What the Experts Are Saying

“Continuous and sustainable school improvement requires three ingredients: a shared language, an empowered leadership group, and time. *Learning by Doing* provides a compelling framework for continuous and sustainable school improvement. The book offers a clear process for bringing these essential ingredients together. It should be required reading for all professional educators dedicated to the mission of ‘Learning for All.’”

—Lawrence W. Lezotte,
Founder of Effective Schools Products

“For the last decade, the authors and their colleagues have been developing a body of work that can and is transforming schools across the country. Like other greats who influence a generation, their books form a logical chain, each section adding to the integrity of the whole. This latest handbook is the next vital link because it takes on the practical challenge of orchestrating change from within. ‘Indispensable’ is an overused word for books that are simply useful; but this book is, in fact, indispensable for leaders who want to make the right changes, and make them endure. When our country gets serious about good schools for all our children, these books will be the curriculum.”

—Jonathon Saphier, Founder and Chairman Emeritus of Teachers 21,
Founder and President of Research for Better Teaching

“Rick DuFour and his colleagues continue to push us to new levels of understanding of how professional learning communities work. They then invite us to join them in developing unique frameworks that can be used in our own schools to create cultures of time, feeling, focus, and persistence aimed at ensuring that every child will succeed. Critical to their approach is aggregating what we know and using this knowledge together, thus compounding its effect. Easily one of the most important new books on school improvement.”

—Thomas J. Sergiovanni, Lillian Radford Professor of Education,
Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas

“In *Learning by Doing*, Rick DuFour, Becky DuFour, Bob Eaker, and Tom Many provide a practical approach to understanding the essential elements of PLCs—clarity of purpose, precision in use of concepts and language, learning through doing as part of teachers’ daily work, interdependent action through teamwork, and a results orientation that focuses on the learning of every student. Readers will find *Learning by Doing* to be filled with the authors’ wisdom and insights informed by years of experience in leading and assisting others in forming PLCs.”

—Dennis Sparks, Executive Director,
National Staff Development Council
“There are no more excuses to avoid professional learning communities. With a mountain of evidence, compelling case studies, and a wealth of experience, *Learning by Doing* will transform PLCs from the ambiguous concept practiced in many schools into a practical reality. For the discouraged educator and administrator, the authors provide respect for the time constraints and daily challenges of the busy practitioner, and leaven the lessons with gentle humor. For the complacent and cynical opponent of change, the authors offer a stirring challenge that the alternative to effective professional communities is not the comfort of the good old days, but a fundamental failure to meet our ethical and professional obligations to students and to one another. For those who think that because they have relabeled a dysfunctional faculty meeting a ‘professional learning community’ they are finished, then they must think again. The self-assessments and reflective exercises in this book will challenge the most experienced PLC leader, while offering hope to those who are starting this process of discovery and collaboration. Many books deserve a glance, perhaps half of them are worthy of a thorough reading, but only a few—and this book is surely in this category—should be devoured. Grab a pen and a colleague and get ready for a challenging and rewarding journey into the heart of professional learning communities.”

—Douglas B. Reeves, Founder,
The Leadership and Learning Center

“As professional learning communities become more and more popular, we need more than ever a definitive guide to the whys, whats, and hows of PLCs. This handbook is it: comprehensive, clear, practical, and above all demanding for moving forward with deep PLCs. Anyone committed to PLCs must base their work on this powerful standard.”

—Michael Fullan, Special Adviser in Education to the Premier and the Minister of Education, Ontario, Canada

“‘Professional learning community’—three ambitious words that don’t often characterize our work in schools. Educators are commonly not professional, and schools are frequently neither hospitable to learning nor communities. With this detailed roadmap, no school leader—teacher, principal, or superintendent—will ever again have to say, ‘I’m all for building a PLC . . . but how do you do it?’ I wish I had this little volume, which is overflowing with concrete ideas, before me during my own turbulent years as a school principal. It would have enabled us to break out of our inertia and create the PLC we all desperately wanted and deserved.”

—Roland S. Barth,
Educator and Consultant

“This may be the best, most practical book yet written on how to implement professional learning communities. It reaches an important threshold—a greater confidence and clarity about the power and potential of PLCs. On every important issue, this book contains excellent tested advice from people who have had immense success implementing learning communities in real schools where they achieved exceptional results. It is that rare book about which one can say: If you read it, and put its principles into action, you can expect results.”

—Mike Schmoker,
Educator and Consultant
“This handbook serves as a useful tool for educators and administrators in need of a resource that helps them develop their school-level professional learning community model from conceptualization to implementation. It promotes a dialogue among school teams that engages them in strategic collaboration and problem solving . . . and synthesizes the research and best practices in the authors’ previous publications by providing action steps readers can build upon to establish their PLC. Readers will find the concepts proposed in this handbook to be nothing less than insightful as they endeavor to achieve sustained and substantive school improvement. *Learning by Doing* provides a wealth of information and viable steps for schools and districts to achieve optimal levels of achievement through the creation of professional learning communities.”

