C H A P T E R 1

Building Professional Learning Communities

A professional learning community (PLC) is about the synergy of collaborative action. The term *synergy* is derived from the Greek word *synergos,* meaning "working together," and describes instances where increased effectiveness and achievement are produced by combined action. Improved student achievement is one instance where research has demonstrated that educators who work collaboratively produce an effect on student results that is greater than the sum of individual teacher effort (Fullan, 2005c). Effective PLCs provide the conditions necessary for the synergy that drives school improvement. Students, teachers, and school leaders are the recipients of the powerful effects of collaborative action as practiced in professional learning communities.

Professional learning communities have become a significant field for research in the past 15 years, as researchers and practitioners in schools explore the effectiveness of schools that have embraced the principles of professional learning communities. In

educational literature, *professional learning community* has come to mean a school environment where teachers work collaboratively in purposefully designed groups to improve student achievement within a structure of support provided by the school administrator. In such schools, principals create a culture where teachers work actively in teams with the shared purpose of producing successful learning outcomes for all students. Stoll and Seashore Louis (2007) describe a PLC as a school where the focus is on "(1) professional learning; (2) within the context of a cohesive group; (3) that focuses on collective knowledge, and (4) occurs within an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the life of teachers, students and school leaders" (p. 3).

This research has prompted many educators to explore the efficacy of professional learning communities as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement. What educators find is that PLCs provide a school learning environment that supports improvement of leadership and teacher capacity. By developing the collective ability to act together to bring about change, PLCs have proven to be very supportive of school improvement. When principals, vice principals, teacher leaders, and teachers work together to begin the process of building professional learning communities within their schools, they are making a profound commitment to build capacity. By working collaboratively, educators develop new skills, explore and utilize enhanced instructional resources, and grow in shared commitment and motivation to improve student achievement (Fullan, 2005c).

This book provides principals who are starting to build PLCs in their schools with a number of practical strategies that have proven effective in building a culture of collaborative action for school improvement. Within this handbook, school leaders can choose from a variety of strategies: graphic organizers, professional development modules with workshop guides, assessment and tracking templates, note-taking charts, staff memos, and case studies. These strategies support the PLC leader in setting directions, building relationships, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program—the core practices of successful school leaders (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006).

WHY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?

Professional learning communities are an instrument for facilitating enhanced learning, teaching, and leadership capacity at all levels of the education system. When educational leaders become determined and purposeful about improving student learning, they seek first to agree on the means to this end. The means, or pathway, as the literature under study suggests, is professional learning communities.

The study of PLCs is led by educational leaders such as Alan Blankstein, Paul Bredeson, Rebecca DuFour, Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, Larry Lazotte, Mike Schmoker, Karen Seashore Louis, Peter Senge, Richard Stiggins, and Louise Stoll. Compelling research supports the value of professional learning communities. These prominent members of the school improvement research community endorse the implementation of PLCs as a significant means of building student, teacher, school leader, and system capacity.

There is a strong rationale for the continued development of the attributes of learning communities in our schools and the greater educational community. Prominent researchers advocate for the efficacy of PLCs because their findings provide evidence that student achievement is influenced by the development of a collaborative action process that focuses on improved student learning. A number of studies provide evidence that the operation of purposeful interaction characterizes successful schools (Fullan, 2001). Researchers conclude that a structure for greater collaboration among teachers that is implemented properly and sustained over time results in a strong professional community that, in turn, contributes to improved student learning.

Teacher collaboration that is evidence based improves the quality of instructional practice, resulting in significant, measurable improvements in student learning (Hargreaves, 2003; Schmoker, 2005). As a result of findings like these, the National Staff Development Council recognizes the importance of learning communities in its *Standards for Staff Development* (2001), where the first of 12 standards supports the implementation of "Learning Communities: Staff development that improves the learning of all students: organizes adults into learning communities where goals

are aligned with those of the school and district" ("Learning Communities: The Standard").

