# Getting Started as a Collaborative Team

| KEY POINTS |
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- Collaborative teams are the engine of professional learning communities.
- The focus during collaborative meetings must be on student learning.
- Effective teams are clear on their purpose, and they follow key processes that enhance their ability to work efficiently.
- Effective teams are focused on results in student learning.

If you're reading this book, there's a good chance you and your team are familiar with the Professional Learning Communities at Work concept put forth by Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour. However, in case you are not, we will begin by reviewing the big ideas related to PLCs and what it takes to function in effective collaborative teams. We'll discuss the elements of PLCs, as well as some critical strategies and processes that your collaborative team will rely on while building its effectiveness. This review will help clarify the big picture of PLCs, build new knowledge, explore the types of strategies that will help prepare teams for the work of designing and using of common formative assessments, and simply provide some good reminders of what effective teams do. You can explore much of the information within this chapter in greater detail in publications such as *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work: New Insights for Improving Schools* (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008), *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, second edition (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010a), *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever It Takes* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010), and *The Collaborative Teacher: Working Together as a Professional Learning Community* (Erkens et al., 2008). These resources have captured the essence of what it means to work as a PLC and can assist schools and districts as they dig into this important work.

## The Big Ideas of a Professional Learning Community

PLCs are not a program, a fad, or a meeting. A PLC is a way of doing business in schools—and that business is learning. PLCs work with that end in mind. As defined by DuFour et al. (2010b, p. 4), a PLC

is "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve." PLCs, they continue, "operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators" (p. 4).

The term *professional learning community* describes a culture and structure now being employed by tens of thousands of schools and districts—not just across North America, but around the world. PLCs are based on the beliefs and practices of highly effective organizations and schools (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Senge, 1990) and characterized by three big ideas that guide their work (DuFour & Eaker, 2008):

1.  **A focus on learning—**Schools that operate as PLCs have a constant eye on learning and will stop at nothing to ensure high levels of learning for all students. This commitment is shared across all members of the learning community and assumes that everyone will work together to examine and change instructional practices to make sure all students learn at high levels. Rather than view their role as serving only those students who are in their classroom, teachers assume collective responsibility for the learning of all students. As a result of this collective responsibility, the pathway for attaining high levels of learning isn't achieved through random acts of improvement implemented in isolation by individual teachers, but rather through systematic improvements that enhance the learning of all students.

2.  **A culture of collaboration—**In a PLC, there is a collective commitment to *all* students in the school. The traditional line that divides "your" students versus "mine" evaporates into a culture of "our" students. Teams are responsible for the learning of all students, and in order to get there, everyone's efforts are pointed in the same direction. To that end, it's impossible for teachers working in isolation to ensure high levels of learning for all students. It's clear that the task is too great, and few, if any, teachers are equipped with all the knowledge or the energy to make it happen on their own. In a PLC, teacher teams collaborate to define what students need to know and do, monitor their learning, and respond systematically when students aren't learning essential concepts and skills. Teachers share their best instructional practices so that all students can benefit. Consequently, students receive a guaranteed and viable curriculum, one that's clearly defined and consistently delivered regardless of what teacher they have (Marzano, 2003). Their learning is the focus of an entire team, and they reap the expertise of all of its members in a systematic fashion.

3.  **A focus on results—**In a PLC, there is a significant shift from a focus on *teaching* to a focus on *learning*. Merely discussing strategies or sharing best practices isn't enough. PLCs focus on the collective impact their professional practice has on student learning, and that impact is measured along the way by collecting and responding to meaningful data. DuFour (2004) says it best when he states that the mission "is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn" (p. 1). The all-too familiar phrase "I taught it, they just didn't learn it" is the antithesis of PLCs. In PLCs, it's all about what students have learned—not what teachers have taught. This constant focus on results in student learning is the impetus for developing and using common formative assessments, as well as any subsequent interventions that provide students with additional time and support.

# The Role of Teams in a PLC

According to DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008), the engine behind school improvement in a professional learning community is the team—grade-level teams, departmental teams, or cross-departmental teams. The actions of these teams are guided by the following questions:

- What do we want students to know and do?
- How do we know they are learning?
- What do we do when they're not learning?
- How do we respond when they've already learned the information?