—Barbara Eason-Watkins, Chief Education Officer, Chicago Public Schools

“I have struggled with school improvement for over 40 years. My background in effective schools research gave me a clear picture of what schools were trying to create, but very few met with success. The work of Becky, Rick, and Bob has given me the vehicle needed to successfully implement school improvement initiatives. Professional learning communities provide a structure to support data gathering, goal-setting, implementation strategies, and monitoring and adjusting activities. My Planning for School and Student Success process (*Harbors of Hope, 2005*) is being used in hundreds of schools throughout North America. The process’ success is determined by the ability of a school staff to become a PLC. My knowledge of PLC concepts has made a significant difference in my ability to support schools and districts in ensuring success for all students.”

—Wayne Hulley, Author and Educator

### What Practitioners Are Saying

“Professional Learning Communities at Work™ has been a breath of fresh air for schools everywhere. The work of Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker has helped me focus my school leadership on the most important and critical issue in schools: student learning. As schools struggle to raise student achievement and increase their organizational effectiveness, the strategies imbedded in the PLC philosophy provide the answer. I have had the opportunity to use this powerful tool in two schools, and in both cases the result was a tremendous gain in student achievement. I believe if leaders at all levels embraced and understood PLCs, we would see schools improve at a rate never seen before.”

—Anthony Muhammad, Principal, Southfield High School, Southfield, Michigan

“The work of the DuFours and Bob Eaker provides schools with the practical strategies that both challenge and empower administrators and teachers to collaborate on creating a school culture that increases student learning.”

—Alan Addley, Principal, Granby Memorial High School, Granby, Connecticut
“Bradley Elementary School serves as a shining example of what is possible when a faculty implements professional learning community concepts. The fact that we did it from the ground up has helped to show other teachers in our district what is possible. Professional learning communities is now the primary focus in our district for professional development.”

—Geri Parscale, Principal,
Bradley Elementary School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

“I have had the honor and privilege to work for a year with Rick, Becky, and Bob to learn the importance and impact of PLCs. The evidence is clear and convincing: PLC concepts are the future for improving schools and school districts. Through properly developed PLCs, school leadership teams and guiding coalitions can make significant improvement in student achievement and leadership development.”

—William Hall, Director,
Educational Leadership and Professional Development,
Viera, Florida

“Building a PLC has transformed our school from a place where adults came to work to a place where students come to learn. Ours was a school with no shortage of teachers working hard; there was also no shortage of teachers who wanted students to learn. What we were lacking, however, was alignment. Our school improvement effort pre-PLC looked like 25 arrows shot from bows by many marksmen: aiming at targets in many directions, but not hitting much of anything predictably. Professional learning communities provided us with the blueprints for alignment. We are now capitalizing on a collective effort to move toward shared mission, vision, values, and goals. We have moved away from a ‘hammer and hope’ approach to one of results—planned and on purpose.”

—Kenneth C. Williams, Principal,
E.J. Swint Elementary School, Jonesboro, Georgia
Dedication

We have been avid, ongoing students of the research regarding professional learning communities and the leadership necessary to bring PLC concepts to life. Our deepest learning, however, has come from our own work in schools that have embodied those PLC concepts and from our association with colleagues who have initiated and sustained the PLC process in their own schools and districts. These men and women come from varied backgrounds throughout North America and from schools and districts that represent a broad spectrum of sizes and circumstances. More importantly, these colleagues share certain characteristics. First, they are passionate about the potential for PLCs to have an impact on the lives of the students they serve. Second, they have learned by doing: They have developed their expertise by leading through the rough and tumble of PLC initiatives. Third, they are willing to and skillful at sharing their insights with other practitioners. Our own understanding of PLC concepts has been enriched by their efforts and deepened by their insights. We are proud to call them colleagues and friends, and we dedicate *Learning by Doing* to them, our PLC associates.

—Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker

To Rick, my friend and mentor, and to Becky and Bob. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of creating and sustaining professional learning communities. And to my father, Dr. Wesley A. Many, I thank you for sharing Willie’s story. I am a living legacy to the lessons so beautifully illustrated by that simple tale.

—Thomas Many
Our work and our thinking have been shaped and influenced by some of the greatest contemporary educational thinkers in North America. We have benefited immensely from the wisdom of Larry Lezotte, Michael Fullan, Doug Reeves, Rick Stiggins, Roland Barth, Mike Schmoker, Jonathon Saphier, Dennis Sparks, Bob Marzano, and Tom Sergiovanni. Like so many educators, we are indebted to them, and we acknowledge the enormous contribution each has made to our practice, our ideas, and our writing.

