Executive Summary

Although quantitative studies about the effect of PLCs are still scarce, there is an increasing amount of qualitative research, based on case studies, that details the successes of PLCs. Some recent studies have shown a positive correlation between the PLC model and an increase in student achievement (Fulton, Doerr & Britton, 2010; Gallimore et al., 2009; Sargent & Hannum, 2009; Saunders, Goldenberg & Gallimore, 2009; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008) as well as a corresponding decrease in the achievement gap (Hord & Summers, 2008). And PLCs have been shown to not only improve work satisfaction, boosting morale and reducing absences, but also increase teachers' use of research-based instructional methods (Fulton, Doerr & Britton, 2010; Hord & Summers, 2008; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008).

Researchers and educators define PLCs differently However, they do seem to agree on the core characteristics of a Professional Learning Community: student-focused, collaborative, inquiry-based, ongoing practice. Schools that embody the PLC concept believe that excellence is everyone's responsibility, and they push each other to take risks, dig deep into each other's instructional methodology, and together try to figure out what works best for their students. This cultural shift is essential for schools to become a true PLC and reach excellence (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008).

Researchers and educators also have different ideas about how best to implement the PLC concept, but they do agree that the following factors are key to successful implementation:

- Shared vision and goals coupled with strong leadership
- Time and space that is protected
- Team structures that connect teachers
- Norms and protocols
- Evidenced-based decision making

Although the PLC concept is often considered a grassroots effort by teachers, the literature emphasizes the importance of the Central Office's role in supporting and sustaining PLCs. Central office can develop the capacity of principals and lead teachers to lead PLCs; establish non-negotiables around the PLC process but also allowing schools to develop their own structures and processes; monitor the PLC process and keep people accountable; and limit initiatives and communicate priorities. Lastly, Central Office and the unions can work together to develop peer facilitators for teachers and principals

The PLC concept is endorsed by the NEA, AFT, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, national councils and associations for math, English, and science teachers, as wells as associations for elementary, middle, and secondary school principals (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008). And, participating in a professional community is a key component of the new LAUSD Teaching and Learning Framework that is being adopted for the new Educator Growth and Development System. It is easy to understand why the PLC concept benefits teaching and learning, but the implementation is the difficult part. This research brief will hopefully be the basis for further research and development of PLCs in the LAUSD.

Please send any comments, questions, or suggestions to paul.hsu@lausd.net.

What can PLCs do for you?

Increasingly, schools and even whole districts have become Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to push student learning to the next level. Can the PLC concept do the same for you?

The concept of Professional Learning Communities or "PLCs" has been in the United States since the early-1990s (Gallimore et al., 2009; Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). More recently, the PLC model was popularized through the work of Dufour and Eaker in *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (1998) and *Whatever It Takes* (Dufour et al., 2004). Since then more teachers and administrators have changed, at a fundamental level, the way they work together to improve student learning and turn around schools.

Although quantitative studies about the effect of PLCs are still scarce, there is an increasing amount of qualitative research, based on case studies, that details the successes of PLCs. Some recent studies have shown a positive correlation between the PLC model and an increase in student achievement (Fulton, Doerr & Britton, 2010; Gallimore et al., 2009; Sargent & Hannum, 2009; Saunders, Goldenberg & Gallimore, 2009; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008) as well as a corresponding decrease in the achievement gap (Hord & Summers, 2008). And PLCs have been shown to not only improve work satisfaction, boosting morale and reducing absences, but also increase teachers' use of research-based instructional methods (Fulton, Doerr & Britton, 2010; Hord & Summers, 2008; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008).

However, with the gain in popularity, the PLC movement to a certain extent has become the newest fad in education, co-opted and adopted indiscriminately and leading to the development of "pseudo-PLCs" (Dufour & Marzano, 2011, p.21). This research brief seeks to clarify 1) the true nature of PLCs; 2) their potential for effecting change; and 3) the essentials of successful implementation. Without a doubt, it takes a village to raise our children. But, the village needs a model for collaborating and problem-solving in order to make a continuous and effectual impact.

