

For Your Child:

We Will Do Whatever It Takes!

By Mary Kaye Siebert, Ph.D., Director of Instruction

One of the most exciting developments in our school district is the simple, but powerful concept of the three important letters: **PLC - Professional Learning Community**. Rick DuFour, well known presenter and author of many books and articles on PLCs, says that the “most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is the capacity of school personnel to function as a PLC.” All of our schools in USD 320 have embraced the PLC model for school improvement, and I can safely say that if there is anything the educational research community agrees on, it is the potential for PLCs to build cultures of excellence in our schools. **The first and most significant guiding principle of a PLC is that the purpose of any school is to ensure high levels of learning for ALL students.** The key to being able to function as a PLC school is the development of high functioning teams of teachers in schools, where collaboration is embedded into routine practices, and time for collaboration is strategically built into the school day and school calendar. All of our teachers have protected time in their calendars on a weekly basis for this important work. In a PLC culture, we acknowledge the importance of focusing our collective efforts on student learning; in doing this we create team norms that create environments of collective inquiry and transparency with regard to the content and skills taught in our classrooms, and the strategies used to create opportunities for student learning and success.

Team collaboration is not the same thing as collegiality. Working with others in an atmosphere of friendliness, sharing and respect is important to be sure; however, this is not collaboration. Collaboration is difficult work and it involves the willingness to be honest with each other, transparent in our intentions, and most importantly, be willing to put in the time to practice this hard work, and be accountable to those we work with in teams. Team collaboration is effective when it focuses on the critical questions of learning, leads to change in classroom practice and teaching, increases teams’ abilities to achieve goals, and helps individual teachers become more effective so that all students learn at high levels. All educators in our school district understand deeply that in order to make great things happen for all students in a school/district, the culture of the organization must be one where all commit to the importance of working together to achieve their collective purpose. This is referred to as a “collaborative culture”. So then, the use of the word "culture" is not just a rhetorical term for those working in

a true PLC. In a true PLC culture, there is unwavering support for the big idea that collaboration is critical for us to do our best work for students-your children.

The terms “culture” and “collaboration” often have different meanings to individuals. But put very simply, the culture of a school/district is essentially “the way we do things around here.” Culture cannot be found in mission statements or strategic planning documents, but instead is found in the day to day behaviors, attitudes and deeply held beliefs of all individuals and groups that make up an organization. Culture is also reflected in the policies and procedures that guide that organization.

Our teachers who work in true PLCs often talk about the term “collaboration”. Collaboration is not the same as congeniality, and the difference between the two is worth noting here. Working with others in an atmosphere of friendliness, sharing and respect is important to be sure; however, this is not collaboration. Collaboration is difficult work and it absolutely involves the willingness to be honest with each other, transparent in our intentions, and most importantly, be willing to put in the time to practice this hard work, and be accountable to those we work with in teams.

One of the most enduring concepts embraced in PLC schools is that the focus of our collective efforts must be on learning, not teaching. Teachers in our PLC schools focus their efforts on learning (in their PLC teams) in a number of significant ways: developing SMART (strategic, measurable, attainable, results-bound, and time-bound) goals that focus on areas for student improvement, developing common assessments and evaluating students’ results as teams of teachers. A central component of our PLCs is that time be allowed within the school day for teams to come together to analyze and improve their classroom practice, and engage in ongoing cycles of questions that promote team learning. The PLC teams in our schools are required to make those goals (including strategies, questions, concerns and results) public, with the discussions in those teams carefully structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers, both individually and collectively. This is, in essence, the epitome of best practices when it comes to professional development.

The emphasis in a PLC then is on learning. While this may seem pretty common sense, obvious, and maybe cliché, a true PLC culture consists of teachers and administrators that take this statement very seriously, and pledge to do “**whatever it takes**” to ensure success for all students-your children! This “whatever it takes” philosophy is embedded into the everyday work of all school personnel in a PLC school. Furthermore, the pledge to ensure learning for all is

reflected in the collective commitments that have been agreed upon in all schools. These commitments are then exemplified in the behaviors and actions of adults and children alike.

In order to ensure that there will be learning for all in our PLC schools, all educators must consider four critical questions, if we indeed believe that all kids can learn: 1) **What is it we expect them to learn?**, 2) **How will we know when they have learned it?**, 3) **How will we respond when they don't learn?**, and 4) **How will we respond when they already know it?** How schools answer the last two questions differentiates schools that operate as true PLCs and those that do not.

“What do we want each student to learn?” Knowing what it is that we want our students to learn is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks of any educator. Our curriculum maps, with links to the standards for our state, provide us with guidance here. But even with agreed upon curriculum maps and guides in place, teachers must continually have conversations with each other in their PLC teams, with regard to how that curriculum fits with the students in their classrooms. They must ask themselves the question “which standards are critical (need to know) and which are not critical (nice to know)”. Educator and researcher Doug Reeves specifies three criteria to help educators determine which standards deserve a higher priority: endurance, leverage, and necessity for the next level of instruction.

* **Endurance**-Does the standard address knowledge and skills that will endure throughout a student's academic career and professional life?

* **Leverage**-Does it address knowledge and skills that will be of value in multiple content areas?

* **Necessity**– Does it provide the essential knowledge and skills that students need to succeed in the next grade level?

Thinking about our curriculum through these three lenses can help us become clearer about what it is that students must learn in our classrooms and grade levels.

“How will we know when each student has learned it?” We know that we cannot wait until the end of a unit, a semester or a year to answer this question. Therefore, we must study the power of formative assessments (assessments for learning) as diagnostic progress-monitoring tools used to adjust teaching and learning while they are still occurring. Creating formative assessments in our PLC teams and using them to monitor progress in our classrooms can help us address the third question.

“How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?” Herein is the ultimate challenge that every teacher/administrator faces regularly. What do we do when a student meets difficulty learning what is needed to be learned? In other words, what do we do when our students haven’t learned what we deem critical? There are no easy answers to this question, however, when teachers work together in high functioning teams, to share what works in their classrooms, use common formative assessments, and analyze data related to student learning, the answers surface more readily. We know that the collective intelligence that is created in collaborative teams is almost always greater than what we have available to us when we attempt to go solo. In addition to working together with colleagues, strategies are designed in our schools to ensure that struggling students receive the time and support they need, no matter who their teacher is. We know that a PLC’s response to such students needs to be systematic and school-wide; it needs to be timely, based on research based interventions, rather than remediation, and directive, not voluntary.

“How will we respond when students already have learned it?” This question calls us to think beyond the curriculum per se, and create meaningful learning opportunities for those students who need additional challenge in the classroom. It’s worth repeating here that the answers to the third and fourth questions discussed in this article separate learning communities from traditional schools, according to Rick DuFour.

In creating schools that are true PLCs, we must continually strive to examine our own stories we tell ourselves in schools. This involves being open to new ways of going about our work and possessing the willingness to examine current practices in order to improve. The challenges are significant, however, the potential for gains in student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and both student and teacher efficacy in the classroom is great. *Note: If you are interested in learning more information about professional learning communities in your child's school, please contact either the building principal of the school, or myself.*