Simply put, the power of improvement lies within the team—"a group of people working *interdependently* to achieve a *common goal* for which members are held *mutually accountable*" (DuFour et al., 2010b, p. 6). The goal is to improve student learning, and teams are committed to examining and adjusting their practices so that all students walk away knowing and being able to do the things that are considered essential. The focus on a common goal is what differentiates a truly collaborative team within a PLC from a more traditional grade-level or course team. The ultimate focus of a collaborative team working within a PLC is placed squarely and consistently on student learning, not merely on the adult behaviors or the products they create. Effective teams have established a culture and a structure that enables them to do the work of clarifying their curriculum, identifying measures that monitor the learning of their students, intervening to ensure that students get needed additional time and support, and differentiating their instruction so that all students, no matter where they are, learn at high levels.

John Hattie (2009), in his book *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, examines numerous instructional practices and concludes that teachers working together in collaborative teams to clarify what students must learn, gather evidence of learning, and analyze that evidence so that they can identify the most powerful teaching strategy is indeed the practice that yields the most results in improving student learning. Getting this powerful continuous improvement model in place requires both structural adjustments and cultural shifts.

# The Nuts and Bolts of Working as a Team

Before you and your team can move forward with the work of creating and implementing common formative assessments, there are some foundational structures and processes to establish. Let's examine these key factors.

## *Time to Collaborate*

The first, and perhaps most obvious, factor is that your team must have time to collaborate on a frequent basis. The work of developing common assessments is not something that can be accomplished simply by meeting as a team once each quarter or even once monthly. To build clarity and consistency across our classrooms so that all students learn at high levels, team members need to meet with a high level of regularity. Rather than collaborating periodically during isolated events, teams need to establish a work flow that connects their actions from meeting to meeting, with little time between.

Schools of all sizes and grade levels have identified a number of ways to find time during the instructional day so that teachers are empowered to collaborate. These include the restructuring of their

instructional day, identifying common prep periods, conducting late-start or early-out schedules, and establishing periods of the week or day during which teacher teams can capture collaborative time. A number of additional ideas for finding time appear on the AllThingsPLC website (www.allthingsplc.info), a tremendous online resource that contains articles, blogs, and recommendations from people in the field who are successfully implementing PLCs. There are suggestions that apply to a number of types of teams, including grade-alike and course-alike teams, departmental teams (teaching similar content, but not necessarily the same course), and e-teams (electronic).

## *Clarity of Purpose and Commitment*

Once your team has been defined and has established a structure for meeting on a frequent basis, it's critical to affirm your mission—your fundamental purpose. In a PLC, that mission is to improve student learning, and all members have a clear and collective understanding of the work to be done. There is not merely an individual commitment from each member of the team, but a team commitment for members to hold themselves accountable to that purpose. While your school may have worked through the process of clarifying its mission, vision, values, and goals, you need to purposefully transfer the conversation to the team level. We highly recommend taking the time to collectively answer these questions: Why do we exist as a collaborative team? What commitments do we make to accomplish this work? The answers will help define and focus your team's mission and unite members by establishing a formal commitment to place student learning at the core of all the team does. If your team hasn't extended that same clarity to its work, it risks the danger of getting off track, or veering off on a nonproductive tangent that's not focused on student learning.

A clear mission or purpose helps to guide team actions and the focus of every member. As a lighthouse guides ships through the fog, the clear purpose of working to improve student learning illuminates the intended course of teamwork. From time to time, teams may experience conversations that are challenging or processes that are unclear. Having that lighthouse that every member of the team can point to during those foggy times can keep teams on a path that is meaningful. In practice, some mature teams have set the expectation that their time will be focused on student learning. They hold themselves to this expectation by bringing evidence of student learning (such as assessment results or student work) to every meeting. They have clear agreement about what they must accomplish and hold each other accountable to stay the course toward that mission.

## *A Clear Picture of the Process*

Effective teams in PLCs understand that there is a work flow inherent within the collaborative process. We recommend following a cycle of collective inquiry, sometimes referred to as the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle (Deming, 1968), which embeds the use of data and reflective practices throughout. The model provides a structure for action research, provides a process to target an area for improvement, and identifies specific strategies for that improvement. During the implementation of those strategies, teams collect evidence along the way, and then collectively examine the results to determine their effectiveness as well as implications for further practice. Here's how it might play out for a team across a period of time:

1. **Plan**—Create an instruction and assessment plan. The team identifies the next instructional segment and the most essential learning or outcomes (power standards) to be addressed. They reflect on the data from prior assessments, or even the previous year, to determine if there

are any learning targets that were particularly challenging for students. After establishing a SMART goal (one that is strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound; O'Neill & Conzemius, 2006), they discuss potential common formative assessment items and establish a timeline for their implementation.

