Leading the PLC Process: How Effective Leaders Close the Knowing-Doing Gap

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The World's Best School Systems Embrace PLCs

- The quality of any school system cannot exceed the quality of the people within it. Therefore, the most effective school systems in the world use the Professional Learning Community concept to provide the ongoing, collaborative, data-driven, job-embedded professional development essential to continued adult learning.

  - Sir Michael Barber (McKinsey Group, 2007)

Districts that Double Student Achievement Embrace PLCs

- It should be no surprise that the result of the multiplicity of activities in the districts that doubled student achievement was a collaborative professional school culture - commonly referred to as a professional learning community. The culture was a product of the activities rather than something created before engaging in the process.

  - Odden and Archibald, 2009

PLCs Key to
Effective Districts

- The PLC process plays a vital role in improving schools across a district. People who work collaboratively in PLCs go beyond mere support groups. They require group members to reflect honestly and openly about their own practice, intentionally seeking ways to do their work better, and continually building their capacity to do so.

  - Anneberg Institute for School Reform

The Challenge of
District-wide PLCs

- The Annenberg Institute for School Reform found that one of the major barriers to district-wide implementation of PLCs was that district level leadership lacked a clear understanding of how to engage in the work or provide the system-wide support to sustain PLCs (2005).

- The Harvard Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) found that although many school districts articulated ambitious visions, they had no coherent, actionable strategy for achieving the vision (2007).

So How Do We Create PLCs Throughout a District?

- The main challenge in system-wide school reform is the too loose/too tight dilemma.

- Should districts provide a rationale, encouragement, and support for specific school improvement process but leave it to the discretion of each school as to whether or not to move forward?

- Should districts provide a rationale, encouragement, and support for a specific school improvement process and then insist that all schools move forward with the process?

Top-down Does Not Work

- Top-down change does not work because it fails to garner ownership, commitment or even clarity about the nature of the change.
  - □ **Fullan, 2007**
- Top-down change does not work because it is more likely to generate compliance than commitment. Teachers and principals are adept at ignoring reform when they close their school and classroom doors and continue doing what they have always done.
  - □ **Tyack and Cuban, 1995**

Bottom-Up Does Not Work

- Bottom-up change does not work because it fails to produce sustainable success at scale.
  - □ **Fullan, 2007**
- Teachers in schools with site-based autonomy tend to focus on marginal changes that do not directly impact the quality of student learning.
  - □ **Richard Elmore, 2006**
- Much harm has been done to public education and to the ideas of equity and excellence by poor implementation of site-based management
  - □ **Phil Schlecty, 2005**

The Tyranny of "Or" Versus the Genius of "And"

- The Tyranny of "or" is the rational view that cannot easily accept paradox..cannot live with two seemingly contradictory forces at the same time. **It must be A or B, but not both.**
- The Genius of "And" is to embrace both of the extremes at the same time. This is not just a question of balance. Balance implies 50-50, going to the midpoint. **Visionary leaders did not seek the gray of balance, but were determined to be distinctly both A and B at the same time.**
  - □ **Jim Collins & Jerry Porras**

SIMULTANEOUS LOOSE <u>AND</u> TIGHT SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Effective school leaders don't simply encourage individuals to go off and do whatever they want, but rather establish clear parameters and priorities that enable individuals to work within established boundaries in a creative and autonomous way. They foster *directed empowerment (*Waterman,1987) or *a culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship* (Collins, 2001).

Effective Districts....

- Establish clear purpose and priority - improving student learning (Louis and Leithwood, 2009)

- Embrace "directed autonomy" by establishing non-negotiable student achievement goals and procedures (Marzano and Waters, 2009)

- Establish a clear understanding of roles with a balance of autonomy and control (Shannon and Bylsma, 2004)

The Need for Central Office Leadership

- Although initially we believed the individual school should be unit of change in school reform, we now recognize that school improvement resulting in improved student achievement can only be sustained with strong central office leadership and support (Lezotte,2002).

- The solution to the loose-tight dilemma comes from the top. This does not mean you need less leadership at the top, but rather more - more of a different kind (Fullan, 2008).

It's Okay to be Assertive!