We also acknowledge the tremendous support we have received for this project from the Solution Tree family. Rhonda Rieseberg and Suzanne Kraszewski are skillful editors who polished our prose and designed layouts for the book that greatly enhanced its readability. We are grateful for the enthusiasm and energy they devoted to this endeavor.

Finally, each of us owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to Jeff Jones, the president of Solution Tree. Jeff is more than a publisher. He is one of the most ethical, service-oriented business leaders we know. He has been an ardent advocate for spreading the PLC concept across North America, and his passion and his skill have given our ideas a platform we could not have achieved on our own. Finally, he is a friend in every sense of the word. Every author should have the opportunity to work with a publisher like Jeff Jones. More importantly, everyone should know the joy of having someone like him for a friend.
# Table of Contents

## About the Authors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1</th>
<th>A Guide to Action for Professional Learning Communities at Work™</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Brief Review</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Are Professional Learning Communities?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Don’t We Apply What We Know?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Action</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Format</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Journey Worth Taking</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 2 A Clear and Compelling Purpose

| Part One: The Case Study: Clarifying Our Purpose | 13 |
| Part Two: Here’s How | 15 |
| Part Three: Here’s Why | 22 |
| Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey | 32 |
| Part Five: Tips For Moving Forward: Building the Foundation of a PLC | 37 |
| Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community | 40 |

## Chapter 3 Creating a Focus on Learning

| Part One: The Case Study: What Do We Want Our Students to Learn, and How Will We Know When They Have Learned it? | 43 |
| Part Two: Here’s How | 45 |
| Part Three: Here’s Why | 50 |
| Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey | 58 |
| Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward: Clarifying and Monitoring Essential Learning | 65 |
| Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community | 68 |
Chapter 4  How Will We Respond When Some Students Don’t Learn? ............................. 71
Part One: The Case Study: Systematic Interventions Versus an Educational Lottery .............................. 71
Part Two: Here’s How ........................................... 73
Part Three: Here’s Why ........................................... 76
Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey ........ 78
Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward: Creating Systematic Interventions to Ensure Students Receive Additional Time and Support for Learning ..................... 81
Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community ............................. 86

Chapter 5  Building the Collaborative Culture of a Professional Learning Community ......................... 89
Part One: The Case Study: Are We Engaged in Collaboration or “Co-Blaboration”? ....................... 89
Part Two: Here’s How ........................................... 91
Part Three: Here’s Why ........................................... 107
Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey .... 111
Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward: Building a Collaborative Culture Through High-Performing Teams ............................. 114
Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community ............................. 115

Chapter 6  Creating a Results Orientation in a Professional Learning Community ............................ 117
Part One: The Case Study: Creating a Results Orientation at the School, Team, and Teacher Level ........ 117
Part Two: Here’s How ........................................... 119
Part Three: Here’s Why ........................................... 134
Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey .... 137
Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward: Using Goals to Focus on Results .................................. 141
Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community ............................. 143
# Table of Contents

## Chapter 7 Using Relevant Information to Improve Results
- Part One: The Case Study: The Reluctance to Use Information .................................. 145
- Part Two: Here’s How ...................................................................................... 147
- Part Three: Here’s Why ............................................................................... 150
- Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey .................. 155
- Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward: Creating a Results Orientation ............ 158
- Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community .............. 161

## Chapter 8 Consensus and Conflict in a Professional Learning Community
- Part One: The Case Study: Building Consensus and Responding to Resistance .......... 163
- Part Two: Here’s How ...................................................................................... 164
- Part Three: Here’s Why ............................................................................... 171
- Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey .................. 177
- Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward: Building Consensus and Responding to Resistance ............ 180
- Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community .............. 182

## Chapter 9 The Complex Challenge of Creating Professional Learning Communities
- Confronting the Brutal Facts of Substantive Change ........... 190
- The Need for Leadership ........................................................................... 191
- Advice for Leading a PLC Initiative ......................................................... 192
- Keep Hope Alive ......................................................................................... 199
- Passion and Persistence ........................................................................... 200
- Final Thoughts .......................................................................................... 206

## Appendix
- ........................................................................................................ 209

## Glossary of Key Terms and Concepts
- ................................................................. 213

## References and Resources
- ................................................................. 221

## Index
- ........................................................................................................ 233

Solution Tree
Richard DuFour, Ed.D., was a public school educator for 34 years, serving as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. He was principal of Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, from 1983 to 1991 and superintendent of the district from 1991 to 2002. During his tenure, Stevenson became what the United States Department of Education (USDE) has described as “the most recognized and celebrated school in America.” It is one of only three schools in the nation to win the USDE Blue Ribbon Award on four occasions, and one of the first comprehensive schools the USDE designated as a New America High School, a model of successful school reform. Stevenson has been repeatedly cited in the popular press as one of America’s best schools and referenced in professional literature as an exemplar of best practices in education.