2. **Do**—Execute the plan. The team implements the instructional plan and gathers data along the way through common formative assessments—assessments created collaboratively by a team of teachers from the same grade level or course.

3. **Study**—Study the results. Collectively, the team examines the results of its common formative assessments and identifies patterns that emerge, including common student errors and differences in results between classrooms.

4. **Act**—Take action. Armed with this new information, the team moves forward in providing brief, but powerful interventions that provide additional time and support for those students who did not attain the targeted skills and concepts. Additionally, team members might include in their teaching repertoire any successful strategies that they discovered when analyzing data with their colleagues.

The Work Cycle for Teams tool (page 98 in the Tools for Teams appendix) further describes the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle and will help guide your team through this process. (Note: This cycle also includes a Prepare phase that relates to the development of team norms in preparation for collaborative work.)

## *Norms for Working Together*

Team *norms* are agreed-on day-to-day behaviors—collective commitments—that the team will follow in order to work purposefully and productively. Norms define *how* each member of the team will function or act within the context of collaboration (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010). Why is this important? Let's first think about what effective teams look like. Members of effective teams are able to navigate through a number of issues and remain professional and open to the input of their colleagues. They are respectful of differing opinions, and they work to build consensus, rather than overpowering opposing views. This does not happen without specifically defining *norms*—the way that every team member commits to doing business with other members of their team. Here are some examples of norms for collaborative teams:

- We will arrive prepared and on time.
- We will be participant members.
- We will stick to our focus on student learning during our meetings.
- We will listen to others' opinions respectfully and will use a consensus process.
- We will base our decisions on data.
- We will not blame the students.

Norms serve as an important vehicle to support the cultural shifts within your team or school from one in which teachers work in isolation, making all instructional decisions independently, to one in which teams work not just collaboratively but interdependently. In this collaborative culture, teachers must put aside their personal preferences and assumptions for the good of the whole team. Once these decisions

cross the classroom door, their impact becomes much more imperative, and the reliance on the team's collective commitments will make or break how the decisions play out. Consider, for example, a teacher who is now required to change a favorite unit or shorten the time spent teaching a particular concept because the team has agreed to have students ready for a common formative assessment by a certain date. The norm for that team is that it will use consensus as a process for identifying actions within the team. If the teacher does not adhere to the agreement, she is breaking the norm, and the within-group accountability and trust is at risk.

If your team has not yet established its norms for working together, we encourage you to use the process outlined in *Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2010a, pp. 137–138). If your team has already established its norms, we recommend that you review and refine them on a regular basis.

### *Consensus-Building Strategies*

When teachers work together with their colleagues, there can be both positive energy and challenging moments. Teams are often faced with difficult conversations and differences of opinion. For example, in the midst of determining the best way to assess essential learnings, members of the team may express very clear preferences that disagree with those expressed by others. To harness that energy and direct it in a positive fashion, teams must employ a respectful decision-making process that keeps the basic tenets of effective collaboration in effect. DuFour et al.'s (2010b) definition of consensus captures the essence of this powerful process: "Consensus is achieved when (1) all points of view have not only been heard but also solicited, and (2) the will of the group is evident even to those who most oppose it" (p. 2). The consensus process is designed to identify solutions, but in a way that brings out critical information about each potential option being explored and weighs that option in an objective fashion. The process yields the best solution that's available to the team at that moment in time and is not based on meeting halfway or voting. The steps to building consensus include:

- **Step one**—Build shared knowledge (of the issue).
- **Step two**—Define the problem and determine any criteria that would need to be met in order for the solution to be considered acceptable. (For example, the solution can't increase costs, or it must be accomplishable during the instructional day.)
- **Step three**—Participate in guided brainstorming or input on solutions.
- **Step four**—Prune the solutions.
- **Step five**—Identify a solution that meets acceptability criteria.
- **Step six**—Establish final consensus.

When teams are working to reach consensus, it's important to assign various roles in support of the process. One of the most crucial roles is that of the facilitator. Facilitators are the emcees of the process and help the team move through the steps and adhere to the agreed-on course of action. They will also make adjustments as needed, such as taking a pause to restate what has already been agreed on, or restating the focus question. It's also helpful to have a recorder, a timekeeper, and someone to help monitor the norms.