Will the real PLC please stand up?

First, a test of your PLC knowledge. Which of the following statements best describes a "Professional Learning Community?"

DID YOU KNOW?: Although PLCs are relatively new to the United States, the concept has long been integral to the professional growth of teachers in Asian countries such as Singapore, Japan, and China (Sargent & Hannum, 2009). In China, teachers are expected to develop joint lesson plans, model lessons in front of each other, and conduct peer observations followed by discussion and critique. Many teachers do not possess classrooms per se, but instead share a common office space with other teachers, where they can discuss educational practices and collaborate on educational research.

A. A group of teachers sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way and generally agreed to have the collective purpose of enhancing student learning.

B. An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.

C. An ongoing process through which teachers and administrators work collaboratively to seek and share learning and to act on their learning, their goal being to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for students' benefit.

As you have probably guessed, all three statements are definitions formulated by some of the leading researchers and educators of the PLC movement (respectively, Stoll & Louis, 2008; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2010; and Hord, 1997). In reviewing their literature, it seems these researchers and educators do not always see eye-to-eye in the way PLCs should be implemented. However, based on the three statements above, they do seem to agree on the core characteristics of a Professional Learning Community: student-focused, collaborative, inquiry-based, ongoing practice.

PLC in the LAUSD?

The question is, how is this concept different from our current practice in LAUSD? The answer of course varies from school to school. There are schools in LAUSD that have grade level and/or subject-alike teams that engage in inquiry similar to the "Steps to Collegial Learning" described by Hord and Sommers (2008, p.144-5):

1. Identify an area or issue that requires staff's change of knowledge and skills
2. Decide what to learn to gain new knowledge and skills, and how to learn it
3. Engage in the learning
4. Apply the learning appropriately in classrooms
5. Debrief with colleagues about "how it went" and assessing effectiveness
6. Revise, based on the new learning from experience, and apply again

Still other schools go through an inquiry process that clarifies the essential questions posed by Dufour and Marzano (2011, p.22-3):

1. What is it we want our students to know?
2. How will we know if our students are learning?
3. How will we respond when students do not learn?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?

But for the most part, unless schools, teams, and teachers have been deliberately trained and supported in this process of inquiry, department and team meetings have tended to focus on

1. Announcements
2. Logistics such as purchasing materials and planning events
3. Sharing of best practices but without the corresponding inquiry into the effectiveness of those practices and how to improve their implementation
4. Analysis of data and plans for improvement but without a systematic study of which part of the plan actually resulted in improvement
5. Discussions about challenging students but not within the context of a systematic intervention process
6. Other discussions not related to student learning

To be clear, it's not that announcements and logistics have no place in department or team meetings. What the PLC movement highlights, says Ms. Shekiba Rahh at Markham Middle School, is the tendency of teachers to "avoid having crucial conversations about the reality of our students, classroom and lessons that can help us improve our students experiences."   In essence, whatever happens in the classroom, stays in the classroom. However, schools that embody the PLC concept believe that excellence is everyone's responsibility, and they push each other to take risks, dig deep into each other's instructional methodology, and together try to figure out what works best for their students. This cultural shift is essential for schools to reach excellence and become a true PLC (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008). And this is the reason why PLC is considered a "concept" as opposed to a process, because it challenges a belief system that has existed since the factory model of education was developed in the late 19th Century (Robinson, 2006).

"Are you a true PLC?" Checklist

☐ Unrelenting focus on students and learning
☐ Shared mission and goals that the staff see as their common purpose
☐ Educators talk with one another about their practice; share their craft knowledge; observe one another while they are engaged in their practice; root for one another's success
☐ Continuous cycle of reflection, learning, and assessment of effects.
☐ Dedicated space and time for meeting; close physical proximity of staff; interdependent teaching roles; communication structures
☐ Common planning periods for grade-level teachers and/or subject-alike teachers
☐ Trust in and respect for one another
☐ Teachers visit each other's classrooms on a regular basis to observe, take notes, and discuss their observations.
☐ Teachers design common assessments and study student work to identify the most effective instructional strategies used by the team
☐ Teachers network with teacher from other schools in a process of inquiry
☐ Regular all staff meetings that focus on school-wide goals and collective learning
☐ Continuous reflection and assessment of how the PLC is functioning
☐ Non-instructional support staff also embody the PLC concept
☐ Support from school leadership, district personnel, and/or external providers on PLC process

Source: Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008; Gallimore et al., 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Louis & Kruse, 1995

Are PLCs Effective?

