FINDING COMMON GROUND IN EDUCATION REFORM
Professional Learning Community Advocates—
A Presentation of the Research

What would it take to persuade educators that successfully implementing professional learning community practices is the most promising path for sustained and substantive improvement of our schools and districts? The research is clear: Many esteemed experts and respected professional organizations in education endorse and advocate the development of PLCs. For those who find research persuasive, we submit the following information.

Expert Endorsements of Professional Learning Communities

> "The most successful corporation of the future will be a learning organization." (Senge, 1990, p. 4)
>
> "Every enterprise has to become a learning institution [and] a teaching institution. Organizations that build in continuous learning in jobs will dominate the twenty-first century." (Drucker, 1992, p. 108)
>
> "Preferred organizations will be learning organizations. . . . It has been said that people who stop learning stop living. This is also true of organizations." (Handy, 1995, p. 55)
>
> "Only the organizations that have a passion for learning will have an enduring influence." (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1996, p. 149)
>
> "The new problem of change . . . is what would it take to make the educational system a learning organization—expert at dealing with change as a normal part of its work, not just in relation to the latest policy, but as a way of life." (Fullan, 1993, p. 4)
>
> "We have come to realize over the years that the development of a learning community of educators is itself a major cultural change that will spawn many others." (Joyce & Showers, 1995, p. 3)
>
> "If schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a professional community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff." (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 37)

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"[We recommend that] schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers; organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding." (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 198)

"We argue, however, that when schools attempt significant reform, efforts to form a schoolwide professional community are critical." (Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996, p. 13)

Louis and Marks (1998) found that when a school is organized into a professional community, the following occurs:

1. Teachers set higher expectations for student achievement.
2. Students can count on the help of their teachers and peers in achieving ambitious learning goals.
3. The quality of classroom pedagogy is considerably higher.
4. Achievement levels are significantly higher.

"We support and encourage the use of professional learning communities (PLCs) as a central element for effective professional development and a comprehensive reform initiative. In our experience, PLCs have the potential to enhance the professional culture within a school district." (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004, p. 3)

"The framework of a professional learning community is inextricably linked to the effective integration of standards, assessment, and accountability . . . the leaders of professional learning communities balance the desire for professional autonomy with the fundamental principles and values that drive collaboration and mutual accountability." (Reeves, 2005, pp. 47–48)

"Well-implemented professional learning communities are a powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways that produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers." (Sparks, 2005, p. 156)

"Strong professional learning communities produce schools that are engines of hope and achievement for students. . . . There is nothing more important for education in the decades ahead than educating and supporting leaders in the commitments, understandings, and skills necessary to grow such schools where a focus on effort-based ability is the norm." (Saphier, 2005, p. 111)

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"[In the most successful schools] leadership ensures there are integrated communities of professional practice in the service of student academic and social learning. There is a healthy school environment in which student learning is the central focus. . . . Research has demonstrated that schools organized as communities, rather than bureaucracies, are more likely to exhibit academic success." (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2007)

"Outcomes for both staff and students have been improved by organizing professional learning communities. For staff, the results include:

- Reduction of isolation of teachers
- Increased commitment to the mission and
- Goals of the school and increased vigor in working to strengthen the mission
- Shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success
- Powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice, that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners
- Increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles that they play in helping all students achieve expectations
- Higher likelihood that teachers will be well-informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students
- More satisfaction and higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism
- Significant advances into making teaching adaptations for students, and changes for learners made more quickly than in traditional schools
- Commitment to making significant and lasting changes
- Higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental, systemic change

For students, the results include:

- Decreased dropout rate and fewer classes 'cut'
- Lower rates of absenteeism
- Increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools
- Larger academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools
- Smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds" (Hord, 1997)

"A school-based professional community can offer support and motivation to teachers as they work to overcome the tight resources, isolation, time constraints and other obstacles they commonly encounter. . . . In schools where professional community is strong, teachers work together more effectively, and put more effort into creating and sustaining opportunities for student learning." (Kruse, Seashore Louis, & Bryk, 1994, p. 4)