Consider this scenario: A grade-level team is trying to decide how best to move forward with the results of its common formative assessments. The members each have different opinions about how best

to provide corrective instruction based on the results. For example, one teacher thinks that each member should serve his or her own students, while another thinks students might be clustered and divided across the four classrooms at that grade level, with each teacher serving a group of students based on need. Rather than spinning off in various directions or raising angst about whose idea is better, the team members followed the steps to building consensus.

First, they affirmed their purpose for providing additional time and support to students who were struggling (step one). After examining the potential numbers of students who would need this support, they generated criteria for acceptability of their potential solutions (step two). One of their criteria supported the concept that the solution would enable team members to work efficiently without duplicating efforts. They then generated potential solutions for providing corrective instruction to their students (step three). During this time, the individuals proposing the solutions had the opportunity to clarify and answer questions from members of the group. During this time, however, members of the team were not allowed to *evaluate* solutions. After all ideas were exhausted, the team weighed each solution against its criteria for acceptability (steps four and five). The solution that was determined to meet the criteria most effectively was a hybrid solution: teachers would swap students twice weekly to receive differentiated instruction, including interventions, based on their common assessment results. To determine final consensus (step six), they used a Fist to Five strategy (see the following feature box for more details) to determine the level of comfort and commitment to implement the solution. In the end, the group felt that its ideas were heard and that the best decision was made that would support student needs.

*Fist to Five* is a quick strategy used in a variety of organizations to check a group's agreement with a proposed solution or concept (DuFour et al., 2010a). No materials or equipment are needed. Here's how it works. After stating the proposal, the facilitator asks individuals to react to a proposal by raising the number of fingers that correspond to their position:

- **5 fingers—**I'm all for the idea. I can be a leader.
- **4 fingers—**I'm for the idea. I can provide support.
- **3 fingers—**I'm not sure, but I am willing to trust the group's opinion.
- **2 fingers—**I'm not sure. I need more discussion.
- **1 finger—**I can't support it at this time. I need more information.
- **0 fingers (fist)—**No. I need an alternative that I can support.

When viewing a room of raised hands, it's important to read the room and get a sense of where the group lies in terms of its acceptance of a proposal. You may see a large amount of agreement, or you may see large variation in the number of fingers raised. Whoever is facilitating the conversation should acknowledge the level of agreement and make general statements such as, "It appears that most of the people here are willing to support this idea," if most hands are showing 4s and 5s. If a significant number of individuals are showing two or fewer fingers, there may need to be more discussion to understand the concerns.

Remember, however, the definition of consensus is *not* that everybody agrees. Rather, you have reached consensus when the *will of the group* is clearly evident, even to those who individually oppose it (DuFour et al., 2010a), and regardless of their opinion, they agree to move forward with the decision and not sabotage the implementation.

### A Commitment and Process for Examining Results

It should be evident that a major premise in PLCs is that collaborative conversations take place around results and that those results are made transparent to all members of the team. Given this continuous focus on the examination of results in a PLC, teams must be comfortable working with data in a collective fashion. To that end, it's essential that teams examine their norms to ensure that they support collaboration around data. Having such norms provides parameters for discussing and examining data in a way that will lessen any potential for individuals to feel threatened or challenged. For example, a team norm might include the following: "We will examine our results without judgment, but with the interest of learning from each other," or "We will use evidence of our effectiveness to make continuous improvements in learning."

Additionally, teams will benefit greatly from using protocols to guide conversations around data. A *protocol* is simply an outline of steps and guidelines that helps teams structure productive conversations around such things as looking at student work, analyzing assessment results, or conducting lesson studies. There are a number of protocols available for use by teams, and many teams create their own. We highly recommend that teams take advantage of these to facilitate conversations throughout the process of not only looking at data but also for discussing instructional practices and calibrating the scoring of student work. A number of protocols are referenced and included in this book to assist teams.

### Development of Purposeful Products

Effective teams have something to show for their collaborative time, and those products are purposeful. The products they create vary based on the current goals of the team, but may include items such as a listing of identified power standards, pacing guides, standards-aligned units, and products in support of common formative assessments, such as scoring rubrics. Not only do these products provide evidence of the team's collaboration, but they build momentum within the team in that they are meaningful and focused on student learning. A great reference for guiding teams through the process of creating critical and purposeful products is Critical Issues for Team Consideration in *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour et al., 2010a, pp. 130–131). Visit **go.solution-tree .com/assessment** to download this tool, which lists eighteen critical issues and a rating scale to evaluate where your team stands on the issues.