A comprehensive literature review on the effectiveness of PLCs is unnecessary because all one needs to do is refer to pages 68-72 of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work* by Dufour, Dufour and Eaker (2008). They conveniently list excerpts from a plethora of studies that have found PLCs to be effective in

- helping organizations deal with change and successfully carry out reforms
- increasing collaboration between teachers and staff and the sharing of responsibility
- boosting student achievement and teacher learning
- elevating teacher expectations for student achievement and raising the quality instruction
- lifting morale and lowering absenteeism for both students and teachers

However, as with most research in education, the research on PLCs is mostly correlative and does not necessarily establish direct cause and effect between the PLC model and the results listed above. Moreover, few studies explore the negative effects of Professional Learning Communities and even less, if any, have looked at failed PLCs. But if we take a step back and look at the bigger picture, it would be difficult to argue against an ongoing collaborative model of inquiry focused on student learning. We preach it in our classrooms when we tell our students to work in groups and learn from each other, so why wouldn't the same help us? Thus, the issue is not so much whether PLCs are effective but how can PLCs be implemented successfully?

What does it take to become a PLC?

Implementing new programs is a difficult process. It is easy to get mired in the implementation process itself and then lose sight of the overarching goals of the program. Going PLC can be doubly difficult because it is not just a program to be carried out. Going PLC requires a shift in deeply held beliefs about the teaching profession and the act of educating. Thus, current literature about PLCs has tended to focus not on their effectiveness but how they are implemented.

Shared Vision and Goals with Strong Leadership

One of the most commonly cited elements of successful PLC implementation is shared vision and goals coupled with strong leadership (Carrol, Fulton & Doerr, 2010; Fulton, Doerr & Britton, 2010; Ermeling, 2009; Hord & Summers, 2008; Kruse & Louis, 2008; Sargent & Hannum, 2009). This point was especially salient for LAUSD's Maywood Academy when it began going PLC in 2010. Because Maywood Academy is beholden to four school plans (SPSA, WASC, Public School Choice, and School Improvement Grant) and the ESBMM contract, they had to establish a shared vision by finding coherence between the plans, and then create

SMART goals that were aligned to the vision, as suggested by Dufour and Marzano (2011). This process helped create a laser-like focus so their PLCs would have a defined purpose.

Implementing the PLC model for the sake of doing PLCs would result in failure. It would be the same as hammering for the sake of hammering as opposed to hammering for the sake of building a house. A clearly defined mission and vision that is adopted by all teachers and staff will move a school forward, with the PLC being the vehicle for carrying out the vision. And it takes strong leaders to create a collaborative staff culture that results in shared leadership (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008; Ermeling, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2008). For more information on defining mission, vision, values and goals and the role of principals in PLCs, see chapters 5, 6, and 12 in *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work* (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008).

Time and Space

Unless schools create the proper conditions, PLCs will not grow properly. There needs to be dedicated PLC time and space (Sargent & Hannum, 2009) so PLCs are not relegated to being an afterthought: "We have some extra time during this staff meeting, let's do some PLC!" PLC meetings need to be consistent and protected so they do not get bumped by the many other issues faced by schools (Ermeling, 2009). Schools that have successful PLCs tend to have common planning time for teachers built into the master schedule (Gallimore et al., 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Sargent & Hannum, 2009). In addition to scheduling time, PLCs need an extended time period to develop because they involve building trust and team work as well as changing habits (Dufour & Marzano, 2008; Kruse & Louis, 2008).

