

## Part Six

### Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

#### For Clarifying the Mission of Your School or District, Ask:

1. What is our fundamental purpose?

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2. Why was this school built? What have we been brought here to do together?

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3. Does the concept of public education for all children mean that all students shall learn or merely that they will be required to attend school?

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4. What happens in our school or district when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

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#### For Clarifying the Vision for Your School or District, Ask:

1. Can you describe the school we are trying to create?

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2. What would our school look like if it were a great place for students? What would it look like if it were a great place for teachers?

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3. It is 5 years from now and we have achieved our vision as a school. In what ways are we different? Describe what is going on in terms of practices, procedures, relationships, results, and climate.

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4. Imagine we have been given 60 seconds on the nightly news to clarify the vision of our school or district to the community. What do we want to say?

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**For Clarifying the Collective Commitments (Values) of Your School or District, Ask:**

1. What are the specific commitments we must honor to achieve our purpose and vision?  
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2. What are the specific behaviors we can exhibit to make a personal contribution to the success of our school?  
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3. What commitments are we prepared to make to each other?  
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4. What commitments or assurances are we prepared to make to every student in our school?  
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5. What are the “must dos” and the taboos for this staff?  
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6. What agreements are shared among all of us?  
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**For Clarifying the Goals of Your School or District, Ask:**

1. How will we know if we are making progress toward achieving our vision?  
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2. How will we know if we are more effective 3 years from now than we are today?  
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3. If we achieve our shared vision, what will student achievement look like in our school?  
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4. What are the most essential conditions and factors we must monitor on an ongoing basis?  
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**For Clarifying How Effective You Are at Communicating Priorities, Ask:**

1. What are the most important factors that drive the day-to-day decisions in our school or district?

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2. What are the priorities in our school or district?

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3. What systems have been put in place to monitor progress in our priority areas?

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4. What gets paid the closest attention in this school or district?

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### Final Thoughts

The consideration of these questions can help a staff lay the foundation for a professional learning community, but important work remains to be done. A staff that embraces the premise that the very purpose of the school is to help all students learn will face the very challenging questions of, “Learn what?” and, “How will we know if each student has learned?” We turn our attention to these critical questions in the next chapter.



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### Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

#### To Clarify Essential Learning, Ask:

1. What is it we want all students to know and be able to do as a result of this course, grade level, or unit of instruction?

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2. How can we be sure each student has access to the same knowledge and skills regardless of who is teaching the course?

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3. What knowledge and which skills in our curriculum pass the three-part test: endurance, leverage, and necessity for success at the next level?

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4. What material can we eliminate from our curriculum?

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5. Is our curriculum preparing students for success on high-stakes tests?

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6. Is our curriculum preparing students for success at the next level?

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7. How should we pace the curriculum to ensure that all students have the opportunity to master the essential learning?

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**To Monitor Student Learning, Ask:**

1. How will we monitor the learning of each student, on each essential skill, on a timely basis?

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2. What are the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work?

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3. What evidence do we have that we apply the criteria consistently?

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4. What evidence do we have that we use the results of common assessments to identify students who require additional time and support for learning?

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5. What evidence do we have that we are using the results from common assessments to identify strengths and weaknesses in our individual teaching?

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6. What evidence do we have that we are using the results of common assessments as part of a continuous improvement process that is helping our team get better results?

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7. Does student performance on our team assessments correlate with their achievement on other assessments at the district, state, provincial, or national level?

- Does student performance on our assessments correlate with the grades they are earning in my course or grade level?
- Do our assessment practices encourage or discourage learning on the part of our students?

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## Part Six

### Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

**To Develop Systematic Interventions That Ensure Students Receive Additional Time and Support for Learning on a Timely and Directive Basis, Ask:**

1. How do we respond in our school when students don't learn?

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2. How timely is our response? How quickly can we identify a student who is experiencing difficulty?

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3. How proactive are we? What steps do we take to identify the students who will need us most before they come to our school?

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4. How directive is our response? Do we require students to put in extra time and utilize the extra support, or do we merely encourage them to do so?

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5. How systematic is our response? Is there a plan in place that ensures students will receive additional time and support for learning independent of the classroom teacher?

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6. Who oversees the system of response? Who makes the determination to move a student from one level of intervention to another?

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7. How extensive is our response? How much time do we have each day and each week to support student learning through our interventions? Do we have multiple layers in our intervention plan?

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8. How might we adjust our schedule to give us greater access to students who are not successful within the traditional school schedule?

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9. How fluid is our response? Can we easily move students in and out of interventions based on their demonstrated proficiency?

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### Final Thoughts

A school-wide system of interventions requires a collaborative culture: a school culture in which staff members work together to provide each student with access to the same essential learning and a culture in which the proficiency of each student is assessed in a way that is timely, authentic, and consistent. In many schools and districts, however, educators squander precious time that has been provided for collaboration on topics that have no impact on student achievement. Chapter 5 delves into this problem and offers strategies for creating high-performing collaborative teams.



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### Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

#### To Promote a Collaborative Culture in Your School or District, Ask:

1. