

Adopting a PLC Culture



Professional Learning Communities provide an umbrella for Wisconsin's new accountability | *Billie Finco and Fran Finco*

Response to Intervention. Positive Behavior Intervention Support. Common Core State Standards. Smarter Balanced Assessment. School and district accountability report cards. All of these accountability initiatives are bearing down on Wisconsin educators and are expected to be fully implemented when the 2014-2015 school year rolls around.

Is it any wonder that superintendents, principals and, perhaps most of all teachers, report feeling overwhelmed by the stress that such rampant changes require?

What if deconstructing Common Core State Standards, creating new curriculum, determining new learning, preparing for the Smarter Balanced Assessment, and successfully implementing a Response to Intervention (RtI) system could be brought together under one umbrella to become part of the day-to-day work of all educators?

The Professional Learning Community (PLC) philosophy promoted by Rick and Becky DuFour provides districts with a model to do all of this with the ultimate aim of increasing student learning.

The PLC Umbrella

The DuFour PLC model is founded on three big ideas. The first is that the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. This understanding is foundational to all of the work that follows, from clarifying the mission to a relentless pursuit of academic excellence.

The second big idea is that all educators are expected to work together on behalf of students. Teachers are given the time and support necessary to work together in order to increase learning. This expectation for collaboration extends to the administrative team and even the school board.

Finally, the third big idea in a PLC is a focus on results in which instructional strategies, district policies and school programs are continually assessed on the basis of their impact on student learning.

The simplicity of these three ideas is deceiving. It's not enough to declare that a district is committed to high levels of achievement for all students.



LEARN MORE at Convention

The School District of Onalaska will present "Improving Your District Using a PLC Philosophy" at the State Education Convention in Milwaukee. The session will take place **Thursday, Jan. 24 from 1:45-2:45 pm** in room 202C at the Delta Center. Learn how following a Professional Learning Community (PLC) culture changed the School District of Onalaska from one that focused on adults and teaching to one that focused on students and learning.

PLC: Three Big Ideas

The DuFour Professional Learning Community (PLC) model, used by the School District of Onalaska, is founded on three big ideas.

1 | The fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. This understanding is foundational to all of the work that follows, from clarifying the mission to a relentless pursuit of academic excellence.

2 | All educators are expected to work together on behalf of students. Teachers are given the time and support necessary to work together in order to increase learning. This expectation for collaboration extends to the administrative team and even the school board.

3 | The district focuses on results in which instructional strategies, district policies and school programs are continually assessed on the basis of their impact on student learning.

Learn more at: www.allthingsplc.info.

Wisconsin schools have a long and unsettling history of achievement gaps for minority students, economically disadvantaged students, English language learners and special education students. Moving toward a PLC culture requires that all staff, from classroom teachers to the superintendent, reject any hidden notions that it's acceptable for any group of children to lag behind.

Too often, with mostly good intentions, the adults who work in and make decisions about what happens in schools let things like schedules and what is good for them (the adults) get in the way of what is best for children. It's more than a little ironic that it requires a great deal of focused work to get the three big ideas totally infused into the culture of most schools.

It's All Beneath the Umbrella

In a PLC, teams of teachers work interdependently toward common goals that lead to high levels of

learning. Rick and Becky DuFour have identified the four essential questions that guide the work of these collaborative teams as:

- *What do you want children to know and be able to do?*
- *How will you know when they know it?*
- *What will you do with those students who do not know it?*
- *What will you do with those students who already know it?*

As the Wisconsin initiative figure shows, all of the Wisconsin accountability initiatives are simply an extension of these four questions. Teacher teams engaged in question number one (What do you want children to know and be able to do?) work to deconstruct the Common Core State Standards and other content standards to determine the Essential Learning Outcomes (ELO) for their grade or course.

When these teams design assessments and determine the proficiency



levels that will determine whether or not an ELO has been met, analyze the results of a common assessment, or compare their current assessment questions to those that students will encounter on the Smarter Balanced Assessments, they are working on question number two (How will you know when they know it?).

Teacher teams working on question three (What will you do with those students who do not know it?) monitor students closely to make sure those who are not acquiring essential knowledge and skills at Tier I, receive timely and targeted intervention at Tiers II and III in both the academic (RtI) and behavioral (PBIS) realms. These teacher teams use common formative and summative assessments to drive their instructional plans and guide next steps in the classroom.

Work on question four (What will you do with those students who

already know it?) occurs as teachers analyze the results of pre- or formative assessments and make differentiated plans for students who have acquired the ELOs of a given instructional unit. These plans are often carried out during planned intervention/ enrichment blocks that have been built into the master schedule.

Moving Into a PLC Culture

The wide sweep of changes being initiated in Wisconsin and across the county are intended to fundamentally change the way that schools function in order to achieve better results for more students.

When teachers are willing to focus on high levels of learning, work collaboratively in teams, focus on results, use data to inform their instruction, learn professionally from one another to improve their instruction, and not be satisfied until all children have learned the

intended curriculum, a school or district knows that they have moved into a PLC culture.

It has been said that every school system is perfectly aligned to achieve the results that it gets. The unprecedented reforms being initiated by the State of Wisconsin are calling all educators and all schools to move toward a brighter future where all kids, poor or rich, from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds, can achieve high levels of academic success. The PLC approach offers a way to make these changes become part of the daily work of teachers, administrators, and board members in an attempt to change the culture of our schools and the future of the children of Wisconsin. ■

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