Team Structures

More than the physical structure, PLCs need an effective team structure. Teachers in PLC teams should have a common connection, whether it is the academic subject or the students they teach. Subject-alike teams seem to be preferred by teachers (Ermeling, 2009), although schools also use grade-level or SLC teams. Carver Middle School in LAUSD, for example, has retained its Personalized Learning Environment (PLE) teams for its PLC work. And just as important, there needs to be an overarching structure for learning as a whole school, otherwise the individual PLC teams may lose focus. Some schools encourage inter-departmental collaboration, or a particular department may guide the others in their learning (McLaughlin & Talbert 2008). Hord and Sommers (2008) also talk about the "whole school professional community" and, in a study of collaborative inquiry in New York City, Robinson (2010) mentions the need for a "core inquiry team" to guide the individual teams.

Voices from the Field

"The Professional Learning Community hit [Markham Middle School] a few years ago and it has allowed teachers to mobilize during common conference time to discuss the…challenges and needs of the classroom. The special education staff meets as a PLC once a week for three times a month after school. Teachers are greeted with an Agenda and Snack Box that we all contribute towards…As we snack and review the agenda we start off with compliments or "good things". After that we dig deep into the meaning of our presence on campus and that is improving student success and our practices as professionals. We decide as a team what we will do, and that helps hold us all accountable. For example, a deadline is set as a collective unit to bring in resources for giving students a pre-assessment to determine their level of knowledge. We then pick a second date to analyze the data and discuss any patterns or trends that are noticed in the data.

In order for a PLC to work, it must have the support of the administration. PLC takes what one would call a "department meeting" and embeds it in the school-wide matrix, thus improving communication and collaboration amongst professionals. However, a PLC…faces many challenges in a bureaucratic structure. For example, if decisions are determined from the top, then what is the use of a PLC or a team leader/PLC leader?…The PLC must be designed and implemented by the school so each PLC is unique to the needs of the school or teachers. Teachers who do not fully understand the concept of PLCs will have to rely on other team members to explain it. Unfortunately, many team leaders are not given adequate training on PLC [work] or the PLC leads continue to change yearly so the information or knowledge isn't shared. Moreover…[coaches] are not…integrated in the PLCs so there continues to be a gap [between theory and implementation].

Time [also] has to be set aside for administration to meet with their team leaders to discuss and monitor the successes and pitfalls PLCs are encountering and the supports they can provide. A lot of work is required from the team leader in order to keep their PLC functioning and committed to their vision and goals. Thus, PLCs can work if you have an effective and energetic team leader [and] can work even with [resistant] staff members if team leaders are given the time and opportunity to build capacity.

Over the years, the PLCs [at Markham Middle School] have gotten better. Teachers are realizing that [PLCs] are here to stay and that they can improve student success. Teachers are also realizing that they must put forth the work or you will have an ineffective PLC. I have seen teachers meet to discuss and analyze student data, and identify students who need additional academic assistance. With hard work and dedication, a functioning PLC can exist on any campus that meets the needs of the students and teachers."

Shekiba Rahh is the PLC lead teacher for the special education department at Markham Middle School. She has a Masters in Public Administration and is a graduate of the Urban School Leaders Program at California State University, Dominguez Hills.

Norms and Protocols

After schools figure out how to organize their space, time, and people, they need to decide on the process for doing the actual PLC work. Putting people together from the same department in the same room at the same time is not a PLC; it's a Status Quo. To be efficient and effective, PLC teams need norms and protocols to guide them through the learning process (Gallimore et al., 2009). Some schools, such as Gardena High School in LAUSD, use Critical Friends Group protocols. Others use the collaborative inquiry process (Robinson 2010) or Japanese lesson study (Sargent & Hannum 2008). At the end of the day, whichever protocol is selected, teachers need to be trained and facilitators need to be present during the meetings to model some of the best practices. To ensure continual improvement, PLC teams should monitor and assess their practice during these meetings on a regular basis (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Many & Ritchie, 2007). It takes practice and reflection before teams learn how to dissect student work, develop common assessments and lessons, and communicate without judgment.