- It's okay to be assertive. You can't wait for success, you have to kick start it. Leadership is a mixture of authority and democracy.

  - Fullan, 2010

Reflect and Respond

- What is your reaction to the idea that the central office should establish certain non-negotiable purpose and priorities?

- What is your comfort level with stipulating what must be tight in your schools?

Keys to Loose-Tight Leadership

- Getting Tight About the Right Things

- Communicating What is Tight With Clarity

The Guiding Principles of A Professional Learning Community

- **The purpose of our school is to see to it that all students learn at high levels, and the future of our students depends upon our success in achieving that purpose.**
- We cannot help all students learn at high levels if we work in isolation. We must build a collaborative culture and engage in a collective effort to achieve our purpose.
- We will not know if we are helping all students learn unless we focus on results and use evidence of student learning as part of a continuous improvement process.

Key Mistakes in Loose-Tight Leadership

- Failure to recognize the need for *specificity*

- It is difficult to explain what a complex idea means in terms of specific actions when you understand it. It is impossible when you use terms that sound impressive but no one really understands what they mean in terms of implementation (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000)

Reflect and React

- If the educators in your district were asked to identify three specific elements of a PLC that are to be evident in their schools, would their responses be consistent?

- If you as individual district leaders were to identify three specific elements of a PLC that must be evident in each school, would your responses be consistent?

What Would it Look Like Like if We Mean it…..

- ….when we said we were committed to helping all students learn?
- Generate a list of indicators that would demonstrate that commitment

19

What Would it Look Like Like if We Mean it…..

- …..when we said we were committed to building a collaborative culture through high-performing teams?
- Generate a list of indicators that would demonstrate that commitment.

20

What Would it Look Like Like if We Mean it…..

- …..when we said we were committed to focusing on results to foster continuous improvement?
- Generate a list of indicators that would demonstrate that commitment.

21

Three Benchmark Districts: School Structure

- All schools will organize staff into collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common SMART goals for which members are mutually accountable. Our schools will be characterized by collaborative teams rather than teachers working in isolation.

Three Benchmark Districts: The Work of Teams

- Teams will establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum, unit by unit.

- Teams will monitor student learning on an ongoing basis through team-developed common formative assessments.

- Teams will use the results of common assessments for three purposes: 1) improve individual professional practice, 2) identify team concerns regarding student achievement, and 3) identify students needing intervention or enrichment.

Three Benchmark Districts: Systems of Intervention

- All schools must have a specific plan in place to provide individual students with additional time and support for intervention and enrichment in a way that is timely, directive, and systematic.

The Most Powerful Strategy for Improving Student Learning

- Teachers work *together* in collaborative teams to:

  - clarify what students must learn,

  - gather evidence of student learning,

  - analyze that evidence,

  - identify the most powerful teaching strategies.

- Reflective teaching must be based on *evidence of student learning* and reflection is most powerful when it is collaborative (Hattie, 2009).

Systematic Intervention: By Name and By Need

- The most effective schools and school systems in the world monitor and intervene at the level of the individual student. The best systems take the process of monitoring student learning and intervention inside schools, constantly evaluating student performance and constructing interventions to assist individual students in order to prevent them from falling behind.

  - Barber and Mourshed, 2007

Reflect and React

- What is your reaction to what these benchmark districts have established as "tight?"

- Are they being tight about the right things?

- What would you remove and what would you add for what must be tight in your schools?

Key Mistakes in Loose-Tight Leadership

- Failure to recognize the need for *specificity*

- **Failure to build the capacity of principals to lead the process (Elmore's reciprocal accountability)**

Three Benchmark Districts Built Capacity Through Principal Summits

- Principal meetings called upon each principal to make a presentation to central office leaders and other principals on the following:

  - How we have organized teams

  - How we have provided time for team collaboration

  - Examples of team products - SMART goals, essential outcomes, team norms, common assessments

  - How the school is providing intervention and enrichment

  - A Data Picture over 3 years - student achievement, attendance, discipline, engagement, parent and staff perception.

Three Benchmark Districts Built Capacity Through Collective Exploration of Critical Issues

- Principals meetings were used to identify the resources and support principals could provide teams to help them succeed in their work.