A review of PLC literature points to seven key attributes of effective professional learning communities:
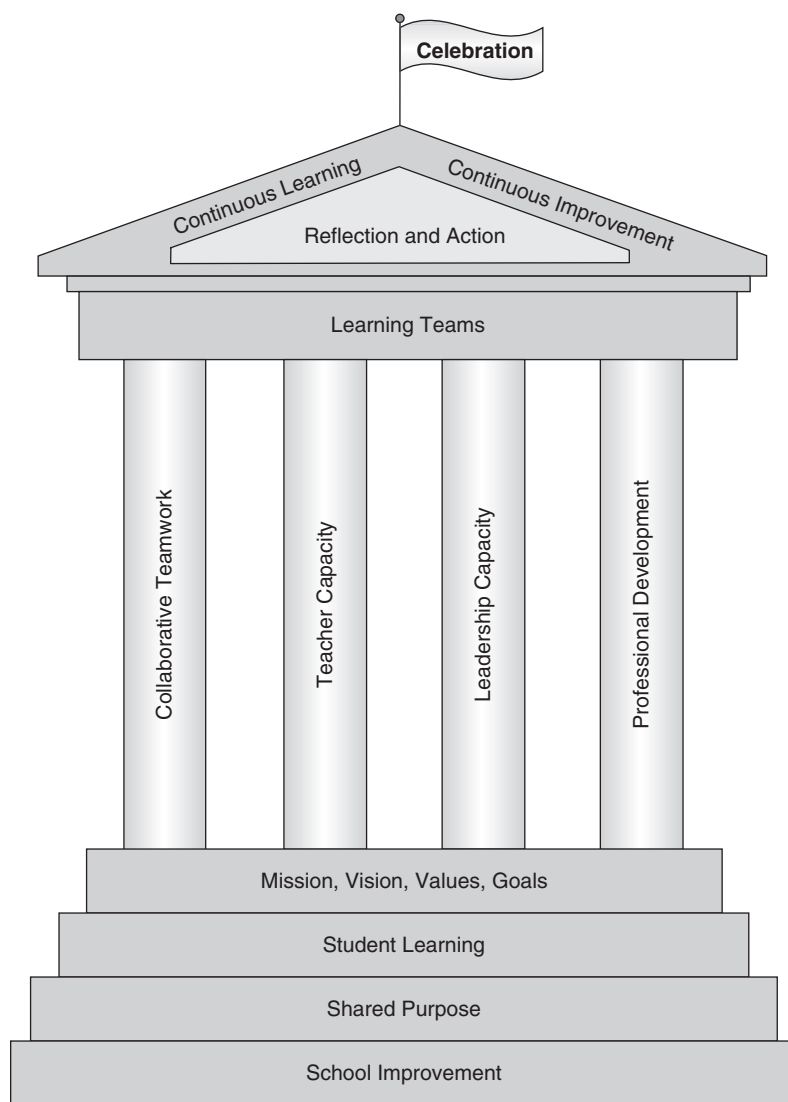
1. Student learning

2. Shared purpose

3. Collaborative teamwork

4. Teacher capacity

5. Leadership capacity

6. Professional development

7. Continuous learning

This chapter examines these seven attributes of professional learning communities within the context of a graphic organizer, the PLC Edifice. This serves as an analogy to present the concepts that researchers and practitioners consider most characteristic of effective professional learning communities. This approach is designed to support principals and their faculties in the implementation of strategies that promote effective PLCs, addressing the needs of students, teachers, and leaders within their schools.

THE PLC EDIFICE: AN ANALOGY

School leaders and teachers assume the roles of architect, building contractor, co-owner, and renovator as they create a professional learning community in their schools. Figure 1.1 represents the planning, building, inhabitation, renovation, and enjoyment of a professional learning community. School leaders and teachers begin their work as they collaboratively plan and create the foundation of their PLC with the shared purpose of improving student learning. They can then construct the four pillars of collaborative teamwork, teacher capacity, leadership capacity, and professional development to support the school's learning teams. Finally, the PLC Edifice is capped with a commitment to continuous learning and

Figure 1.1   The PLC Edifice

Celebration

Continuous Learning

Continuous Improvement

Reflection and Action

Learning Teams

Collaborative Teamwork

Teacher Capacity

Leadership Capacity

Professional Development

Mission, Vision, Values, Goals

Student Learning

Shared Purpose

School Improvement

PLC Edifice

improvement, which includes reflection and action. The flag of celebration completes the metaphorical building process.

The Foundations of a PLC

Two PLC attributes, *student learning* and *shared purpose,* serve to focus the attention of educators on school improvement. In effect, these attributes become critical tools for implementers of professional learning communities to capture the imagination and keep it focused on the tasks at hand. Since distractions can sidetrack the effort, implementation of a professional learning community must start with an exercise to build a solid foundation for school improvement. How best to create a blueprint that underpins the planned construction of a professional learning community? One way is to develop the mission, vision, values, and goals of a school (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Throughout this process, school leaders rely on strong communication skills to build the collaborative culture that supports the construction of their learning community.