Rick is the author of 8 books and more than 50 professional articles. He wrote a quarterly column for the Journal of Staff Development for almost a decade. He was the lead consultant and author for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development’s seven-part video series on the principalship and is the author of two other videos: How to Develop a Professional Learning Community: Passion and Persistence (2002) and Through New Eyes: Examining the Culture of Your School (2003).

He has received his state’s highest award as both a principal and superintendent. He was named one of the top 100 school administrators in North America by Executive Educator magazine, was presented the Distinguished Scholar Practitioner Award from the University of Illinois, and was the 2004 recipient of the National Staff Development Council’s Distinguished Service Award. He consults with school districts, state departments of education, and professional organizations throughout North America on strategies for improving schools.
Rebecca DuFour, M.Ed., has served as a teacher, school administrator, and central office coordinator. As a former elementary principal, she helped her school earn state and national recognition as a model professional learning community. She was the lead consultant and is the featured principal in the 2003 Video Journal of Education program Elementary Principals as Leaders of Learning and one of the featured principals in the 2001 production Leadership in the Age of Standards and High Stakes.

Becky is the co-author of Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities (2002) and Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don’t Learn (2004). She is a co-editor of On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities (2005), a collection of essays by leading educational authors and consultants. She is also featured in the three-part video series Let’s Talk About PLC (2004).

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Robert Eaker, Ed.D., is the former dean of the College of Education and interim executive vice president and provost of Middle Tennessee State University. He is a former fellow with the National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development. He has written widely on the issues of effective teaching, effective schools, helping teachers use research findings, and high expectations for student achievement. He was recognized by Phi Delta Kappan as one of the nation’s leaders in helping educators translate research into practice.

Learning Communities (2005), a collection of essays from leading educational authors and consultants. He is also featured in the three-part video series Let’s Talk About PLC (2004).

Bob has spoken at numerous national meetings held by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development. He regularly consults with school districts throughout the nation on school improvement issues.

Thomas Many, Ed.D., a superintendent for 16 years, has spent the past 10 years at Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96 in Buffalo Grove, Illinois. The students from his district feed into Adlai Stevenson High School where Rick DuFour was superintendent for 11 years. Tom has been a classroom teacher, learning center director, curriculum supervisor, principal, and assistant superintendent.

Tom is a practitioner of professional learning communities and has been involved in initiatives at the state and local level to bring about continuous improvement in schools. Under his direction, District 96 has been recognized as one of the highest achieving and lowest spending districts in Illinois.

Tom has presented at a wide variety of educational conferences and has published several articles that have received national attention. His combination of theoretical expertise and practical hands-on experience make him a compelling and sought-after presenter. He delivers exciting workshops on PLCs throughout the United States and Canada.
Chapter 1

A Guide to Action for Professional Learning Communities at Work™

We learn best by doing. We have known this to be true for quite some time. More than 2,500 years ago Confucius observed, “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” Most educators acknowledge that our deepest insights and understandings come from action, followed by reflection and the search for improvement. After all, most educators have spent 4 or 5 years preparing to enter the profession—taking courses on content and pedagogy, observing students and teachers in classrooms, completing student teaching under the tutelage of a veteran teacher, and so on. Yet almost without exception, they admit that they learned more in their first semester of teaching than they did in the 4 or 5 years they spent preparing to enter the profession. This is not an indictment of higher education; it is merely evidence of the power of learning that is embedded in the work.

Our profession also attests to the importance and power of learning by doing when it comes to educating our students. We want students to be actively engaged in hands-on authentic exercises that promote experiential learning. How odd then that a profession that pays such homage to the importance of learning by doing is so reluctant to apply that principle when it comes to developing its collective capacity to meet the needs of students. Why do institutions created for and devoted to learning not call upon the professionals within them to become more proficient in improving the effectiveness of schools by actually doing the work of school improvement? Why have we been so reluctant to learn by doing?

A Brief Review

Since 1998 we have published numerous resources with two goals in mind: first, to persuade educators that the most promising strategy for helping all students learn at high levels is to develop a staff’s capacity to function
as a professional learning community (PLC) and second, to offer specific strategies and structures to help educators create PLCs in their own schools.

In *Professional Learning Communities at Work™: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (1998), we provide the conceptual framework for PLCs and the research to support the concepts. We also offer descriptions of how PLC concepts impact the various stakeholders in schools—teachers, principals, students, and parents—and how they impact important school programs such as the curriculum, professional development, and assessment. *Getting Started: Reculturing Your School to Become a Professional Learning Community* (2003) provides specific strategies for beginning the PLC process, describes the cultural shifts that take place, and addresses the most common questions that arise as schools begin their PLC journeys.

