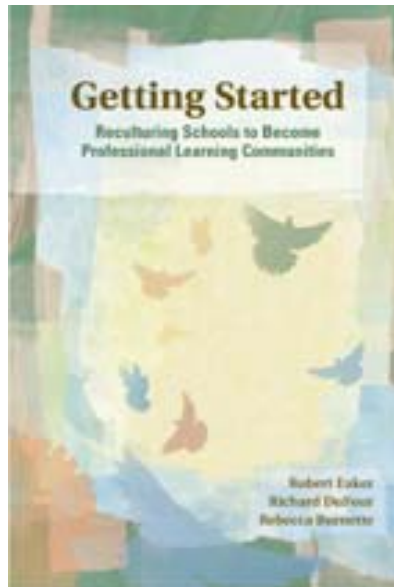


Executive Book Summary

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Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities

Richard Dufour, Robert Eaker and Rebecca Burnette have written “Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities” in response to the frequently asked question “Where do I begin?” It is written in an easy to read conversational style where the authors share personal experiences and insights into professional learning communities (PLC). This book offers practical ideas and specific strategies for implementing the process of a PLC. The authors set up a clear difference between traditional schools and professional learning communities, with the core difference being a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning.



Three key questions constantly emerge throughout the book: What do we want our students to learn? How can we be certain they have learned it? How will we respond if they do not learn it?

Three key questions in a PLC:

What do we want our students to learn?

How will we know if they have learned it?

How will we respond if they do not learn it?

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....the characteristics of a professional learning community are essential to the sustained improvement of any organization.



Professional Learning Communities

Three major themes in policies, programs & practices of PLC

- * A solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, vision, values and goals
- * Collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals
- * Focus on results as evidenced by commitment to continuous improvement

Solid Foundation

A school cannot become a PLC until all the staff have discussed questions that have to do with direction and purpose. The authors give a wonderful metaphor of a table, and each leg of the table represents **mission, vision, values & goals**. Schools must pay attention to all four areas for the table to be stable.

Collaborative Culture

A collaborative culture must become embedded within the culture of the school. Teachers are expected to give up a degree of autonomy in order to help all students learn at a high level. Each teacher will be part of a **team** that works interdependently. Teams may be grade level groups or may include multi-age level teachers, as well as support staff. Teachers work together on learning outcomes, course work, units of instruction, common assessment tools, and many other things.

“The first critical rule of building a learning community is to build a solid foundation of shared mission, vision, values and goals.”

Schools that function as professional learning communities are always characterized by a collaborative culture.

Results

School improvement is based on student learning. What this comes down to is how do we determine what works best? **Student Learning!**



Cultural Shift: How can traditional schools become professional learning communities?

Before a school's culture can be fundamentally changed, their belief system must be altered. The professional learning community is not a physical thing but a way of thinking, believing and knowing. Cultural shifts are non-linear, that is they do not have to come in any particular order. Shifts may occur immediately or may take years to happen. Each school and school district is unique and there is no timeline that should be followed.

You must speak to the hearts of people if you hope to change the culture in a school.

There are many elements that show marked differences between traditional schools and PLC, which include; collaboration, development of mission, vision, values and goals, focus on learning, leadership, celebration, persistence and school improvement plans. Below are some differences summed up in a table:



Traditional Schools

Professional Learning Communities

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborative teams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mission statements are brief & generic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mission statements clarify what students will learn, how we'll know they learned & how to respond when they don't learn
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vision statements are average opinions, often with lists & developed by a few people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vision statements are research-based, credible, focused & shared through collaboration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Values are random, excessive in number, articulated as beliefs and behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Values are linked to vision, few in number, focus on self
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal statements are random, excessive in number, focus on means not ends, impossible to measure, not monitored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal statements are linked to vision, few in number, focus on desired outcome, measurable & monitored
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers decide independently what to teach and how to assess it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers collaborate and agree upon focuses, reduce content for greater depth & create assessments together

Time and Perspective



First Things First!