To Help Build the Capacity of Teams, Address...

- Why - (Rationale)

- How - (Process)

- What - (Common Language, Tools, Templates, Materials, Resources, Examples

- When - (Timeline)

- Guiding Questions

- Criteria for Clarifying Quality of Each Product

- Tips and Suggestions for Moving Forward

Three Benchmark Districts Built Principal Capacity Through Rehearsal

- Principal meetings were used to rehearse how principals could illustrate reciprocal accountability with team leaders and how to engage in crucial conversations with staff.

A Crucial Conversation

- Honor the person

- Seek to understand by encouraging the person to share his or her assumptions and thought process

- Find Common Ground

- Share your assumptions and thought process

- Build Shared Knowledge. "Gathering facts is the prerequisite homework for a crucial conversation." (Patterson, et al.,2002)

Assertions

- If we allow students the option of acting irresponsible, many will elect to act irresponsibly.

- Allowing students to choose to be irresponsible does not teach responsibility.

- Adult behavior and practices in schools have contributed and continue to contribute   to student failure.
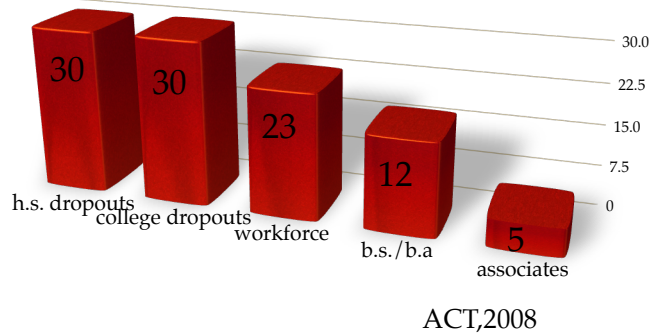
Evidence-Based
Decision Making?

1.23 million students dropped out of high school in the United States last year—one student every 26 seconds.

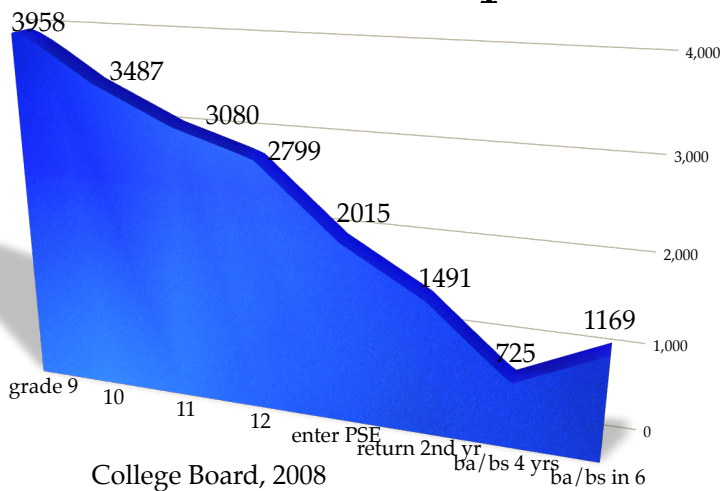Approximately 30% of students who enter high school will drop out.

Hard Facts
Regarding Dropouts

- Dropouts earn 33 cents for every $1 a college graduate will earn and 66 cents for every dollar a high school graduate will earn.

- They are more prone to ill health and will live a shorter life.

- They are less employable in a volatile job market.

- Their children will have only a 1 in 17 chance of ever earning a college degree.

Of the 100 Students Who Enter High School

30 — h.s. dropouts
30 — college dropouts
23 — workforce
12 — b.s./b.a
5 — associates

ACT, 2008

Educational Pipeline

3958 — grade 9
3487 — 10
3080 — 11
2799 — 12
2015 — enter PSE
1491 — return 2nd yr
725 — ba/bs 4 yrs
1169 — ba/bs in 6

College Board, 2008

Evidence of Our Success?

- Throughout the 20th century, we ranked first in the world in high school completion rates. We now rank 21 of 27 advanced economies.

- We rank near the bottom of industrialized countries in completion rates after students have enrolled in college.