In *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don’t Learn* (2004), we explore how schools at all levels have created systematic interventions that ensure their students receive additional time and support for learning in a timely and directive way. In *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities* (2005), we were privileged to serve as editors and contributors to a collection of writing from North America’s leading educational thinkers who share their insights and suggestions for helping make PLC concepts the norm in all schools.

*Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work™* is the logical next step in our effort to help educators confront the challenges of implementing significant changes in their schools and districts as they work to become PLCs. We rely heavily on current research from a number of different fields, but we also draw upon the insights we have acquired in our work with schools and districts throughout North America.

**What Are Professional Learning Communities?**

It has been interesting to observe the growing popularity of the term *professional learning community*. In fact, the term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning. This lack of precision is an obstacle to implementing PLC concepts because, as Mike Schmoker observes, “clarity precedes competence” (2004, p. 85). Thus, we begin this handbook with an attempt to clarify our meaning of the term. To those familiar with our past work, this step may seem redundant, but we are convinced that redundancy can be a powerful tool in effective communication, and we prefer redundancy to ambiguity.
A Focus on Learning

The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it. In order to achieve this purpose, the members of a PLC create and are guided by a clear and compelling vision of what the organization must become in order to help all students learn. They make collective commitments clarifying what each member will do to create such an organization, and they use results-oriented goals to mark their progress. Members work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student’s learning on a timely basis, provide systematic interventions that ensure students receive additional time and support for learning when they struggle, and extend and enrich learning when students have already mastered the intended outcomes.

A corollary assumption is that if the organization is to become more effective in helping all students learn, the adults in the organization must also be continually learning. Therefore, structures are created to ensure staff members engage in job-embedded learning as part of their routine work practices.

There is no ambiguity or hedging regarding this commitment to learning. Whereas many schools operate as if their primary purpose is to ensure that children are taught, PLCs are dedicated to the idea that their organization exists to ensure that all students learn essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions. All the other characteristics of a PLC flow directly from this epic shift in assumptions about the purpose of the school.

A Collaborative Culture With a Focus on Learning for All

A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all. The team is the engine that drives the PLC effort and the fundamental building block of the organization. It is difficult to overstate the importance of collaborative teams in the improvement process. It is equally important, however, to emphasize that collaboration does not lead to improved results unless people are focused on the right issues. Collaboration is a means to an end, not the end itself. In many schools, staff members are willing to collaborate on a variety of topics as long as the focus of the conversation stops at their classroom door. In a PLC, collaboration represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school.
Collective Inquiry Into Best Practice and Current Reality

The teams in a PLC engage in collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning. They also inquire about their current reality—including their present practices and the levels of achievement of their students. They attempt to arrive at consensus on vital questions by building shared knowledge rather than pooling opinions. They have an acute sense of curiosity and openness to new possibilities.

Collective inquiry enables team members to develop new skills and capabilities that in turn lead to new experiences and awareness. Gradually, this heightened awareness transforms into fundamental shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and habits which, over time, transform the culture of the school.

Working together to build shared knowledge on the best way to achieve goals and meet the needs of clients is exactly what professionals in any field are expected to do, whether it is curing the patient, winning the lawsuit, or helping all students learn. Members of a professional learning community are expected to work and learn together.

Action Orientation: Learning by Doing

Members of PLCs are action oriented: They move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality. They understand that the most powerful learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and experience as the most effective teachers. In fact, the very reason that teachers work together in teams and engage in collective inquiry is to serve as catalysts for action.

Members of PLCs recognize that learning by doing develops a deeper and more profound knowledge and greater commitment than learning by reading, listening, planning, or thinking. Traditional schools have developed a variety of strategies to resist taking meaningful action, preferring the comfort of the familiar. Professional learning communities recognize that until members of the organization “do” differently, there is no reason to anticipate different results. They avoid paralysis by analysis and overcome inertia with action.

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Inherent to a PLC are a persistent disquiet with the status quo and a constant search for a better way to achieve goals and accomplish the purpose of the organization. Systematic processes engage each member of the organization in an ongoing cycle of:

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
Implementing those strategies and ideas

Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not

Applying new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

The goal is not simply to learn a new strategy, but instead to create conditions for perpetual learning—an environment in which innovation and experimentation are viewed not as tasks to be accomplished or projects to be completed but as ways of conducting day-to-day business, forever. Furthermore, participation in this process is not reserved for those designated as leaders; rather, it is a responsibility of every member of the organization.

Results Orientation

Finally, members of a PLC realize that all of their efforts in these areas—a focus on learning, collaborative teams, collective inquiry, action orientation, and continuous improvement—must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions. Unless initiatives are subjected to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark rather than purposeful improvement. As Peter Senge and colleagues conclude, “The rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results” (1994, p. 44).

