



Leading Professional Learning

Think ‘system’ and not ‘individual school’ if the goal is to fundamentally change the culture of schools

BY MICHAEL FULLAN

I have deliberately selected the term “professional learning” in the title rather than professional learning communities, not because I do not value the latter but rather because I think the more fundamental issues of professional learning will be neglected if we pursue PLCs in a direct manner.

I have three reasons to be worried about the spread of professional learning communities. First, the term travels faster and better than the concept. Thus we have many examples of superficial PLCs — educators simply calling what they are doing professional learning communities without going very deep into learning and without realizing they are not going deep.

This is a kind of you-don’t-know-what-you-don’t-know phenomenon. So problem one is the danger and likelihood of superficiality.

Second, people make the mistake of treating professional learning communities as the latest innovation. Of course in a technical sense it is an innovation to the people first using it, but the moment you treat it as a program innovation, you run two risks. One is that people will see it as one innovation among many — perhaps the flavor of the year, which means it can be easily discarded once the going gets rough and as other innovations come along the fol-

lowing year.

The other risk is that once you see it as an innovation to be implemented you proceed in a fashion that fails to appreciate its deeper, more permanent meaning. Professional learning communities are in fact about establishing lasting new collaborative cultures. Collaborative cultures are ones that focus on building the capacity for continuous improvement and are intended to be a new way of working and learning. They are meant to be enduring capacities, not just another program innovation.

Third, professional learning communities also can be miscast as changing the cultures of individual schools rather than their deeper meaning that PLCs need to be part and parcel of creating new multiple-school district cultures. I know of more than one superintendent who bemoans the fact that this or that school has a wonderful internal professional learning community but eschews working with other schools.

The work of transforming schools means all or most schools, and this means it is a system change. For system change to occur on a larger scale, we need schools learning from each other and districts learning from each other. We call this “lateral capacity building” and see it as absolutely crucial for system reform. Put another way, individual,



isolated PLC schools are verboten in any deep scheme of reform, and the PLC as an innovation can easily slip into this trap. The third problem then is how PLCs can unwittingly represent tunnel vision, reinforcing the notion of the school as an autonomous unit.

I am, in effect, arguing we must keep our eye on the more basic purpose to which PLCs are presumably a solution. The basic purpose, in my view, is to change the culture of school systems, not to produce a series of atomistic schools, however collaborative they might be internally.

Without a deeper concern for transforming cultures of all schools, these three problems — superficiality, the PLC as a program innovation and the focus on individual schools — can easily marginalize the value of professional learning communities as part of the movement to transform school system cultures.

Convincing Research

Richard Elmore, in his 2004 work *School Reform From the Inside Out: Policy, Practice and Performance*, argues that decades of school reform have only touched the surface through structural and curriculum initiatives that have failed to get inside the classroom in any telling way.

The research is very convincing on this score. I recently reviewed this work carefully in completing the 4th edition of my own work, *New Meaning of Educational Change*. Even reform efforts that had millions of dollars and political will behind them, along with focusing on many of the right strategies (standards, assessment aligned with standards, curriculum revision, plenty of professional development for teachers and principals and even professional learning communities) have failed to make much of an impact in the classroom.

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School Reform in 2005 conducted case studies of major districtwide reform efforts in Chicago, Milwaukee and Seattle. While noting the three cases had a lot of positive things going for them, when all was said and done their bottom-line conclusion was this: “The three districts had decentralized authority and resources to the schools in different ways and had undergone significant organizational changes to facilitate their ambitious instructional improvement plans. The unfortunate reality for the many principals and teachers we interviewed was that the districts were unable to change practice on a large scale.”

Another case in point, described in *Reform as Learning* by Lea Hubbard and others in 2006, is the revealing account of how San Diego fared under an assertive change strategy with a lot of focus and resource support. The strategy involved a strong focus on instruction

with school principals being trained and supervised as instructional leaders, and the role of area superintendents being converted to instructional leaders. The strategy moved too fast and too aggressively until a backlash of cumulative resistance resulted in a change of leadership along with a change of strategy. Some gains were made in literacy and math at the elementary level, but the difficulty of accomplishing widespread change in classroom instruction took its toll in the face of a highly pressurized strategy.

Even a less contentious districtwide reform set of strategies, well designed and pursued over a five-year period in Duval County, Fla., did not accomplish much widespread reform, according to Jon Supovitz in his soon-to-be-published book, *The Case for District-Based Reform*.

Workplace Practices

What is going on here? We finally get jurisdictions to take the reform literature seriously and we still get halting reform efforts. Here is where I want to turn the corner and indicate what is missing, and correspondingly why it is so difficult to accomplish.