- Our rank in terms of college graduates among young workers (25–34 years of age) has dropped from 2nd in 1995 to 11th.

Our collective behavior can influence student decisions!

- All masters of influence focus on behavior. They start by asking, "To improve this situation, what do I want people to do?"

- They then identify a few high-leverage vital behaviors that are critical to success, and they focus intently on those behaviors.

- They coach the specifics of those behaviors through deliberate practice, identify incentives and rewards to encourage the behaviors, and align processes and structures of the organization to support the behaviors (Patterson, *et al.*, 2008).

We should attempt to influence student decisions!

"Left to their own devices, individuals make pretty bad decisions—decisions they would not have made if they had paid full attention, possessed complete information, had unlimited cognitive abilities, and were blessed with complete self control.

"It is legitimate to steer people's choices in directions that will make their lives better. It is proper to nudge."

—Thaler & Sustein (2008), pp. 5–6

What is your default position?

"If public officials think that one policy produces better outcomes, they can greatly influence the outcome by choosing it as the default position.

"Setting default options ... can have huge effects on outcomes.... By properly deploying both incentives and nudges, we can improve our ability to improve people's lives."

—Thaler & Sunstein (2008), p. 8

Reflect and React

- How are you developing the capacity of principals to lead the PLC process?

- What is your reaction to how the benchmark districts used principal meetings to build capacity?

- How are you monitoring the effectiveness of your principals in leading the PLC process?

Key Mistakes in Loose-Tight Leadership

- Failure to recognize the need for *specificity*

- Failure to build the capacity of principals to lead the process (Elmore's reciprocal accountability).

- **Failure to limit initiatives.**

Limit Initiatives

- The benchmark districts made the PLC process *the* district improvement process, not one of many. They have limited initiatives and have continued to sustain their focus on PLCs.

Key Mistakes in Loose-Tight Leadership

- Failure to recognize the need for *specificity*

- Failure to build the capacity of principals to lead the process (Elmore's reciprocal accountability).

- Failure to limit initiatives.

- **Failure to build a common vocabulary.**

Develop a Common Vocabulary

- Changing the way we talk is an important element in changing the way we work (Kegan and Lahey, 2001)

- To what extent is there a common understanding of key PLC terms throughout your district?

Key Mistakes in Loose-Tight Leadership

- Failure to recognize the need for *specificity*

- Failure to build the capacity of principals to lead the process (Elmore's reciprocal accountability).

- Failure to limit initiatives.

- Failure to build a common vocabulary.

- **Failure to communicate effectively.**

The ONE THING

■ The "One Thing" leaders of any organization must know to be effective is the importance of **clarity** - communicating clearly and consistently

- ☐ **the purpose of the organization,**
- ☐ **the primary clients it serves,**
- ☐ **the future it is creating,**
- ☐ **the indicators of progress it will track, and**
- ☐ **the specific actions members can take immediately to achieve its long-term purpose and short-term goals.**

An Audit of Our Communication

- ■ What systems have we put in place to ensure we "do" what must be done?
- ■ What do we monitor?
- ■ What do we model? How can we operate as a PLC?
- ■ What questions do we ask?
- ■ How do we allocate time?
- ■ What do we celebrate?
- ■ What are we willing to confront?

Aligning What We Do with What We Say

- • Can you identify any policy, procedure, or practice in your district or school that may not align with the big ideas of a professional learning community?

Beware of Shortcuts on the PLC Journey

- The PLC process is typically not derailed by a single cataclysmic decision. It veers off track by a series of shortcuts that undermine the process. It dies, not from one fatal blow, but from a hundred small wounds.

Beware of Shortcuts on the PLC Journey

- Identify potential damaging shortcuts for each of the following areas:
  - ☐ Clarifying what all students must know and be able to do
  - ☐ Monitoring each student's learning on an ongoing basis through common formative assessments
  - ☐ Responding when students do not learn
  - ☐ Enriching and extending the learning for those who are proficient
  - ☐ Creating high-performing collaborative teams
  - ☐ Establishing a focus on results to foster interdependent teams and continuous improvement

Next Steps

- What steps, if any, should your district take as a result of the dialogue today?