This focus on results leads each team to develop and pursue measurable improvement goals that are aligned to school and district goals for learning. It also drives teams to create a series of common formative assessments that are administered to students multiple times throughout the year to gather ongoing evidence of student learning. Team members review the results from these assessments in an effort to identify and address program concerns (areas of learning where many students are experiencing difficulty). They also examine the results to discover strengths and weaknesses in their individual teaching in order to learn from one another. Most importantly, the assessments are used to identify students who need additional time and support for learning. Frequent common formative assessments represent one of the most powerful tools in the PLC arsenal.

Why Don’t We Apply What We Know?

As we have shared our work in support of PLCs with educators in every state in the U.S. and every province of Canada, we have become accustomed to hearing the same response: “This just makes sense.” It just makes sense that a school committed to helping all students learn at high levels would focus on learning rather than teaching, would ensure students had access to the same curriculum, would assess each student’s learning on a timely basis using consistent standards...
for proficiency, and would create systematic interventions that provide students with additional time and support for learning. It just makes sense that we accomplish more working collaboratively than we do working in isolation. It just makes sense that we would assess our effectiveness in helping all students learn on the basis of results—tangible evidence that they have actually learned. It just makes sense! In fact, we have found little overt opposition to the characteristics of a PLC.

So why don’t schools do what they already know makes sense. In The Knowing-Doing Gap, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton (2000) explore what they regard as one of the great mysteries of organizational management: the disconnect between knowledge and action. They ask, “Why does knowledge of what needs to be done so frequently fail to result in action or behavior that is consistent with that knowledge?” (p. 4).

This handbook is our most specific and direct attempt to help educators close the knowing-doing gap by transforming their schools into PLCs. More specifically, it is designed to accomplish the following four objectives:

1. To help educators develop a common vocabulary and a consistent understanding of key PLC concepts
2. To present a compelling argument that the implementation of PLC concepts will benefit students and educators alike
3. To help educators assess the current reality in their own schools and districts
4. To convince educators to take purposeful steps to develop their capacity to function as a PLC

Helping Educators Develop a Common Vocabulary and a Consistent Understanding of Key PLC Concepts

Michael Fullan observes that “terms travel easily . . . but the meaning of the underlying concepts does not” (2005a, p. 67). Terms such as professional learning community, collaborative teams, goals, formative assessments, and scores of others have indeed traveled widely in educational circles. They are prevalent in the lexicon of contemporary “educationese.” If pressed for a specific definition, however, many educators would be stumped. It is difficult enough to bring these concepts to life in a school or district when there is a shared understanding of their meaning. It is impossible when there is no common understanding and the terms mean very different things to different people within the same organization.

Developmental psychologists Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2001) contend that the transformation of both individuals and organizations requires new language. They write, “The places where we work and live are, among other things, places where certain forms of speech are promoted and encouraged, and
places where other ways of talking are discouraged or made impossible” (p. 7). As educators make the cultural shift from traditional schools and districts to PLCs, a new language emerges. Therefore, we have included a glossary of key terms used in implementing PLC concepts to assist in building shared knowledge of both critical vocabulary and the concepts underlying the terms. This glossary begins on page 213. We hope it will add to the precision and clarity of the emerging language that accompanies the creation of PLCs.

Presenting a Compelling Argument That the Implementation of PLC Concepts Will Benefit Students and Educators Alike

Jim Collins (2001) begins his best-selling book Good to Great with a provocative observation: “Good is the enemy of great.” “Good” organizational performance can cause complacency and inertia instead of inspiring the pursuit of continuous improvement essential to sustained greatness. Despite the persistent attacks on public schools throughout North America by politicians insisting on greater accountability, business leaders demanding better trained workers, and members of the media lamenting the failure of public education, most parents believe their children go to “good” schools. While they may be concerned about the quality of education throughout the country, almost 70% of parents consistently give the schools their oldest child attends a grade of A or B (Rose & Gallup, 2005). So what would cause educators to explore more powerful models for learning if the general perception in the community they serve indicates they are already doing a good job? One strategy, increasingly popular in contemporary North America, is to apply sanctions and punishment for schools that fail to demonstrate improvement. Currently this strategy impacts only a small percentage of schools, and its effectiveness remains very much in question.

Another strategy for motivating a faculty to initiate new practices and procedures is to present a persuasive case that there is a better, more effective, more gratifying way to approach the work. We are convinced that the PLC model makes that compelling case for any educator willing to give it meaningful consideration. The model offers a tangible, realistic, compelling vision of what schools might become. We hope to bring the PLC concept to life in ways that resonate with educators because, after all, “It just makes sense.”

