and those goals are SMART—specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely.

Many teams have a common framework for collaboration that's linked to their purpose of moving students to higher levels of learning. They use a "work plan flow chart" (pictured at left) as a guide, adjusting it to their specific needs. The team moves through this step-by-step process as they set goals, align curricula, plan units of study, develop lessons, create formative assessments, analyze assessment results, and plan for instructional correction, intervention, and enrichment.

"What do we want all students to learn?" and "How will we know if they've learned it?" are two of the most significant questions that PLCs consider. To answer these questions, high-performing teams typically create common assessments that are aligned with the standards they have identified. They use a numbers-to-names-to-needs process to track student progress relative to those standards. They examine assessment results to ascertain the *number* of students at each performance level, then identify students at the proficient, strategic, and intensive levels by *name* and *need*. This process puts a face to the data. The teachers

KEYS TO EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

- Collaboration is built into the school day
- Team norms support collaboration
- Teams commit to SMART goals
- Teams focus on key questions
- Products of collaboration are explicit
- Student performance data guides each team's work

know which students aren't proficient, can analyze assessment results to pinpoint weak areas, and target intervention with a laser focus.

At Whited and other schools that are successfully closing achievement gaps, teachers have taken a courageous "look in the mirror" by analyzing student data together. By collaborating on the data analysis process, they have brought their work as educators out of isolation and "de-privatized" their profession. They are comfortable putting their names to the data and indicating which and how many of their students are struggling. They are also willing to name the students who are succeeding and to share instructional practices that are producing strong results.

In high-performing teams, every teacher opens

teams require. They provide an equal measure of pressure and support for the improvement effort—pressure regarding the urgency of ensuring that all students succeed and support in finding the time and resources to get the job done.

Most importantly, these school leaders model the very practices they are asking their teachers to use. Their faculty meetings are focused on critical questions about learning rather than management issues. They ensure that everyone in the school is clear about what students need to learn. They obtain, analyze, and share assessment data so that teachers understand and can participate in decision-making about instructional practices. In asking teachers to work collaboratively, share best practices, and demonstrate a willingness to learn from one another, these principals understand that they must align their own work as administrators to these behaviors.

As educators, we often know what needs to be done to advance student learning. The difficulty is doing it, and getting the right people doing the right work. Creating high-performing teacher teams is one strategy that can create the stimulus and support for the changes we know we must make.

As difficult as teamwork is to measure and achieve, its power cannot be denied. "When people come together and set aside their individual needs for the good of the whole, they can accomplish what might have looked impossible on paper," says organization leadership and teamwork expert Patrick Lencioni, author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.

Is it possible for every student to reach proficiency? Just ask the third-grade teachers at Whited School. One hundred percent proficient. Every child learning at high levels. *This* is the power of high-performing teams. ◆

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his or her classroom practice to peers. They create a spirit of shared accountability—an understanding that "they are all our students"—and a willingness to do whatever it takes to help all students learn. This is a key characteristic of a PLC team.

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

Unfortunately, the quality of collaborative teams is not the same in every school. Research is clear on this point: leadership matters. According to Effective Schools researcher Lawrence Lezotte, "Effective principals are the key, without whom the disparate elements of effective schooling practices and the concepts of a PLC cannot be brought together, nor maintained."

School principals foster the conditions under which professional learning communities either flourish or whither. In schools strongly focused on improvement, principals provide leadership by giving staff an honest assessment of student achievement and by reviewing the research and practices of similar schools that are achieving at high levels. They communicate the value of teacher leadership, then work to create the structures, culture, and trust that high-performing teacher