Evidence-Based Decision Making

Lastly, PLCs cannot operate on opinion and feeling. Instead, the PLC process is guided by evidence-based decision making (Dufour, 2011; Hargreaves, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2008). PLCs operate similarly to action research teams, in which evidence-gathering is a key aspect of the learning process and the participants take a scientific approach to solving problems. Most often the purpose of gathering evidence in PLC work is to get a real-time picture of student learning. The evidence that PLC teams collect could be anything from student work, to peer observation notes, to common

assessments created by the team. Once the team has a solid picture of what is happening in the classrooms, they can identify a particular issue, try instructional strategies to address that issue, and then re-assess at the end to see how the picture of student learning has changed.

What can the central office do to support PLCs?

Although the PLC movement is commonly viewed as a grassroots effort by groups of teachers or particular schools, recent literature has contended that the central office plays a crucial role in the development and sustainability of PLCs. As Kruse and Louis (2008) mention in their case study, PLCs do not just "emerge organically" in schools but require a certain degree of top-down direction and support at the school and district level. Dufour and Marzano in *Leaders of* Learning (2011) outline the district's role in developing PLCs:

- Employ "simultaneous loose-tight leadership"
- Develop specificity and common language
- Build capacity of teachers leaders and principals to lead PLC schools
- Create structures to monitor the PLC process
- Limit initiatives and communicate priorities

One of the key points they make is that the district must establish non-negotiables around the PLC process but, at the same time, allow schools to develop their own PLC structures and processes. For example at Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), central office worked with principals to establish the following district-wide "Fundamental Element" for its PLCs:

> Schools will work in collaborative teams interdependently to clarify what students must learn, gather evidence of student learning, analyze the evidence, identify the most powerful teaching strategies/best practices, and transfer those strategies across all team members. (p. 31)

What the FCPS central office did not do was prescribe to the schools a particular format for the PLC teams, such as telling all of the schools to form content-alike teams. Instead, the central office emphasized the fundamental goals, key strategies for achieving those goals, and indicators for tracking progress towards those goals. And importantly, the central office provided training and resources to build the capacity of principals and teachers to conduct PLC work.

Another way that the central office can support and sustain PLCs is to train peer facilitators (Ermeling, 2009; Gallimore et al., 2009). As the district looks to expand career pathways, teachers can become peer facilitators to help build capacity, monitor PLC processes, and share best practices around the district. UTLA and AALA in particular can also play a role in helping to develop these peer facilitators for teachers and principals.

Waiting for Rambo?

In a 2011 article titled "Work Together But Only If You Want To," Rick Dufour challenges the teaching profession to make a case for working in isolation. He believes the time has passed for simply "encouraging" or "inviting" teachers to collaborate. He cites examples of other professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, who collaborate closely with their colleagues by critiquing and challenging each other's practice. He believes that the difficulty of implementing authentic PLCs should not be an excuse to "opt out." And if schools and districts provide teachers with proper support structures and "embed" collaboration into the regular function of schools, then teachers will give up their habit of isolation.

After reading the article, the question that comes to mind is why do teachers, generally speaking, work in isolation in the first place. One major factor for the continued isolation of teachers seems to be the institutional culture of schools. Especially at the secondary level, subjects are compartmentalized and most teachers possess their own real estate. Schools in Asian countries tend to group kids into homerooms with teachers rotating into the classroom. Then, after teaching, they go to the office that is shared by all of the other teachers in the school. In America, however, it is possible for a teacher to go through a whole day without interacting with another adult.

