The futility of PLC Lite

The professional learning community process, properly executed, can deliver dramatically improved teaching and learning. But too often it's followed incorrectly and gains fail to materialize.

By Rick DuFour and Douglas Reeves

Although many schools around the world have claimed to embrace the professional learning community (PLC) process, it would be more accurate to describe the current state of affairs in many schools as PLC Lite. Educators rename their traditional faculty or department meetings as PLC meetings, engage in book studies that result in no action, or devote collaborative time to topics that have no effect on student achievement — all in the name of the PLC process. These activities fail to embrace the central tenets of the PLC process and won't lead to higher levels of learning for students or adults.

When educators are working in a school that is truly a PLC, they recognize they must:

#1. Work together in collaborative teams rather than in isolation and take collective responsibility for student learning.
#2. Establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum that specifies the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students are expected to acquire, unit by unit.

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#3. Use an assessment process that includes frequent, team-developed, common formative assessments based on the guaranteed and viable curriculum.
#4. Use the results of common formative assessments to:
   - Identify students who need additional time and support for learning.
   - Identify students who would benefit from enriched or extended learning.
   - Identify and address areas of individual strengths or weaknesses in teaching based on the evidence of student learning.
   - Identify and address areas where none of the team members were able to bring students to the desired level of proficiency.
#5. Create a system of interventions that guarantees that students who struggle receive additional time and support in ways that do not remove them from new direct instruction, regardless of the teacher to whom they have been assigned.

The four questions

An excellent test for distinguishing between a genuine PLC and a school engaged in PLC Lite is the school's attention to the four questions that drive the work of collaborative teams in a PLC:

#1. What do we want students to learn?
#2. How will we know if they have learned it?
#3. What will we do if they have not learned it?
#4. How will we provide extended learning opportunities for students who have mastered the content?

While the wording of these questions varies slightly among PLC researchers, the essence of the questions is nearly identical. We recommend that faculty members keep a very simple one-page protocol that helps them focus on these questions. Meetings that only address standards, that focus entirely on disciplinary issues and parent complaints, or that center on employee issues may be very interesting, but they do not represent the work of high-performing PLCs.

Common formative assessments

The best teachers are constantly checking for student understanding almost minute by minute as they teach. They direct questions to randomly selected students, check on student work as they move around the room, and use whiteboards, clickers, and exit slips to gather evidence of student learning to help them determine how to proceed with instruction. Students also use this evidence to assess their own understanding. This type of ongoing formative assessment has repeatedly been proven to have a powerful effect on student learning.

There are times, however, when a collaborative team should collectively gather evidence of student learning in a more formal assessment process such as written tests or performance-based assessments. These assessments can also be formative if:

- They're used to identify students who aren't yet able to demonstrate proficiency;
- Those students receive additional time and support for learning through a timely process of systematic intervention that never removes them from new direct instruction;
- Students have another opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned; and
- Teachers use the evidence of student learning to inform and improve their individual and collective professional practice.

School systems have paid dearly for many assessments that masquerade as formative assessments. Calling them uninformative assessments would be more accurate. Genuine formative assessments are intellectually owned by the teachers who created them, are directly related to classroom instruction, and naturally lead to conversations about intervention for students and the effectiveness of different instructional practices. Uninformative assessments lead to an entirely different conversation which, briefly stated, concludes with, "Thank goodness that's over — now we can go back to what we were doing."

Formative assessments not only align with instruction and academic standards but also extend beyond traditional test preparation that too frequently dominates classroom time. For example, even if state tests are largely based on multiple-choice questions, effective common formative assessments can require writing, communication, collaboration, problem solving, and critical thinking in ways that are far more challenging than traditional tests. The job of teachers in this case is not to mimic state tests but to challenge students to show what they know in ways that exceed traditional tests.

Data analysis

A major distinction between true PLCs and schools engaged in PLC Lite is how the schools use data that are intended to reflect evidence of student learning. Many PLC Lite schools have no process for collective analysis of student learning. As a result, groups of teachers spend their time discussing student behavior ("Should we allow students to bring their cell phones into class") or sharing preferences about how they teach a skill or concept ("I have always taught it this way"). In other PLC Lite schools,

the teaching group may look at data but only use them to assign students to intervention and not as a basis for discussions of instructional practice. They fall into the routine of teach, test, hope for the best, assign students to intervention, and move on with business as usual.

