

## The Professional Learning Community Continuum

Element of a PLC	Pre-Initiation Stage	Initiation Stage	Developing Stage	Sustaining Stage
<p><b>Mission:</b> Is it evident that learning for all is our core purpose?</p>	No effort has been made to engage faculty in identifying what they want students to learn or how they will respond if students do not learn. School personnel view the mission of the school as teaching rather than learning.	An attempt has been made, typically by the central office, to identify learning outcomes for all grade levels or courses, but this attempt has not impacted the practice of most teachers. Responding to students who are not learning is left to the discretion of individual teachers.	Teachers are clear regarding the learning outcomes their students are to achieve. They have developed strategies to assess student mastery of these outcomes, they monitor the results, and they attempt to respond to students who are not learning.	Learning outcomes are clearly articulated to all stakeholders in the school, and each student's attainment of the outcomes is carefully monitored. The school has developed systems to provide more time and support for students experiencing initial difficulty in achieving the outcomes. The practices, programs, and policies of the school are continually assessed on the basis of their impact on learning. Staff members work together to enhance their effectiveness in helping students achieve learning outcomes.
<p><b>Shared Vision:</b> Do we know what we are trying to create?</p>	No effort has been made to engage faculty in describing preferred conditions for their school.	A vision statement has been developed for the school, but most staff are unaware of or are unaffected by it.	Staff members have worked together to describe the school they are trying to create. They have endorsed this general description and feel a sense of ownership in it. School improvement planning and staff development initiatives are tied to the shared vision.	Staff members routinely articulate the major principles of the shared vision and use those principles to guide their day-to-day efforts and decisions. They honestly assess the current reality in their school and continually seek effective strategies for reducing the discrepancies between the conditions described in the vision statement and their current reality.

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<p><b>Shared Values:</b> How must we behave to advance our vision?</p>	Staff members have not yet articulated the attitudes, behaviors, or commitments they are prepared to demonstrate in order to advance the mission of learning for all and the vision of what the school might become. If they discuss school improvement, they focus on what other groups must do.	Staff members have articulated statements of beliefs or philosophy for their school; however, these value statements have not yet impacted their day-to-day work or the operation of the school.	Staff members have made a conscious effort to articulate and promote the attitudes, behaviors, and commitments that will advance their vision of the school. Examples of the core values at work are shared in stories and celebrations. People are confronted when they behave in ways that are inconsistent with the core values.	The values of the school are embedded in the school culture. These shared values are evident to new staff and to those outside of the school. They influence policies, procedures, and daily practices of the school as well as day-to-day decisions of individual staff members.
<p><b>Goals:</b> What are our priorities?</p>	No effort has been made to engage the staff in setting and defining school improvement goals related to student learning. If goals exist, they have been developed by the administration.	Staff members have participated in a process to establish goals, but the goals are typically stated as projects to be accomplished or are written so broadly that they are impossible to measure. The goals do not yet influence instructional decisions in a meaningful way.	Staff members have worked together to establish long- and short-term improvement goals for their school. The goals are clearly communicated. Assessment tools and strategies have been developed and implemented to measure progress toward the goals.	All staff pursue measurable performance goals as part of their routine responsibilities. Goals are clearly linked to the school's shared vision. Goal attainment is celebrated and staff members demonstrate willingness to identify and pursue challenging stretch goals.
<p><b>Communication:</b> How do we communicate what is important?</p>	There is no clear, consistent message regarding the priorities of the school or district. Initiatives are changing constantly and different people in the organization seem to have different pet projects.	A small group of leaders in the school or district is declaring the importance of a program or initiative. Their efforts have yet to impact practice to any significant degree.	The school or district is beginning to align practices with stated priorities. New structures have been created to support the initiative, resources have been re-allocated, and systems for monitoring the priorities have been put into place. Evidence of progress is noted and publicly celebrated.	The priorities of the school or district are demonstrated in the everyday practices and procedures of the school and the assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors of the staff. The priorities are evident to students, parents, new staff members, and even visitors to the school or district. Stories of extraordinary commitment to the priorities are part of the lore that binds people together.