Another possible reason why teachers work in isolation is because they have never been trained in effective collaboration. Teachers often agree that teaching is like being on an island and many want to collaborate with other colleagues. However, some teachers do not know where to start and others have had bad experiences. Principals and instructional leaders may not have the knowledge base or skill to train teachers because they had the same experience in the classroom. And while teacher preparation programs look for people who are collaborators, those programs do not necessarily train teachers in the process of collaborative inquiry. As teachers, we know that putting kids into groups does not automatically result in productive group work. We have to scaffold that behavior and teach them how to communicate, interact, and think together. We help them establish the objective, define roles, and use protocols so students take individual and group responsibility for the learning process. Like our students, teachers need the same training. If teachers knew how to collaborate effectively and the structural barriers were removed, such as lack of time and space, then more teachers would be working together in PLCs.

Lastly, another reason why teachers might work in isolation is the "Rambo" effect. Teaching is a difficult job, and there are times, usually the last period of the day or week, when we feel the need to don that red headband, take a deep

breath, and then stride into the classroom ready for battle. For some of us, that is an everyday experience and it takes a certain amount of strength, independence, and pride to make it through the day successfully. As a result, the job selects for people who are independent-minded and can go it alone. The side effect is that we have people who are independent-minded and can go it alone, which could create a mental barrier towards collaboration. Collaboration may take on a meaning of weakness and dependence. If you are a Rambo like I was, the question to ask is whether it takes more strength and courage to go it alone or to work with colleagues and have the difficult conversations. Perhaps then, instead of Rambo, we can adopt the Ocean's 11 mental model—an interdependent team of individuals supporting each other with their own talents, working together towards a common objective.

The concept of Professional Learning Communities is simple: a group of teachers sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way and generally agreed to have the collective purpose of enhancing student learning (Stoll & Louis, 2008). PLCs have been connected to increased student achievement and teacher morale, among other benefits. The PLC concept is endorsed by the NEA, AFT, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, national councils and associations for math, English, and science teachers, as wells as associations for elementary, middle, and secondary school principals (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008). And, participating in a professional community is a key component of the new LAUSD Teaching and Learning

Framework that is being adopted for the new Educator Growth and Development System. Component 5b of the LAUSD Teaching and Learning Framework states:

> Participation in a professional community requires active involvement, the promotion of a culture of collaboration, and inquiry that improve the culture of teaching and learning. Relationships with colleagues are an important aspect of creating a culture where expertise, materials, insights and experiences are shared. The goal of the professional community is improved teaching and learning.

Thus, there are many reasons to adopt the PLC concept. The implementation, however, is the trickier part because it involves removing structural and cultural barriers and requires time and training. This brief is just the beginning and if your colleagues or your school would like to become a true PLC, please see the recommended resources below to help you get started. For additional assistance, you can also contact Paul Hsu at paul.hsu@lausd.net. Also, if your colleagues or your school are a true PLC, we want to hear from you and learn from your experience. And finally, if you have tried the PLC model and did not have success with it, please contact us so we can learn from your experience as well.

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Paul Hsu, Ed.D., is the Teacher Lead and Project Manager for the LAUSD School Improvement Grant.

Recommended Resources

Instead of browsing through the references section, here is a select list of recommended book titles and online resources that can help you get started:

1. ***Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work: New insights for improving schools*** by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker, 2008—Provides a broad overview of the Dufour approach to school reform through PLCs. It's an easy read but if you want more concrete steps and protocols, please see the handbook below.

2. ***Learning by Doing: A handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*** by Richard DuFour, Rebecca Dufour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many, 2006—Step-by-step guide for starting PLCs.

3. ***Leading Professional Learning Communities: Voices from research and practice*** by Shirley Hord and William Sommers, 2008—A slightly different perspective on implementing PLCs than the DuFour camp.

4. ***Leaders of Learning: How district, school, and classroom leaders improve student achievement*** by Richard DuFour and Robert Marzano, 2011—combines the writings of DuFour and Marzano; more for school and district leaders.

5. **All Things PLC website: http://www.allthingsplc.info/** by Rick Dufour's group—includes blogs and discussions, as well as tools and resources.

6. **Professional Learning Communities Information Brief: http://www.centerforcsri.org/plc/** by The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement—nice overview of PLC literature and contains a comprehensive list of PLC websites.

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