Student Learning

Student learning and the commitment to improved student achievement is the first and most essential attribute of professional learning communities. Each of the PLC advocates places student learning and achievement as the foundation of their work on school improvement. It's not enough to ensure that students are taught. The issue is whether they learn. Teachers must ensure that students become ongoing learners with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make success possible (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). Blankstein's latest book reflects this theme in its title: *Failure is NOT an Option: Six Principles That Guide Student Achievement in High-Performing Schools* (2004). Our moral purpose as educators is to raise the bar on student learning and close the gap in student achievement (Fullan, 2005b). Results that demonstrate that PLCs make a difference to student learning are an important motivator of continuing research in this area.

Shared Purpose

Shared purpose is the second attribute of professional learning communities. The key word is *shared.* A PLC has a school

culture where mission, vision, values, and goals are supportive of student learning through the application of the principles of a professional learning community. Senge (2000) writes convincingly of the discipline of shared vision and mutual purpose in learning communities. Developing a clear and focused mission is one of the building blocks of a professional learning community (Bredeson, 2003). DuFour and Eaker (1998) have written how-to books on developing mission, vision, values, and goals. Essentially, the commitment of school leaders to the principles of professional learning communities and their skills in inspiring their schools to espouse those attributes is of extreme importance to the success of professional learning communities. Principals use words such as *commitment* and *responsibility* to describe the shared purpose of their leadership in building school capacity to impact positively on student learning and achievement.

The Pillars of a PLC

Once the foundations of the professional learning community are firmly in place, it is time to move to the erection of the four critical pillars of the PLC edifice. The pillars of *collaborative teamwork, teacher capacity, leadership capacity,* and *professional development* support the most significant element of a PLC structure: effective teacher learning teams.

Collaborative Teamwork

Collaborative teamwork, according to the literature, is the most significant attribute of professional learning communities. Teachers work together collaboratively in schools in a variety of permutations, such as learning teams, whole-faculty study groups, grade or division teams in elementary schools, and department teams in secondary schools.

Research studies consistently report that collective teacher and leader inquiry results in improved instructional practice, which has a positive influence on student achievement. A PLC is characterized by teams of teachers working with their principals and other school staff to create an environment where problem solving, innovation, reflection on practice, and collaborative professional development to design and implement effective instructional program is the norm (Eason-Watkins, 2005).

To create a school culture based on collaborative inquiry, it is essential to generate the synergy that occurs when the teamwork of a group is working so well that the group's efforts produce the maximum results from the available resources (Lick, 2005). These positive results also contribute to the synergy of teacher collective efficacy, the group's belief in their ability to improve student achievement. When teacher learning teams create the results that the members have worked hard to achieve, professional morale is strengthened.

Successful collaborative teamwork that results in improved student, teacher, and leadership capacity is the most significant attribute of professional learning communities.

Teacher Capacity

The focus on building student capacity for learning is accompanied by the recognition that you can't have better student achievement without working on teacher capacity, the fourth attribute. Working in collaborative teams produces job-embedded professional development. NSDC's *Standards for Staff Development* (2001) insists that "the most powerful forms of staff development occur in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis . . . for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving" ("Learning Communities: The Rationale"). The PLC principal strongly supports the growth of teacher instructional expertise.

Research has shown that a positive contributor to improved student achievement is the development of the capacity of teachers to collaborate as they initiate and assess effective instructional practices. Bredeson's (2003) building blocks of a professional learning community include a strong professional culture with an instructional program supported by professional development. Since PLC advocates are lifelong learners themselves, it's not surprising to read their often passionate call to educators at all levels to support the growth of teacher capacity.

Leadership Capacity

The fifth attribute, leadership capacity, recognizes the importance of strong leadership when building a PLC. PLC advocates

have written extensively on the role of the leader in creating and sustaining professional learning communities. Since the quality of the leadership of principals and teachers directly impacts the quality of teaching, learning, and relationships in PLCs, "creating, developing and sustaining a professional learning community is a major leadership and management task, one which emerged from the data as a critical strategic process" (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005, p. 117).