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<p><b>Clarify Regarding What Students Must Know and Be Able to Do</b></p>	<p>There has been little effort to establish a common curriculum for students. Teachers are free to determine what they will teach and how long they will teach it.</p>	<p>District leaders have established curriculum guides that attempt to align the district curriculum with state standards. Representative teachers may have assisted in developing the curriculum guides. The materials have been distributed to each school, but there is no process to determine whether the designated curriculum is actually being taught.</p>	<p>Teachers have worked with colleagues to review state standards and district curriculum guides. They have attempted to clarify the meaning of the standards, establish pacing guides, and identify strategies for teaching the content effectively.</p>	<p>Teachers have worked in collaborative teams to build shared knowledge regarding state standards, district curriculum guides, trends in student achievement, and expectations of the next course or grade level. As a result of this collective inquiry, teachers have established the essential learning for each unit of instruction and are committed to instruct their students in the essential learning according to the team's agreed-upon pacing guide. They know the criteria they will use in judging the quality of student work, and they practice applying those criteria until they can do so consistently. They demonstrate a high level of commitment to the essential curriculum, to their students, and to their teammates.</p>

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<p><b>Assessing Whether Students Have Learned the Essential Curriculum</b></p>	<p>Each teacher creates the assessments he or she will use to monitor student learning. Assessments may vary widely in format and rigor from one teacher to another. The assessments are used primarily to assign grades rather than to inform teacher and student practice. State or provincial tests are administered in the school, but teachers pay little attention to the results.</p>	<p>District officials analyze the results of state and provincial tests and report the results to each school. Principals are expected to work with staff to improve upon the results. The district may also administer district-level assessments in core curricular areas. These assessments have been created by key central office personnel, by representative teachers serving on district committees, or by testing companies who have sold their services to the district. Classroom teachers typically feel little commitment to the assessments and pay little attention to the results.</p>	<p>Teachers have worked together to analyze results from state and district tests and to develop improvement strategies to apply in their classrooms. They have discussed how to assess student learning on a consistent and equitable basis. Parameters are established for assessments, and individual teachers are asked to honor those parameters as they create tests for their students. Teachers of the same course or grade level may create a common final exam to help identify strengths and weaknesses in their program.</p>	<p>Every teacher has worked with colleagues to develop a series of common, formative assessments that are aligned with state or provincial standards and district curriculum guides. The teams have established the specific proficiency standards each student must achieve on each skill. The team administrators common assessments multiple times throughout the school year and analyzes the results together. Team members then use the results to inform and improve their individual and collective practice, to identify students who need additional time and support for learning, and to help students monitor their own progress toward agreed-upon standards.</p>

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<p><b>Systematic Interventions Ensure Students Receive Additional Time and Support for Learning</b></p>	<p>There is no systematic plan either to monitor student achievement on a timely basis or to respond to students who are not learning with additional time and support. What happens when students experience difficulty in learning will depend entirely upon the teacher to whom they are assigned.</p>	<p>The school has created opportunities for students to receive additional time and support for learning before and after school. Students are invited rather than required to get this support. Many of the students who are most in need of help choose not to pursue it.</p>	<p>The school has begun a program of providing time and support for learning within the school day, but unwillingness to deviate from the traditional schedule is limiting the effectiveness of the program. The staff has retained its traditional 9-week grading periods, and it is difficult to determine which students need additional time and support until the end of the first quarter. Additional support is only offered at a specific time of the day or week (for example, over the lunch period or only on Wednesdays), and the school is experiencing difficulty in serving all the students who need help during the limited time allotted.</p>	<p>The school has a highly coordinated, sequential system in place. The system is proactive: It identifies and makes plans for students to receive extra support even before they enroll. The achievement of each student is monitored on a timely basis. Students who experience difficulty are required, rather than invited, to put in extra time and utilize extra support. The plan is multi-layered. If the current level of support is not sufficient, there are additional levels of increased time and support. Most importantly, all students are guaranteed access to this systematic intervention regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned.</p>