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In a true PLC, collaborative teams of teachers use evidence of student learning as a basis for collective inquiry into instructional practice. The conversation moves beyond war stories and personal preferences to explore which practices are leading to superior results. On these teams, the dialogue is more likely to be, "I see that your students consistently demonstrate high levels of proficiency when we assess the ability to compare and contrast. What strategies, practices, or materials are you using to get these great results?" Reflective teaching is powerful when it is done collectively rather than in isolation and when it is based on actual evidence of student learning (Hattie, 2009). Any school that is not using the results of team-developed common formative assessments to improve professional practice is not yet fully engaged in the PLC process.

Perhaps the worst examples of faux data analysis are the unfortunately named "war rooms" in which district leaders display data from the previous year's state tests and use this as a vehicle to publicly praise and humiliate principals and faculty members. This is what military veterans call "fighting the last war." The most effective examples of data analyses involve not the scores from the previous year but rather from the previous unit. Most important, this is not an exercise in "looking at data" as if we were looking at strange animals in the zoo. The best examples of data analysis lead to specific actions by teachers and administrators so that an examination of the data leads to interventions and changes in instruction, feedback, and support.

Interventions

Virtually every school claims that its mission is to help all students learn, but the relevant question to ask is, "What happens in your school when students don't learn what you have deemed is essential?" The least effective response to this question is that students must repeat a grade or a course. In some states, 3rd graders who fail a state standardized test must repeat the grade. The research is overwhelmingly against retention, but facts are merely an annoyance to those with strongly held opinions. We only suggest that every legislator who thinks that retention is a good idea should be required to chaperone the 7th-grade dance in which 16-year-olds are part of the student body.

The most effective interventions are not the repetition of previous unsuccessful teaching; rather, they employ systematic, intensive, focused, and immediate individual or small-group instruction. For example, we've observed districts in which schools identify students each week who are missing homework, failing tests, or otherwise being unsuccessful. Imagine how the stress level of teachers, students, administrators, and parents would be reduced if students went into every weekend with projects and homework up to date and with satisfactory performance in every class.

These interventions may not be perfect, but they are dramatically better than retention or leaving the issue of how to respond when students don't learn to each teacher to resolve on his or her own. These interventions do more than improve student success; they also dramatically improve faculty morale. Imagine what next year would be like if we had fewer repeaters and more elective classes. It might begin to restore the joy of teaching and the reason most teachers entered the profession: to make a positive difference in the lives of students.

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Real PLCs

We urge schools to avoid labeling themselves as PLCs without engaging in the hard work that goes into becoming a PLC. Too many schools have adopted the label without committing to the substance of the professional learning community processes. Specifically, educators must focus on the four questions of PLCs as an integral part of their meetings, use common formative assessments in a way that has a specific effect on teaching and learning, and analyze data not as a way to humiliate teachers but rather as a way to elevate the learning of students and faculty members. Finally, real PLCs include specific interventions that lead to measurable improvements in student performance. When the PLC process is implemented deeply and sustained over time, schools can experience dramatic improvement in learning by both students and adults. PLC Lite is an exercise in futility that helps neither students nor the educational systems that serve them. K

Reference

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to student achievement.* New York, NY: Routledge.

ESSA is more than the latest acronym on education's block

By **MARIA FERGUSON**

The Every Student Succeeds Act curtails federal authority in education, but it also could be a curtain raiser for more bipartisan work that advances education.

If bet makers were remotely interested in federal policy, the 11th-hour passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in late December would have defied most odds. After years of bickering and several close calls, Congress finally did its job and just in time for Christmas, ESSA officially became the new kid of federal education policy (and acronyms).

Already much has been written about the new law, the major highlights being the shrunken federal footprint, new power and autonomy for states and local school districts, and the end of the federal NCLB waivers. The final bipartisan effort that forever ended the era of "*fill in the blank* . . . left behind" was a testament to Sens. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Patty Murray (D-Wash.), both of whom fought hard for a reauthorization by year's end.

For a law that took so long to get reauthorized, ESSA is a fairly predictable response to both NCLB and the Obama administration's efforts to make its mark despite Congressional gridlock. For example, the accountability requirements for ESSA are similar to the waivers and are starkly different from NCLB. States now have far more autonomy to determine how schools are held accountable for student performance. This change means nonwaiver states — those still operating under NCLB — now need to establish new accountability systems. Despite the many similarities, ESSA still has some key differences so waiver states, too, will need to revise their accountability systems to comply with the new requirements. With all this revising and retooling, the 2016-17 school year will be a major transition period as states adjust to the new normal.