Helping Educators Assess the Current Reality in Their Own Schools and Districts

More than 2 decades ago, Naisbitt and Aburdene (1985) offered the common sense conclusion that people find it a lot easier to get from point A to point B if they know where point B is and how to recognize it once they arrive. For many educators, however, school improvement initiatives have been plagued by uncertainty and confusion regarding both points A and B. They have not taken
the time to clarify either the current status of their school or what they hope it will become. As a result, efforts to reform their schools have too often been characterized by random stops and starts, rather than by purposeful progression on a path of improvement. A key step in any effective improvement process is an honest assessment of the current reality—a diligent effort to determine the truth (Collins, 2001). Educators will find it easier to move forward to where they want to go if they first agree on where they are.

Even when teachers and administrators make a good faith effort to assess their schools, they face significant obstacles. All schools have cultures: the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for a school and guide the work of the educators within it. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that educators do not have school cultures, but rather that the school cultures have them. Teachers and administrators are typically so immersed in their traditional ways of doing things that they find it difficult to step outside of those traditions to examine conventional practices from a fresh, critical perspective. Therefore, this handbook is designed not only to offer specific examples of PLC practices (to help paint a picture of point B), but also to help educators make a frank and honest assessment of current conditions in their schools (to clarify point A).

**Convincing Educators to Take Purposeful Steps to Develop Their Capacity to Function as a PLC**

Our greatest hope in developing this handbook is that it will help educators take immediate and specific steps to close the knowing-doing gap in North American education by implementing PLC concepts in their own schools and districts. Once again, it will take action on the part of educators to accomplish this objective. The research on what it takes to improve schools has been very consistent over a number of years. Most educators already know what they should do to help students achieve at higher levels, and if they don’t have the necessary knowledge, it is easily accessible to them in a variety of forms. The question confronting most schools and districts is not, “What do we need to know in order to improve?” but rather, “Will we turn what we already know into action?”

**Taking Action**

Perhaps the greatest insight we have gained in our work with school districts across the continent is that schools that take the plunge and actually begin doing the work of a PLC develop their capacity to help all students learn at high levels far more effectively than schools that spend years preparing to become PLCs through reading or even training. Educators must develop their collective capacity to function as PLCs, but as Michael Fullan (2005a) notes, “Capacity building is not just workshops and professional development for all. It is the
daily habit of working together, and you can’t learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn by doing it and having mechanisms for getting better at it on purpose” (p. 69).

In the past we have provided study guides for our books because we discovered that many faculties use our resources in their book study groups. We call the study guide that accompanies this book an “Action Guide” (available at www.solution-tree.com); we cannot stress enough that this resource is not designed for study, but rather for action—to help educators take the essential action steps for building their capacity to create and sustain PLCs.

The Format

Each chapter of this handbook includes six parts:

- Part One: The Case Study
- Part Two: Here’s How
- Part Three: Here’s Why
- Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey
- Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward
- Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

Part One: The Case Study

Each chapter opens with a case study describing some of the issues and challenges that have arisen in a school or district that is attempting to implement PLC concepts. The names of schools and people described in the case studies are fictional, but the situations presented are neither fictional nor hypothetical. They represent the very real issues educators must grapple with and resolve if they are to bring PLC concepts to life in their schools and districts. Readers may be tempted to skip the case studies section of each chapter in order to move quickly to solutions. We urge you to resist that temptation. A critical step in assessing alternative solutions to any problem is to come to an understanding and appreciation of the problem itself. We hope you will take the time to consider each case study carefully, reflect upon the issues it presents, and generate possible strategies for addressing those issues. This reflective process will only be strengthened if readers engage in it collectively with their colleagues prior to considering the rest of the chapter.

Part Two: Here’s How

In our work with schools, we have found that “how” questions come in at least two varieties: one type represents a sincere and genuine solicitation of guidance Schools that take the plunge and actually begin doing the work of a PLC develop their capacity to help all students learn at high levels far more effectively than schools that spend years preparing to become PLCs through reading or even training.
from inquirers who are willing to act, and the other typically comes in waves as a series of “yeah, but . . .” questions. For example, after listening to an explanation of PLC concepts and procedures, a teacher or administrator responds with:

- “Yeah, but . . . how are we supposed to find time to collaborate?”
- “Yeah, but . . . how can we give students extra time and support for learning when our schedule will not allow it?”
- “Yeah, but . . . how can this work in a school this big (or small, or poor, or urban, or rural, or suburban, or low achieving and therefore too despondent, or high achieving and therefore too complacent)?”
- “Yeah, but . . . how can we make this happen with our ineffective principal, unsupportive central office, or adversarial teacher union?”