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<p><b>Collaborative Teams of Teachers Focus on Issues That Directly Impact Student Learning</b></p>	<p>There is no systematic plan in place to assign staff members to teams or provide them with time to collaborate. Teachers work in isolation with little awareness of the strategies, methods, or materials used by their colleagues.</p>	<p>Some structures have been put into place for teachers who may be interested in collaborating. Teachers are encouraged but not required to participate. Topics tend to focus on matters other than classroom instruction and student learning.</p>	<p>Time has been provided during the contractual day for teachers to work together in teams on a regular basis (at least once a week). Guidelines have been established in an effort to ensure staff members use collaborative time to address topics that will impact instruction. Teams are attempting to develop positive relationships and implement specific procedures, but they may not be convinced the collaborative team process is beneficial. Leaders of the school are seeking ways to monitor the effectiveness of the teams.</p>	<p>Self-directed teams represent the primary engine of continuous improvement in the school. Team members are skillful in advocacy and inquiry, hold each other accountable for honoring the commitments they have made to one another, consistently focus on the issues that are most significant in improving student achievement, and set specific measurable goals to monitor improvement. The collaborative team process serves as a powerful form of job-embedded staff development, helping both individual members and the team in general become more effective in helping students learn at high levels. Staff members consider their collaborative culture vital to the effectiveness of their school.</p>

## Where Do We Go From Here? Worksheet A Commitment to a Collaborative Culture

Describe one or more aspects of a professional learning community that you would like to see in place in your school.	What steps or activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each step or phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
<p>Teachers work together as members of collaborative teams. The members of each team work interdependently to achieve common goals.</p> <p>Each team is provided with time to meet and uses that time to engage in collective inquiry on questions specifically linked to gains in student achievement.</p> <p>Each team adopts and observes protocols that clarify how members will fulfill their responsibilities to the team.</p> <p>Each team is asked to generate and submit products, which result from their discussion of critical questions.</p>				

After working individually, share your assessment with colleagues. Where do you have agreement? Where do you find discrepancies in the assessments? Listen to the rationales of others in support of their varying assessments. Are you able to reach agreement?

**Where Do We Go From Here?**

The challenge confronting a school that has engaged in the collective consideration of a topic is answering the questions, “So what?” and, “What, if anything, are we prepared to do differently?” Now consider each indicator of a professional learning community described in the left column of the Where Do We Go From Here? Worksheet on page 140, and then answer the questions listed at the top of the remaining four columns.

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<p>Creating a Focus on Results That Impacts Schools, Teams, and Teachers</p>	<p>There is no effort to establish specific district goals intended to impact the direction of each school. The district reacts to problems as they arise and does little to either focus on the future or promote continuous improvement.</p>	<p>The district establishes multiple long-range goals as part of a comprehensive strategic planning process. Schools may create annual school improvement plans in response to district requirements, but those plans have little impact upon classroom practices.</p>	<p>The district has identified a few key goals. Every school then adopts goals designed to help the district achieve its targets. Every collaboratively team in every school adopts SMART goals specifically aligned with its school goals. A process is in place to monitor each team's progress throughout the year.</p>	<p>Educators throughout the district have a results orientation. Collaborative teams of teachers establish both annual goals and a series of short-term goals to monitor their progress. They create specific action plans to achieve goals and clarify the evidence they will gather to assess the impact of their plans. This tangible evidence of results guides the work of teams as part of a continuous improvement process. Each member understands the goals of the team, how those goals relate to school and district goals, and how he or she can contribute to achieving the goals.</p>