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> "Such a tipping point—from reform to true collaboration—could represent the most dramatic shift in the history of educational practice. . . . We will know we have succeeded when the absence of a 'strong professional learning community' in a school is an embarrassment." (Schmoker, 2004, p. 431)

Organizations That Endorse Professional Learning Communities

The fundamental premise of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) is that school reform cannot succeed without creating conditions in which teachers teach well. The Commission has identified the creation of "Strong Learning Communities" as one of its three core strategies for improving both teaching and schools:

> "Quality teaching requires strong, professional learning communities. Collegial interchange, not isolation, must become the norm for teachers. Communities of learning can no longer be considered utopian; they must become the building blocks that establish a new foundation for America's schools." (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003, p. 17)

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was formed to advance the quality of teaching and learning by developing professional standards for accomplished teaching. Its position statement includes the following:

> "Five Core Propositions form the foundation and frame the rich amalgam of knowledge, skills, dispositions and beliefs that characterize National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs). The fifth proposition calls upon teachers to be members of learning communities . . . to collaborate with others to improve student learning . . . to work with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development and staff development." (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2007a)

The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) was created by the Council of Chief State School Officers to develop a common core of teaching knowledge that would clarify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions all teachers should demonstrate to be considered "professional." The standards included the following statements:

> "Professional teachers assume roles that extend beyond the classroom and include responsibilities for developing the school as a learning organization. . . . Professional teachers are

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> responsible for planning and pursuing their ongoing learning, for reflecting with colleagues on their practice, and for contributing to the profession's knowledge base." (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, 1992, p. 13)

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) called upon math leaders to do the following:

1. "Ensure teachers work interdependently as a professional learning community to guarantee continuous improvement and gains in student achievement."
2. "Create the support and structures necessary to implement a professional learning community."
3. "Ensure a systemic implementation of a professional learning community throughout all aspects of the mathematics curriculum, instruction and assessment at the school, district, or regional level." (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, in press)

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has created the Professional Learning Communities at Work Series—a topical resource kit to help teachers work as PLCs as they focus on key issues such as adolescent literacy, secondary writing, and teaching English language learners. An NCTE position paper argued that PLCs make teaching more rewarding and combat the problem of educators leaving the profession:

> "Effective professional development fosters collegial relationships, creating professional communities where teachers share knowledge and treat each other with respect. Within such communities teacher inquiry and reflection can flourish, and research shows that teachers who engage in collaborative professional development feel confident and well prepared to meet the demands of teaching." (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006, p. 10)

The National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) issued a position paper (2006) in which it asserted that a key component of high-quality staff development would "facilitate the development of professional learning communities."

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), particularly its professor emerita Shirley Hord, has been engaged in the ongoing exploration of the potential of PLCs. As SEDL reported in one of its publications on the topic:

> "Professional learning communities offer an infrastructure to create the supportive cultures and conditions necessary for achieving significant gains in teaching and learning. Professional learning communities provide opportunities for professional staff to look deeply into the teaching and learning process and

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to learn how to become more effective in their work with students." (Morrissey, 2000)

The National Education Association (NEA), America's largest teaching organization with over 2.7 million members, is committed to making teaching more rewarding and satisfying. In pursuit of its long-term vision of "a great public school for every student," the NEA has created its own recommended school improvement model: The Keys to Excellence. The model is intended to help educators with school improvement plans and to help them meet the challenges of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Although the model never uses the term professional learning community, its six keys to a quality school are consistent with PLC principles. The NEA keys and examples of some of the specific indicators the organization has identified for each follow:

1. Shared understanding and commitment to high goals
   - "The staff has a collective commitment to and takes responsibility for implementing high standards for all students."
   - "The school operates under the assumption that all students can learn."
2. Open communication and collaborative problem solving
   - "Teachers and staff collaborate to remove barriers to student learning."
   - "Teachers communicate regularly with each other about effective teaching and learning strategies."
3. Continuous assessment for teaching and learning
   - "Student assessment is used for decision making to improve learning."
   - "A variety of assessment techniques are used."
4. Personal and professional learning
   - "Teachers have regularly scheduled time to learn from one another."
   - "Professional development has a direct, positive effect on teaching."
5. Resources to support teaching and learning
   - "Computer hardware and software supplies are adequate for students and teachers."
   - "Support services are adequate."
6. Curriculum and instruction
   - "Instruction includes interventions for students who are not succeeding."
   - "Teachers are open to new learnings and rethink their approaches to teaching and assessment practices based on teacher-directed action research and other classroom based inquiries." (National Education Association, 2003)

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The president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), an organization representing 1.4 million members, called for those interested in improving schools to "make schools learning communities for teachers as well as students. Provide for master teachers, teacher centers, real professional development in the schools—with time for teachers to work with one another to overcome children's learning problems as they come up" (Feldman, 1998).