These questions are less of a search for answers on how to implement PLC concepts successfully and more of a search for a reason to avoid implementation. As Peter Block (2003) says, “Asking ‘How?’ is a favorite defense against taking action” (p. 11). Block goes on to say, “We act like we are confused, like we don’t understand. The reality is that we do understand—we get it, but we don’t like it” (p. 47–48). Our own work with schools has confirmed that a group that is determined not to act can always find a justification for inaction. Questions about “how” can have a positive impact only if those asking are willing to act on the answers.

Therefore, the “Here’s How” sections in this book are written for those who seek ideas, insights, and information regarding how PLC concepts come alive in the real world of schools. Part Two of each chapter describes how educators bring a particular PLC element to life in their school. It will present exemplars for schools to use as a model as they work through the challenges of moving from concepts to action.

We fully recognize that there is no precise recipe for school improvement (blending two parts collaboration with one part formative assessment does not work). We also understand that even the most promising strategies must be customized for the specific context of each district and each school. The most effective improvement models are those that have been adapted by staff to fit the situation in their schools and communities (Hall & Hord, 1987; Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987; Marzano, 2005). Therefore, the “Here’s How” sections do not presume to present “The Answer” to problems posed in the case study, because it is the dialogue about and the struggle with those problems at the school and district level that results in the deepest learning and greatest commitment for teachers and administrators. Our hope is that this book can serve as a tool educators can use to initiate the dialogue and to engage in the struggle.
Part Three: Here’s Why

Informing others about how something can be done does not ensure they will be persuaded to do it. In fact, we are convinced that one of the most common mistakes school administrators make in the implementation of improvement initiatives is to focus exclusively on “how” while being inattentive to “why.” Leaders at all levels must be prepared to anticipate and respond to the inevitable questions and concerns that arise when educators are called upon to engage in new practices. We have included Part Three in each chapter to offer useful tools—research, reasoning, and rationale—to help clarify why the initiative should be undertaken.

Part Three draws upon, but is not limited to, the research base on education. We examine findings from studies in organizational development, change processes, leadership, effective communication, and psychology because the challenges facing contemporary leaders demand that they look outside the narrow scope of their professional field for answers.

Part Four: Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey

This section calls upon readers to assess the current reality in their own schools as it relates to a particular element of PLC practices. Readers will do hands-on work as they use the charts in this section to assess their policies and practices. They are then asked to present evidence and arguments in support of their assessments.

Part Five: Tips for Moving Forward

Each chapter includes specific suggestions and strategies to assist with the implementation of particular PLC concepts. The primary purpose of this handbook is to encourage people to act, to “learn by doing.” Random actions, however, do nothing to enhance the capacity of a staff to function as a PLC. The challenge facing leaders is to identify purposeful and focused actions that contribute to the goal of improved learning for students and staff alike. Part Five offers insight regarding which actions to take and which to avoid. It identifies tactics that offer the greatest leverage for advancing PLC concepts and presents research-based and practitioner-proven tips for pursuing those tactics effectively.

Part Six: Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

Members of PLCs engage in collective inquiry: They learn how to learn together. But it is only when they focus this collective inquiry on the right questions that they develop their capacity to improve student and adult learning.
It has been said that the leader of the past knew how to tell. The leader of the future, however, will have to know how to ask. Those who lead the PLC process should not be expected to have all the answers and tell others what they must do. Leaders should instead be prepared to ask the right questions, facilitate the dialogue, and help build shared knowledge. Part Six will offer some of the “right” questions educators should consider as they work to drive PLC concepts deeper into the culture of their schools and districts.

A Journey Worth Taking

Despite the popularity of the term *professional learning community*, the practices of a PLC continue to represent “the road less traveled” in public education. Many teachers and administrators prefer the familiarity of their current path, even when it becomes apparent that it will not take them to their desired destination. We recognize it is difficult to pursue an uncharted path, particularly when it is certain to include inevitable bumps and potholes along the way. We do not argue that the PLC journey is an easy one, but we know with certainty that it is a journey worth taking. We have seen the evidence of improved learning and heard the testimonials of teachers and principals who have been renewed by establishing common ground, clear purpose, effective monitoring, and collaborative processes that lead to better results. They describe a heightened sense of professionalism and a resurgence of energy and enthusiasm generated by committed people working together to accomplish what could not be done alone. As Robert Evans (1996) writes:

> Anyone part of such a process, or anyone who has seen first-rate teachers engage in reflective practice together, knows its power and excitement. Opportunities to collaborate and to build knowledge can enhance job satisfaction and performance. At their best, they help schools create a self-reflective, self-renewing capacity as learning organizations. (p. 232)

The following chapters will not eliminate the bumps and potholes of the PLC journey, but they will offer some guidance as to how educators can maneuver their way around and through the rough spots on the road. It has been said that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. We urge readers to take that step. Let us begin together.