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<b>A Focus on Results</b>	There are no processes to use results as a tool for improvement. Teachers fall into a predictable pattern: They teach, they test, they hope for the best, and then they move on to the next unit.	District leaders analyze results from high-stakes summative tests such as state and provincial examinations. Data are shared with each school, and principals and teachers are encouraged to review the results and address weaknesses as part of their school improvement plan.	The school has created a specific process to bring together collaborative teams of teachers several times throughout the year to analyze results from common formative assessments. Teams identify areas of concern and discuss strategies for improving the collective results. Assessments are also used to identify students who are experiencing difficulty, and the school creates systems to provide those students with additional time and support for learning.	Collaborative teams of teachers regard ongoing analysis of results as a critical element in the teaching and learning process. They are hungry for information on student learning and gather and analyze evidence from a variety of sources. Results from their common formative assessments are compared to results from state and provincial assessments to validate the effectiveness of their local assessments. Teachers use results to identify strengths and weaknesses in their individual practice, to help each other address areas of concern, and to improve their effectiveness in helping all students learn. Strategically linked SMART goals drive the work of each collaborative team. Analysis of the performance of individual students enables the team and school to create efficient and timely interventions. Improved results and achievement of goals are the basis for a culture of celebration within classrooms, the school, and the district.

## Where Do We Go From Here? Worksheet Collaborative Teams Turn Data Into Information for Continuous Improvement

Describe one or more aspects of a professional learning community that you would like to see in place in your school.	What steps or activities must be initiated to create this condition in your school?	Who will be responsible for initiating or sustaining these steps or activities?	What is a realistic timeline for each step or phase of the activity?	What will you use to assess the effectiveness of your initiative?
	<p>Collaborative teams of teachers regard ongoing analysis of results as a critical element in the teaching and learning process.</p> <p>Data are transformed into information that impacts practice because evidence of results is easily accessible and openly shared among teammates.</p> <p>Teachers use results to identify strengths and weaknesses in their individual practice, to help each other address areas of concern, and to improve their effectiveness in helping all students learn.</p> <p>The focus on results is critical to both the school's system of interventions and their culture of celebration.</p>			



professional learning community is an ethos that infuses every single aspect of a school's operation. When a school becomes a professional learning community, everything in the school looks different than before" (p. 48).

When a school moves from traditional practice to create a PLC, it undergoes a seismic cultural shift. On pages 187–189 we offer a brief review of the shifts we have referenced in this book.

There is a corollary to Hargreaves' observation that becoming a PLC "changes everything": It also changes everyone. Every educator—every teacher, counselor, principal, central office staff member, and superintendent—will be called upon to re-define his or her role and responsibilities. People comfortable working in isolation will be asked to work collaboratively. People accustomed to hoarding authority will be asked to share it. People who have operated under certain assumptions their entire careers will be asked to change them.

In their comprehensive study of school leadership, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) distinguish between first-order and second-order change. The former is incremental, representing the next step on an established path and operating within existing paradigms. The change can be implemented by utilizing the existing knowledge and skills of the staff. The goal of first-order change is to help us get better at what we are already doing. Second-order change, however, is a dramatic departure from the expected and familiar. It is perceived as a break from the past, is inconsistent with existing paradigms, may seem to be at conflict with prevailing practices and norms, and will require the acquisition of new knowledge and new skills (p. 113). The goal of second-order change is to modify the very culture of the organization and the assumptions, expectations, habits, roles, relationships, and norms that make up that culture. Transforming schools into PLCs demands second-order change, and engaging in second-order change is particularly problematic.

Finally, what we advocate in this book is not a program, but an *ongoing, never-ending* process specifically designed to change the very culture of schools and districts. Educators are accustomed to a predictable cycle of initiatives with short life spans, launched with fanfare and promises, only to be buffeted by confusion, concerns, criticisms, and complaints, until ultimately drowning in despair. Educators are very familiar with *initiating* change, but the idea of a process that continues forever is foreign to them.