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) issued a position paper titled *This We Believe*, outlining its recommended strategies for improving schools. NMSA called for the following:

> "Building a learning community that involves all teachers and places top priority on the education and healthy development of every student, teacher, and staff member . . . professional development should be integrated into the daily life of the school and directly linked to the school's goals for student and teacher success and growth. To meet these goals, people work together in study groups, focus on learning results, analyze student work, and carry out action research." (2003, p. 11)

Principals have also been urged by their professional organizations to focus their efforts on developing their schools as professional learning communities.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2001) has clarified the essential responsibilities of principals in its publication *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do* in which it states:

> "If adults don't learn then students won't learn either. . . . The school operates as a learning community that uses its own experience and knowledge, and that of others, to improve the performance of students and teachers alike. . . . They must be a place where learning isn't isolated, where adults demonstrate they care about kids but also about each other. In such places, learning takes place in groups. A culture of shared responsibility is established, and everybody learns from one another." (p. 5)

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) calls upon high schools to engage in an improvement process that will ensure success for every high school student. In *Breaking Ranks II* (2004), the NASSP urges principals to focus on the development of a professional learning community within each school as a primary improvement strategy. In *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (2006), the NASSP organizes 30 recommendations for improving middle schools into three general areas, the first of which calls for "collaborative leadership and professional learning communities" (p. 23).

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In citing its recommendations for effective professional development, the National Staff Development Council (2007) contends, "Effective staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district."

The North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA) is responsible for the accreditation of more than 8,500 schools in 19 states. Concluding that its process works "hand in hand" with the PLC concept, the NCA reported:

> "Working at complementary levels—the school and classroom—the NCA school improvement and PLC processes reinforce and strengthen one another. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually supportive. If we want to ensure that no child is left behind, we must understand the important relationship between the NCA school improvement process and PLC. . . . The use of PLC at the classroom level has dramatically increased teachers' ability to implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum, monitor student progress with colleagues on school improvement goals and curriculum objectives, and improve the teaching and learning process. The strong link between school improvement goals and PLC at the classroom level allows all children to be successful." (Colliton, 2005, pp. 1–2)

Studies That Support Professional Learning Communities

The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools conducted a 5-year study that included analysis of data from more than 1,500 elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States. The Center also conducted field research in 44 schools in 16 states. Schools that were successful in linking their improvement initiatives with improved student learning were characterized by the following traits (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995):

1. A focus on an agreed-upon vision of what students should learn
2. Teaching that requires students to think, to develop in-depth understanding, and to apply academic learning to important, realistic problems
3. Schools that function as professional learning communities in which teachers . . .
   - Are guided by a clear shared purpose for student learning
   - Feel a sense of collective responsibility for student learning
   - Collaborate with one another to promote student learning
   - Enjoy increased autonomy at the school site

Another analysis of the data collected by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools agreed that development of professional learning communities was critical to

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improving schools and elaborated on the conditions leading to successful PLCs. Kruse, Seashore Louis, and Bryck (1994) argue that in a PLC, teachers are committed to the following:

1. Reflective dialogue based on a shared set of norms, beliefs, and values that allow them to critique their individual and collective performance
2. De-privatization of practice that requires teachers to share, observe, and discuss each other's methods and philosophies
3. Collective focus on student learning fueled by the belief that all students can learn and that staff members have a mutual obligation to see to it that students learn
4. Collaboration that moves beyond dialogue about students to producing materials that improve instruction, curriculum, and assessment for students
5. Shared norms and values that affirm common ground on critical educational issues and a collective focus on student learning

The study also reported that these five factors are supported by structural conditions such as time to meet during the school day, teachers organized into collaborative teams that work together interdependently to achieve common goals, open communication within and across teams, and teacher autonomy guided by a shared sense of purpose, priorities, and norms. Social resources that support the PLCs include commitment to continuous improvement, high levels of trust and respect, sharing of effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and focused orientation for those new to the school.