Elmore got it right when he observed: "Improvement is more a function of *learning to do the right things* in the settings where you work." Later he emphasizes: "The problem [is that] there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems of practice. This disconnect between the requirements of learning to teach well and the structure of teachers' work life is fatal to any sustained process of instructional improvement."

Previously Elmore identified what it would take to get substantial change in practice: "People make these fundamen-



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tal transitions by having many opportunities to be exposed to the ideas, to argue them into their own normative belief systems, to practice the behaviors that go with these values, to observe others practicing those behaviors, and, most importantly, to be successful at practicing in the presence of others (that is, to be seen to be successful). In the panoply of rewards and sanctions that attach to accountability systems, the most powerful incentives reside in the face-to-face relationships among people in the organization, not in external systems."

We have made a similar case for achieving breakthrough results, which means success for 90 percent or more of all students, say in literacy. At the core of *Breakthrough*, we offered the Triple P model — personalization, precision and professional learning. The first two P's are what educators do when they try to get differentiated instruction right. That is to say learning for all requires we address the learning needs of each student (personalization) and do so in an instructional manner that fits their learning needs of the moment (precision).

We also said this has to be done in a way that is manageable. It has to be practical and efficient to the degree that it is feasible. The kicker is that in order to achieve these two P's, the third P is crucial: Every teacher must be learning how to do this virtually every day. Individually and collectively professional learning, getting better and better in the setting in which you work, must be built

into the culture of the school in both its internal and external interactions.

What is missing in school cultures then is most schools, structurally and normatively, are not places where virtually every teacher is a learner all the time. This is the missing element in standards, qualifications, professional development and so on. The latter do not by themselves represent continuous professional learning.

We also can see immediately why this is so difficult to accomplish on a

large scale. It is a cultural change that is both deep and necessary, and one that needs to occur, not in this or that school, but in all schools and the infrastructures within which they operate. It is a system change that permanently deprivatizes teaching in order to build in continuous improvement. Professional learning communities must be seen in this light, i.e., they must be judged on their effectiveness at creating cultures of professional learning on a system scale.

PLCs Revisited

We are now in a position to revisit PLCs. Professional learning communities started as a research phenomenon going back at least to Judith Little's 1981 work on collegiality, "The Power of Organizational Setting," and Susan Rosenholtz's study of "learning enriched" and "learning impoverished" schools. In this research collaborative, schools with a focus on teachers working together to improve instruction were better schools.

The clearest depiction of the key components of professional communities is provided by Sharon Kruse and others in their 1995 article, "Building Professional Learning Communities." They point to five critical elements that underpin effective PLCs: reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared norms and values.

Then they identify two major sets of conditions. One is structural — time to meet and talk, physical proximity, inter-

dependent teaching roles, communication structures and teacher empowerment and school autonomy. The other condition is what Kruse and her colleagues call “social and human resources” or what we refer to as culture. For Kruse, this includes openness to improvement, trust and respect, cognitive and skill base, supportive leadership and socialization (of current and incoming staff).

They claim, as I do, the structural conditions are easier to address than the cultural ones. Kruse concludes by observing: “Professional community within schools has been a minor theme in many educational reform efforts since the 1960s. Perhaps it is time that it became a major rallying cry among reformers, rather than a secondary whisper.”

Twelve years later professional learning communities have become more prevalent, which is exactly why we should take them more seriously. The shift from research (what makes professional learning communities tick) to development (how do we cause more of

them to become established) also has been part of recent developments. May I note as well that good development includes and sharpens the research knowledge base because there is nothing like trying to make a complex idea work to learn more deeply about it.

The gold standard for fostering the development of PLCs comes from the activist work of Richard Dufour and his colleagues. Their latest offering, *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Building Professional Learning Communities*, is a powerful contribution to the field. Having led the development of PLCs in both elementary and secondary schools and now being associated with pockets of successful examples across all levels, Dufour essentially sets out to take all the excuses off the table for policymakers and practitioners alike.

Their guide to action for creating PLCs starts with the definition of six core elements: a focus on learning; a collaborative culture with a focus on learning for all; collective inquiry into best

practice; an action orientation (learning by doing); a commitment to continuous improvement; and a focus on results.

In addition to showing how these six elements work in their own right and interdependently, Dufour furnishes a rubric aimed at assessing one’s culture in terms of 12 dimensions (more detailed than the six) according to four stages: pre-initiation, initiation, developing and sustaining. Most of all, they go deep into the realities of developing collaborative cultures. They contend conflict is inevitable and show how to confront it constructively. Above all, their handbook draws two conclusions — developing and maintaining PLCs is extremely hard work and there are no excuses for not getting on with it.