There is only one conclusion that can be drawn about a transformation that changes everything, changes everyone, represents a departure from the familiar, demands the acquisition of new skills, and continues forever: This transformation requires substantive change—real change—and *real change is real hard!*

(continued on page 190)



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## Cultural Shifts in a Professional Learning Community

### A Shift in Fundamental Purpose

From a focus on teaching . . .	to a focus on learning
From emphasis on what was taught . . .	to a fixation on what students learned
From coverage of content . . .	to demonstration of proficiency
From providing individual teachers with curriculum documents such as state standards and curriculum guides . . .	to engaging collaborative teams in building shared knowledge regarding essential curriculum

### A Shift in Use of Assessments

From infrequent summative assessments . . .	to frequent common formative assessments
From assessments to determine which students failed to learn by the deadline . . .	to assessments to identify students who need additional time and support
From assessments used to reward and punish students . . .	to assessments used to inform and motivate students
From assessing many things infrequently . . .	to assessing a few things frequently
From individual teacher assessments . . .	to assessments developed jointly by collaborative teams
From each teacher determining the criteria to be used in assessing student work . . .	to collaborative teams clarifying the criteria and ensuring consistency among team members when assessing student work
From an over-reliance on one kind of assessment . . .	to balanced assessments
From focusing on average scores . . .	to monitoring each student's proficiency in every essential skill

### A Shift in the Response When Students Don't Learn

From individual teachers determining the appropriate response . . .	to a systematic response that ensures support for every student
From fixed time and support for learning . . .	to time and support for learning as variables
From remediation . . .	to intervention
From invitational support outside of the school day . . .	to directed (that is, required) support occurring during the school day
From one opportunity to demonstrate learning . . .	to multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning

(continued)

## Cultural Shifts in a PLC (continued)

### A Shift in the Work of Teachers

From isolation . . .	to collaboration
From each teacher clarifying what students must learn . . .	to collaborative teams building shared knowledge and understanding about essential learning
From each teacher assigning priority to different learning standards . . .	to collaborative teams establishing the priority of respective learning standards
From each teacher determining the pacing of the curriculum . . .	to collaborative teams of teachers agreeing on common pacing
From individual teachers attempting to discover ways to improve results . . .	to collaborative teams of teachers helping each other improve
From privatization of practice . . .	to open sharing of practice
From decisions made on the basis of individual preferences . . .	to decisions made collectively by building shared knowledge of best practice
From "collaboration lite" on matters unrelated to student achievement . . .	to collaboration explicitly focused on issues and questions that most impact student achievement
From an assumption that these are "my kids, those are your kids" . . .	to an assumption that these are "our kids"

### A Shift in Focus

From an external focus on issues outside of the school . . .	to an internal focus on steps the staff can take to improve the school
From a focus on inputs . . .	to a focus on results
From goals related to completion of project and activities . . .	to SMART goals demanding evidence of student learning
From teachers gathering data from their individually constructed tests in order to assign grades . . .	to collaborative teams acquiring information from common assessments in order to (1) inform their individual and collective practice, and (2) respond to students who need additional time and support

### Cultural Shifts in a PLC (continued)

A Shift in the Work of Teachers	
From isolation . . .	to collaboration
From each teacher clarifying what students must learn . . .	to collaborative teams building shared knowledge and understanding about essential learning
From each teacher assigning priority to different learning standards . . .	to collaborative teams establishing the priority of respective learning standards
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### Cultural Shifts in a PLC (continued)

A Shift in School Culture	
From independence . . .	to interdependence
From a language of complaint . . .	to a language of commitment
From long-term strategic planning . . .	to planning for short-term wins
From infrequent generic recognition . . .	to frequent specific recognition and a culture of celebration that creates many winners
A Shift in Professional Development	
From external training (workshops and courses) . . .	to job-embedded learning
From the expectation that learning occurs infrequently (on the few days devoted to professional development) . . .	to an expectation that learning is ongoing and occurs as part of routine work practice
From presentations to entire faculties . . .	to team-based action research
From learning by listening . . .	to learning by doing
From learning individually through courses and workshops . . .	to learning collectively by working together
From assessing impact on the basis of teacher satisfaction ("Did you like it?") . . .	to assessing impact on the basis of evidence of improved student learning
From short-term exposure to multiple concepts and practices . . .	to sustained commitment to limited, focused initiatives