The new law also changes the dynamics of school improvement in states and districts. Before ESSA, the U.S. Department of Education was fairly prescriptive about how states identified low-performing schools and supported improvement. (Pause here to remember the SIG models . . . may they rest in peace.) Now, local districts will make decisions regarding support and improvement. When the state identifies schools that need help, local education agencies, in partnership with stakeholders (educators, parents, etc.), will develop plans to improve the performance of those schools. This power shift is a direct response to years of complaining by local educators that the school improvement models dictated by the federal government did not fit the unique needs of their communities.

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The autonomy conferred upon state and district leaders with ESSA, however, does not come without challenges. While some states and school districts are well-equipped to meet the challenges of school improvement, others will feel the weight of the task. Capacity issues, the delicate nature of stakeholder engagement, and local politics can make school improvement tricky business. Although some local leaders bemoan strict federal requirements, others will admit that the feds sometimes provide the political cover they need to implement tough plans for improvement.

Other notable changes in the new law include important shifts in how federal education policy labels and accounts for students long classified as English language learners (ELLs). ESSA classifies these students simply as English learners (ELs) and requires states to include them in their accountability plans under Title I (which governs accountability for *all* students). Previously, accountability for ELL students was part of Title III (also known as Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students). The shift to Title I conveys important symbolism: Moving ELs into the same accountability pool as all other students demonstrates the growing effect these students have on education. Educators in California, Texas, and Florida know well that changing demographics in the U.S. are making EL students a crucial part of the equation when measuring overall student performance.

Finally, in what was almost surely a tit-for-tat move by some members of Congress, ESSA also prohibits certain actions by the Secretary of Education. Secretary Arne Duncan stirred up a Congressional bee's nest when the administration started handing out waivers to NCLB in reaction to Congress' inability to get the law reauthorized. This

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bold move did not go over well with certain members of Congress, and they have been chewing the bitter root ever since. The list of prohibited actions by the secretary (and the department) covers four pages of the conference report, so clearly some members have neither forgiven nor forgotten the waivers.

Specifically, the Secretary of Education and the department cannot:

- Promulgate rules on the accountability system that are inconsistent with or outside the scope of the statutory requirements, or add new criteria through regulations that are inconsistent with or outside the scope of the statutory requirements.
- Condition state plan approval, revisions to a plan, or the approval of a waiver request by adding requirements inconsistent with or outside the scope of the statutory requirements.
- Prescribe specific academic assessments or assessment items, including the Common Core.
- Prescribe specific long-term goals, indicators, weights of indicators, methodology, school support and improvement strategies, and exit criteria in an accountability system.
- Prescribe any aspect or parameter of a teacher, principal, or other school leader evaluation system, or indicators or specific measure of teacher, principal, or other school leader effectiveness.
- Issue guidance that provides a strictly limited or exhaustive list to illustrate successful implementation or that purports to be legally binding.
- Define terms through regulations that are inconsistent with or outside the scope of the statutory requirements or to collect any data except from existing federal, state, and local reporting requirements.

All these prohibitions make one wonder if the secretary can take lunch without first checking statute. It will be interesting to see how these rules play out for John B. King, Jr., who became acting secretary of education in early January. King, a well-respected educator and former state chief (New York), previously served as the department's senior adviser delegated duties of deputy secretary, a title almost as awkward as acting secretary. Why a man so clearly qualified and accomplished needs to endure these half-prince titles is beyond me, but I suppose that is what it takes to avoid the hideous Senate confirmation process.

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Whether King's acting status will hinder his ability to demonstrate leadership when it comes to the rules, regulations, and guidance that will fill in the details of ESSA remains to be seen. Like Duncan, King has shown himself to be a tough, battle-ready educator, so my bet is that he'll do everything he can to make the most of his limited time at the department.

In the end, ESSA seems to have satisfied most critics of both NCLB and the Duncan administration's hard-nosed approach to improving student performance. Writ large, education leaders, wonks, and pundits agree that while ESSA is not perfect, it is far better than its precursor. The bipartisan effort to produce ESSA (hopefully) closes the book on a particularly divisive era in education policy. The last 10 years proved that education, once an issue that united people, can now be used as a powerful tool to divide them. At a time when our nation is divided on so many fronts, seeing education emerge as a unifying force among us would be a good thing. The presidential campaign would, of course, provide the perfect backdrop for national leaders to reinforce the vital role education plays in the life of every American, but sadly that's not a bet worth making. K

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