Transforming a school into a PLC can only happen when the principal is an advocate for collaborative action and actively supports the faculty's development as a PLC. Principals who exhibit the qualities of a lifelong learner, intellectually engaging themselves in learning experiences and celebrating their personal professional growth, provide a model that inspires their faculties to do the same (Barth, 2005; Hord, 1997).

Principals who work with their learning teams in a collaborative manner build trust and facilitate the positive experiences of increased teacher and leader learning. Leadership capacity within the school grows, and future school and district leaders are nurtured in professional learning communities.

Professional Development

Closely tied to building teacher and leader capacity is the sixth attribute—professional development. This attribute is considered very important to the functioning of effective PLCs. Both administrators and teachers must engage their creative and reflective capacities as learners to strengthen their practice (Bredeson, 2003). Professional development that supports the improvement of the instructional program of the school is an essential pillar of a professional learning community.

A PLC utilizes two types of professional development. Capacity building includes both professional development external to the school and the internal learning that occurs in collaborative teacher teams. PLCs make active use of job-embedded learning, judiciously accessing external professional development when it meets their learning goals. Teachers best develop their instructional practice when they learn by doing and have a process in place to assess the results of their practice and respond

to the data. When professional development is continuous, shared, and closely connected to teaching and learning, teacher capacity grows. The collaborative interaction possible in learning teams allows teachers to benefit from the insights of their colleagues (Hargreaves, 2003; Stiggins, 2005). Research has shown that this job-embedded professional development offers that best source of improved teacher capacity.

The Roof of a PLC

Without the seventh attribute of continuous learning, the PLC structure is susceptible to erosion and decay. To stretch the point further, any gains made in constructing an effective professional learning community can be lost unless the PLC is protected from the elements that challenge change in any institution. A professional learning community is sustained by a cyclical process that insists on reflection and action for continuous improvement. Just as a roof shelters a building from the elements, a commitment to continuous learning and improvement supports a school as it addresses the myriad issues that impact improving student achievement.

Continuous Learning

When schools are committed to collaborative teamwork in the service of improving student achievement, continuous learning is a natural development. This seventh attribute of professional learning communities is characterized by a focus on results that supports the ongoing cycle of learning teams as they set goals, take action, review their results, and respond with new goals and further actions to support their own and their students' learning (Hully & Dier, 2005).

An expectation that all teachers and leaders in schools should continue to build their capacities is pervasive in the literature on professional learning communities. However, a focus on continuous learning over time is not easy. It is hard work to sustain the professional learning community model, since learning team members must feel accountable for student achievement results and use these results to fuel continuous improvement (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). Continuous improvement requires continuous reflection and a commitment to take action as a result.

Barth (2005) feels that "there is no more difficult and important job for the educator than to change the prevailing culture of a school so that it will become hospitable to learning," and asks the wonderful question, "Would it not be astonishing if lifelong learning became the 'standard' against which schools, school professionals, and students were evaluated" (p. 132).

Reflection and Action Template

Start the planning process for building a professional learning community in the school by reflecting on your reading about PLCs in Chapter 1. Jot down your initial thoughts about the process of creating a PLC in the chart below.

Shared Purpose and Student Learning: Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals   What can I do?
Learning Teams: Collaborative Teamwork, Teacher Capacity, Leadership Capacity, Professional Development   How can I make this happen?
Reflection and Action: Continuous Learning and Improvement   What method(s) will I use?
Next Steps   What will I do next?

SUMMARY

The PLC principal leads a school that has embraced the shared purpose of improving student achievement. Together, administrators and their faculties develop an infrastructure of collaborative teamwork, producing an exciting synergy that effects change. Teacher capacity building and leadership capacity building are continuous, as the PLC nurtures the development and use of strategies and actions that increase the collective power, or efficacy, of the whole organization to engage in continuous improvement for ongoing student learning. Professional development, both external to the school and job-embedded within collaborative teams, supports the cycle of continuous learning that energizes a PLC. In an effective PLC, the principal and faculty take mutual responsibility for effectiveness, build a foundation of trust within the PLC together, accept mutual responsibility for interpersonal effectiveness, and consciously create a collaborative infrastructure. The resulting interpersonal synergy helps educators to plan creatively, respond to challenges proactively, and feel a collective sense of efficacy about the work they do.

What are the leadership practices that improve schools? Chapter 2, The Role of the Principal in Leading Professional Learning Communities, offers a framework of effective practices that principals demonstrate in their roles as PLC leaders.