The Dufour model and its six components go a long way in combating many of the worry-list concerns I raised at the outset. The approach certainly eschews superficiality and demands depth. Dufour and his colleagues do not see professional learning communities as

Page 13

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an innovation per se but mainly as a means of getting more quickly at the core issue of changing cultures. They are involved increasingly in multischool and districtwide initiatives.

Still the concerns remain — implementation is implementation. The worry list should serve as a constant checklist for any group pursuing PLCs. What strikes me as more troublesome is that it is turning out to be much more difficult than we thought to change cultures. Earlier we saw Elmore's description of what it would take to embed professional learning into every teacher learning.

I also referred to Supovitz's study of Duval County where PLCs were one of the small number of core components of the five-year focused reform strategy in the district. Despite learning communities being an explicit strategy in the district, and despite many structural mechanisms and professional learning opportunities for enacting PLCs (such as strategies for sharing practices and using data for improvement), after five years Supovitz found, "The possibilities created by professional learning communities — rigorous inquiry into the problems and challenges of instructional practice and the support of that practice — seemed to be occurring only in pockets of the district."

We have to conclude then that PLCs are at the early stages of being pursued

seriously. It is the case that politicians and policymakers are likely to underinvest in the strategy as it does not represent a quick fix. Equally problematic are educators themselves. Some underestimate what it will take to make the cultural changes at stake. And when it comes right down to it, many teachers tacitly or otherwise play the privatization card, rather than run the risk of engaging in transparent teaching in order to get at the up-close details of instructional improvement as a new normal modus operandi. Only the latter will result in continuous improvement. And the latter is about the personal and collective learning of teachers

Real Implications

The first and obvious implication of pursuing the implementation of a deep professional learning is for leaders to declare the agenda is changing the learning culture of the school. There's also a need to distinguish between structure and culture, noting that cultural change is the more important change and more difficult to achieve. While there's no need to use the term "professional learning community," if you do reference it, be sure to emphasize that the planned changes are fundamental.

Second, position PLCs as a whole-system change in which each and every school is implicated. Moreover, the route to all schools changing means each

school must engage in lateral capacity building. Put another way, schools interacting with each other is a strategy to promote intra-school collaboration as educators show to others what they are doing and learn from others. Breaking down the walls of schools is a concomitant part of breaking down the walls of the classroom.

Third, in addition to lateral capacity building, PLC work also means refashioning the relationship between the school and the district. Partly to include interschool strategies coordinated by the district, but also to encompass two-way interaction and mutual influence across the two levels.

Fourth, an even bigger change is at stake when school and district leaders see themselves as engaged in changing the bigger context or system — what I have called "system thinkers in action." As Ron Heifetz and Martin Linsky put it in *Leadership on the Line*, leaders these days must be able to be on the dance floor and the balcony simultaneously.

Fifth, part of the purpose of PLCs is to make schools more accountable to the public. In my experience, as strong PLCs develop they are accompanied by a more proactive outreach to students and parents. I think this occurs because educators in these schools become more confident and more competent and thus become more comfortable in taking the risk to involve others, also recognizing that engagement of students and parents is essential for success.

Sixth and finally, the spread of professional learning communities is about the proliferation of leadership. Henry Mintzberg, in his book *Managers Not MBAs*, captured this when he observed that "leadership is not about making clever decisions. ... It is about energizing other people to make good decisions and do better things."

Doing better things is all about cultures of professional learning. PLCs need to be seen explicitly in this light or they will go the way of just another innovation that captures the limelight ephemerally. ■

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Additional Resources

Michael Fullan suggests the following books (listed in alphabetical order), which relate to the subject of his article:

- ▶ *Breakthrough* (2006) by M. Fullan, P. Hill and C. Crevola, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- ▶ *Leadership and Sustainability* (2005) by M. Fullan, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- ▶ *Leadership on the Line* (2002) by R. Heifetz and M. Linsky, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass.
- ▶ *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Building Professional Learning Communities* (2006) by R. Dufour, R. Dufour, B. Eaker, and T. Many, Solution Tree, Bloomington, Ind.

▶ *Managers not MBAs* (2004) by H. Mintzberg, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco.

▶ *Reform as Learning* (2006) by L. Hubbard, H. Mehan, and M.K. Stein, Routledge, London.

▶ *School Reform From the Inside Out: Policy, Practice and Performance* (2004) by R.F. Elmore, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

▶ *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (in press) by M. Fullan, 4th edition. Teachers College Press, New York, N.Y.

▶ *Turnaround Leadership* (2006) by M. Fullan, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.