Preface

That Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have become the talk of educators these days is curious to me, for two reasons. The first is that it has taken painfully long for educators to realize that working in isolation is inherently limited in its ability to help us improve. We get it now: collectively, we *are* more than the sum of our parts. The second reason for my curiosity rests in the fact that PLCs have, in small pockets of education, been around for nearly two decades. PLCs were called Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) back in the early 1990s and I was fortunate to have been trained and fully immersed in this work beginning in 1993. During that year, I began an intensive two-year training program as a Math/Science Fellow for the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), based then at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. At the conclusion of this program in 1994, I became a member of the National Re:Learning Faculty of CES (renamed and reconfigured as the National School Reform Faculty, or NSRF, in 1995). To this day, the NSRF (based now at the Harmony Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana), along with a splinter group called the School Reform Initiative (also based in Bloomington), continue to provide some of the very best resources for working PLCs.

Several schools and many CFGs/PLCs later, I began to see the work of CES and NSRF multiply and take hold in many larger pockets of education. As this happened, I began to witness a change in culture in many schools and districts. These changes impacted the way teachers worked. Common planning time for teacher teams became widespread; collaboration became valued and practiced in urban and rural schools alike. As team planning and collaboration became more commonplace in lieu of the teacher-in-isolation model that lingered for nearly a century, the term Professional Learning Community (or more commonly, PLC) entered into our educational vernacular. As has been the case with so many terms and acronyms that abbreviate various educational reform efforts, the term PLC became ubiquitous and, by virtue of that very fact, its meaning and focus became diluted and often obscured. Suddenly every group of teachers at every kind of teacher meeting was labeled a *PLC.* To be fair and honest to those teams of teachers working as authentic PLCs, many groups deserved

the title, but many others did not. Assembling a group of teachers during common planning time is in and of itself no more a PLC than putting kids in groups is a cooperative learning environment. That would be disappointing enough, but the danger in calling any group of teachers a PLC is that everyone in the school community thinks they are in and understand genuine PLCs. When no real gain in student learning resulted from such groups, the teachers' and administrators' mentality resounded: "Yeah, we're doing[1] PLCs," or worse, "PLCs are nothing new—we've been doing them for years." And so the tacit belief in many schools became that PLCs don't really work. The problem was not that PLCs didn't work; the problem was that what many schools were calling PLCs didn't work.

I wrote this book to help real schools build authentic PLCs with real faculties. There are several important works on PLCs written by distinguished authors who present convincing research-based arguments for why schools should have PLCs. *The Practice of Authentic PLCs* does not attempt to convince readers to implement PLCs, and it is not about the research supporting PLCs (though a brief research summary is included in Chapter 1). This book is about how to actually build, from the ground up, effective, authentic PLCs in any school or district.

The Practice of Authentic PLCs is not a step-by-step PLC owner's manual. Nothing as complex as building genuine, collaborative teacher cultures focused entirely on student learning could ever be expressed completely in a book that would work for every teacher team in every school. There is no cookie-cutter approach to this work that could accommodate every school faculty. But there are some common truths that are characteristic of authentic PLCs that are worth discussing. *The Practice of Authentic PLCs* acts as a guide for teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators in assisting schools in creating and using authentic PLCS, so that student learning really does improve quantitatively and qualitatively.

The Practice of Authentic PLCs is organized into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) provides background and clarity about PLCs and lays the foundation for building a collaborative culture in a school.

Chapter 1 delineates PLCs and provides a research base explaining the essential impact of PLCs on improving student achievement.

Chapter 2 lays out the progression of steps that are vital to building effective, collaborative teacher teams. Team building, norm setting, and first exposure to using protocols are essential elements in this chapter. Everything that follows Chapter 2 depends on teacher teams having a solid foundation of collaboration with which to do the work of authentic PLCs.

Part II (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) provides the foreground, which is the work, or *Essential Tasks,* of authentic PLCs. Respectively, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explain how to examine teacher and student work, design quality

1. This statement is inherently oxymoronic. As those who are involved with authentic PLCs will attest, PLCs are not so much something the team *does,* as they are something that the team *is.*

common formative assessments, and review and respond to data. These chapters walk the reader through each of these Essential Tasks in which authentic PLCs continually engage.

The final two chapters, 6 and 7, comprise Part III: Coaching Authentic PLCs. This section assists the coaches of PLCs, those teacher leaders who facilitate the complex and interpersonal tasks outlined in the previous chapters. This aspect of authentic PLCs—guidance for the PLC coaches—is too often neglected in popular works in the PLC realm and, in my view, is absolutely essential if PLCs are to make a difference for the students whose teachers are part of a PLC.

Chapter 6 offers coaches practical guidance in facilitating the protocols and activities mentioned throughout Parts I and II and ends with a Frequently Asked Questions section that addresses questions I am commonly asked by coaches in working with schools. A more detailed discussion of troubleshooting more substantial obstacles faced by coaches is the subject of the final Chapter 7.

Part III concludes with a Coach's Appendix, which provides important reference documents that coaches can use to gauge their teams' progress as they lead their PLCs toward authenticity. These documents include the following: *PLC Members' Code of Discourse*, *High Functioning PLC Continuum,* and *Suggested First-Year Timeline.* In addition to the Coach's Appendix, there is a section following Part III that includes all protocols and activities mentioned throughout the text, as well as some new protocols for team building, looking at student and teacher work, problem solving issues and dilemmas, engaging in text-based discussions, and looking at data.

Everything suggested in this book has been field-tested in schools where I have taught or in schools in which I have consulted in the ways of implementing PLCs. So while the content of this book is supported by research, the book is not based solely on the research. It is based on my firsthand experiences working in and with PLCs for almost 20 years. Its genesis derives not so much from wanting to write a handbook about how to build authentic PLCs, but from a need I recognized while working with school districts.

On a final note, it is important to realize that building authentic PLCs is not a linear task. That is, with the exception of team building and setting group norms, which should be done at the outset, many of the Essential Tasks of PLCs described in Part II (e.g., looking at student work, designing common formative assessments, responding to data) can be tackled in any order, and indeed, they should happen concurrently in a PLC. There is no one way to do this; it will be a recurring theme of this book that PLCs are not so much a checklist of tasks as they are a culture within a school, a culture whose players are committed to quality and collaborative teacher work that focuses without compromise or exception on improving student learning.

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