- * Focus on learning
- * Focus on collaborative culture
- * Focus on results
- * Provide timely, relevant information

A common problem began to arise after workshops; with all the things a principal needs to do, where is there time to do things to create a professional learning community? What Dufour proposes is a change in perspective. Time is a constant. Dufour gives the image of a pitcher full of rice (all the things a principal already does). Now imagine that tennis balls represent things needed to create a PLC. There is no way that the tennis balls can fit in without displacing some rice. The idea is to work PLC principles into what you are currently doing.

Focus on Learning

We focus on learning by first looking at what it is exactly we want each child learn. Teachers can do this by not only looking at curriculums, but also to use teachers guides, research, and other professional organizations. Secondly, we want to know how we will assess this learning. Teachers need to develop common assessments and specify what the standards are for each assessment. Lastly, we will need to know what to do when there are children who do not learn. In the past, it was expected that all children will learn a concept within a fixed amount of time. In a PLC, **learning is the constant**. Children are provided with additional time and support. This support can come in many ways, and in fact teachers are having to get creative. Teachers may use business partnerships, internships with high school students, or peer tutoring.

Focus on Results

Many schools have good intentions, but fail to achieve the results they desire. A professional learning community is effective because it is able to reach the results they desire. They do this through careful monitoring of their team work. Each team sets specific goals to serve as milestones of their progress. Often schools set goals that are unattainable but PLC schools follow as formula:

Strategic & specific

Mesaurable

Attainable

Results-oriented

Time-bound

Focus on timely, relevant information

As the teachers work collaboratively together, the principal will provide them with an overview of how their work is progressing.

Focus on Collaborative Culture

Teachers are put in teams, which all work together to achieve goals related to mission and vision. These teams develop their own protocols or norms to determine how they will run their meetings. Team members will be provided with feedback and will also write evaluations on their experiences.

Lessons Learned: Boones Mill Elementary School

Rebecca Burnette, Principal of Boones Mill Elementary School had a vision of where her new school should be headed:

- * Staff are united by a shared vision, collective commitments and common goals
- * Teacher work collaboratively in teams on questions of teaching and learning
- * Improvement practices become part of the regular routine
- * Focus on results

In this chapter, Burnette provides a practical guide to how she went about setting up a professional learning community in her own school. Below are many of the strategies and steps she followed:

Honoring the History and finding common ground

- * Talk to the staff and listen to what they have to say about their school, both the past and the future

Creating a Guiding Coalition

- * Introduce PLC vocabulary and concepts through discussions, articles, workshops

Laying the Foundation

- * Build upon the existing mission statement; identify two or three overarching goals

Aligning School Structures with the PLC model

- * Entire staff was put into teams; a master schedule was created to allow teams time within the school day to meet

*“I knew that the key to the effectiveness of my communication was what I **did** rather than what I said”*





Isn't it ironic how frequently we question the willingness of others to do what must be done to improve our school, and in doing so, absolve ourselves of the responsibility for taking action?

A call for action

A professional learning community is a process, not a program. This book is not only to help people and answer questions, but also to inspire people to want to set up a professional learning community in their school. The purpose in setting up your school as a PLC is to help all children achieve at higher levels and help all teachers become the very best they can be.

A collaborative culture is more than just working together. People need to care for each other, help and support each other too. The question is not "What problems will arise?" but "When problems arise, how will we solve them together?"

Conversation with the Authors

Anticipating questions, the three authors give advice on various topics:

Recommendations for starting out

- Engage small groups of teachers in dialogue
- Find out, visit, read about schools that are PLC
- Tie PLC into existing practices

Conceptual framework

- PLC is a way of thinking
- Leader has to connect all areas of change from traditional to PLC

District Leadership

- Schools have done this without support of district
- District should be 'tight' on the following issues:
 1. Ensuring each student will be monitored on a timely basis
 2. Ensuring each school should develop its own way of dealing with students who are not learning
 3. Ensure that teachers work together in teams
 4. Ensure that each teacher is being provided with useful information on how students are doing

Encountering Resistance

- Focus on behaviors not attitudes
- Provide people with experiences that contradicts their expectations
- Collaboration time is provided during the day