WestEd, a research and development agency focusing on how to improve schools, explored the question, "What does it take to translate teacher professional development into impressive learning gains for students?" The agency's report concluded, "Our key finding—the central importance of a professional community to adult and student learning—will be no surprise to those familiar with other educational research." (WestEd, 2000, p. 11)

Research That Supports the Three Big Ideas of a Professional Learning Community

Another approach to presenting the research in support of PLCs is to break the concept down into the three big ideas explained in *Learning by Doing* (2006)—a focus on learning, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results—and share the research or each idea. For example, the following research highlights the importance of a collaborative culture:

> "The single most important factor for successful school restructuring and the first order of business for those interested in increasing the capacity of their schools is building a

collaborative internal environment that fosters cooperative problem-solving and conflict resolution." (Eastwood & Seashore Louis, 1992, p. 215)

"The ability to collaborate—on both a small and large scale—is becoming one of the core requisites of postmodern society. . . . In short, without collaborative skills and relationships it is not possible to learn and to continue to learn as much as you need in order to be an agent for social improvement." (Fullan, 1993, pp. 17–18)

"An interdependent work structure strengthens professional community. When teachers work in groups that require coordination, this, by definition, requires collaboration. When groups, rather than individuals, are seen as the main units for implementing curriculum, instruction, and assessment, they facilitate development of shared purpose for student learning and collective responsibility to achieve it." (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, pp. 37–38)

"The key to ensuring that every child has a quality teacher is finding a way for school systems to organize the work of qualified teachers so they can collaborate with their colleagues in developing strong learning communities that will sustain them as they become more accomplished teachers." (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003, p. 7)

"Collaboration and the ability to engage in collaborative action are becoming increasingly important to the survival of the public schools. Indeed, without the ability to collaborate with others the prospect of truly repositioning schools in the constellation of community forces is not likely." (Schlechty, 2005, p. 22)

"A precondition for doing *anything* to strengthen our practice and improve a school is the existence of a collegial culture in which professionals talk about practice, share their craft knowledge, and observe and root for the success of one another. Without these in place, no meaningful improvement—no staff or curriculum development, no teacher leadership, no student appraisal, no team teaching, no parent involvement, and no sustained change—is possible." (Barth, 2006, p. 13)

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Professional organizations for educators have also endorsed the premise that educators should work together collaboratively. Consider the conclusions of the following organizations:

> "Some of the most important forms of professional learning and problem solving occur in group settings within schools and school districts. Organized groups provide the social interaction that often deepens learning and the interpersonal support and synergy necessary for creatively solving the complex problems of teaching and learning. And because many of the recommendations contained in these standards advocate for increased teamwork among teachers and administrators in designing lessons, critiquing student work, and analyzing various types of data, among other tasks, it is imperative that professional learning be directed at improving the quality of collaborative work." (National Staff Development Council, 2007)

> "High performing schools tend to promote collaborative cultures, support professional communities and exchanges among all staff and cultivate strong ties among the school, parents, and community. . . . Teachers and staff collaborate to remove barriers to student learning. . . . Teachers communicate regularly with each other about effective teaching and learning strategies." (National Education Association, 2006)

> "It is time to end the practice of solo teaching in isolated classrooms. Teacher induction and professional development in 21st century schools must move beyond honing one's craft and personal repertoire of skills. Today's teachers must transform their personal knowledge into a collectively built, widely shared, and cohesive professional knowledge base." (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee [for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future], 2005, p. 4)

> "[Accomplished teachers] collaborate with others to improve student learning. . . . They work with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development and staff development." (National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, 2007a)

> "Successful middle level teacher preparation programs place a high premium on teaching prospective and practicing middle level teachers about the importance of collaboration with colleagues and other stakeholders. One of the unique characteristics of