## Where Do We Start?

Your team's goal is to hit the ground running and develop meaningful products that empower you toward continuous improvement in student learning. Following are strategies that help your team do just that. The overarching goal of each of these strategies is to focus and maximize the amount of time the team has to develop meaningful products, not to detract from that time. If your processes and systems are efficient and concise, they will help your team stay on track.

### Prepare for Efficient and Focused Meetings

Chances are you've been at a meeting that was not well organized or efficient. What were your thoughts about attending another one? You were probably less than enthusiastic. Let's think about our team meetings. Don't we want those to be highly organized and efficient so that our time is well spent?

Of course! Here are some strategies that teams have found helpful for running organized and efficient team meetings:

- **Define roles**—It's important to establish roles for team meetings. These roles may include a meeting facilitator, the timekeeper, and a recorder. While roles may not be held by the same individual each meeting, it's a good idea to begin with the same person facilitating until the team matures and has built capacity for that role.

- **Have clear agendas and keep notes**—Meeting agendas should inform and guide whatever discussions will be taking place about student learning. In general, they will follow one or more steps of the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle. Consider the sample in figure 1.1.

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**Meeting focus:** Identify greatest area of need (GAN) in seventh-grade English language arts (writing), and develop quarterly SMART goal.

**Agenda:**

- Examine data from previous writing assessments to identify common areas of need based on grade-level writing rubric.
- Identify goal for improvement in specific learning target writing based on the findings.
- Write SMART goal and an action plan for accomplishment of the goal.

**Next time:** Create common formative assessment focused on identified learning targets.

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**Figure 1.1: Seventh-grade English language arts team meeting agenda.**

As you can see, while not complicated, this agenda is clear about what the team will accomplish during members' time together. Additionally, the agenda includes a conversation about the team's next steps. Agendas and notes are helpful not only to ensure that there's productive work from meeting to meeting but to inform members of the team who were unable to attend. Recording notes throughout the meeting creates a group memory of conversations, decisions, and next steps that will carry forward the team's momentum through the next meeting. These notes should be shared with everyone on the team, and they will serve as a basis for creating the next agenda. They have an added benefit in that they help team members hold one another accountable for decisions made at each meeting.

- **Stay organized**—The work you will be doing as a collaborative team isn't necessarily linear, and at times, the paperwork may pile up. Meeting notes, assessment data, drafts of common formative assessments, and standards documents can end up in a mess, or worse yet, unavailable when they're needed in the midst of a team meeting. We highly recommend using data notebooks organized into critical sections. Ideally, each member of the team will have a copy of this notebook so that everyone can be on the same page (literally and figuratively!).

## Focus Your Team's Efforts With Clear Goals

Establishing norms—collective commitments—is a great first step for teams, but it's important to translate those good intentions into results. Begin by examining data to determine the greatest area of need in student learning, and then set clear and measurable targets for improvements in those areas. In PLCs, these targets are expressed as *goals*—"measurable milestones that can be used to assess progress in

advancing toward a vision" (DuFour et al., 2010b, p. 3). Specifically, these goals are SMART—specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound (O'Neill & Conzemius, 2006). These goals are not focused on what we, as educators, do. Rather, they are focused on what students will do as a result of the team's actions. They target critical areas for improvement in student learning, and therefore are designed to not only guide focused improvement but also provide a process for monitoring progress toward their attainment—the results.

The most powerful part of the process, however, is the development and implementation of an action plan that is designed to close the gap between the current reality and the goal. The plan may include a number of actions and steps that focus on closing that gap, ranging from curriculum alignment, the use of formative assessments, implementation of effective instructional practices, and targeted interventions. The SMART Goals and Action Planning Worksheet (page 100 in the Tools for Teams appendix) shows the process teams can follow to establish SMART goals and design action plans that take these critical areas into consideration.

### Celebrate Success

Working as a collaborative team is certainly rewarding, but it can definitely be hard work. Be sure to keep perspective and maintain momentum by celebrating along the way. Use gains in student achievement and other team accomplishments as sources of inspiration. Schedule celebrations into your meeting agendas so that you won't forget to take time to recognize the results your team has achieved.

## Full Speed Ahead

We hope this chapter has helped you recharge your knowledge about PLCs and affirmed or even refined your understanding about how your team can function more effectively. Ensuring your team's ability to function effectively and efficiently establishes a strong foundation and framework within which you can tackle the challenges and embrace the rewards of what we consider to be one of the most pivotal and exciting parts of being a PLC—creating and using common formative assessments. The next chapter will frame the overall topic of assessment and set the stage for starting the process.