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> middle level schools for teachers is the heavy emphasis on collaboration. . . . Teachers are not operating in isolation. This permits insights and understandings about young adolescent students to be shared with others and therefore maximized." (National Middle School Association, 2006)

> "Isolation is the enemy of learning. Principals who support the learning of adults in their school organize teachers' schedules to provide opportunities for teachers to work, plan, and think together. For instance, teams of teachers who share responsibility for the learning of all students meet regularly to plan lessons, critique student work and the assignments that led to it, and solve common instructional or classroom management problems." (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001, p. 45)

> "A high school will regard itself as a *community* in which members of the staff collaborate to develop and implement the school's learning goals. Teachers will provide the leadership essential to the success of reform, collaborating with others in the educational community to redefine the role of the teacher and to identify sources of support for that redefined role." (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, p. 4)

The third big idea in a PLC, a focus on results, has been endorsed by many experts. Evidenced-based decision-making is key to producing a results-orientation in education. Consider the following statements:

> "An astonishing number of educational leaders make critical decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and placement on the basis of information that is inadequate, misunderstood, misrepresented, or simply absent. Even when information is abundant and clear, I have witnessed leaders who are sincere and decent people stare directly at the information available to them, and then blithely ignore it. . . . Strategic leaders are worthy of the name because of their consistent linking of evidence to decision making. They respond to challenges not by scoring rhetorical points but by consistently elevating evidence over assertion." (Reeves, 2006, p. 95)

> "School systems must create a culture that places value on managing by results, rather than on managing by programs." (Schlechty, 1997, p. 110)

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> "It is essential that leaders work to establish a culture where results are carefully assessed and actions are taken based on these assessments." (Schlechty, 2005, p. 11)

> "Concentrating on results does not negate the importance of process. On the contrary, the two are interdependent: Results tell us which processes are most effective and to what extent and whether processes need reexamining and adjusting. Processes exist for results and results should inform processes." (Schmoker, 1996, p. 4)

> "What does it take to close the achievement gaps? Our findings suggest that it comes down to how schools use data. Teachers in gap-closing schools more frequently use data to understand the skill gaps of low-achieving students. . . . When data points to a weakness in students' academic skills, gap-closing schools are more likely to focus in on that area, making tough choices to ensure that students are immersed in what they most need." (Symonds, 2004, p. 13)

In fact, evidence-based decisions are so important to establishing a results orientation in any organization that many experts outside education have advocated for using data:

> "The ultimate measure of a great team is results. Effective teams avoid ambiguity and interpretation when it comes to results. They decide what they want to achieve, then they clarify how they will measure their progress. They select one or two indicators they can collectively focus upon and around which they can rally. They create a scoreboard that helps keep them focused on results. These teams use the scoreboard to monitor their progress against the expected achievement." (Lencioni, 2005, p. 69)

> "Companies operate under the false assumption that if they carry out enough of the 'right' improvement activities, actual performance improvements will inevitably materialize. At the heart of this assumption, which we call 'activity centered,' is a fundamentally flawed logic that confuses ends with means, processes with outcomes. Payoffs from the infusion of activities will be meager at best. And there is in fact an alternative: results-driven improvement processes that focus on achieving specific, measurable operational improvements within a few months." (Schaffer & Thomson, 1998, p. 191)

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"We found there was something distinctive about the decision-making process of the great companies we studied. First, they embraced the current reality, no matter how bad the message. Second, they developed a simple yet deeply insightful fame of reference for all decisions. . . . You absolutely cannot make a series of good decisions without first confronting the brutal facts." (Collins, 2001, p. 69)

"Unless you can subject your decision-making to a ruthless and continuous *JUDGMENT BY RESULTS*, all your zigs and zags will only be random lunges in the dark, sooner or later bound to land you on the rocks." (Champy, 1995, p. 120)

"Ducking the facts about performance for fear of being judged, criticized, humiliated, and punished characterizes losing streaks, not winning streaks. In a losing streak, facts are used for blame, not improvement; they are turned into weapons to persecute, not tools to find solutions. . . . In winning streaks, players get and use abundant feedback about their performance. Leaders can . . . ensure that measurements ultimately empower rather than punish people." (Kanter, 2004, p. 208)

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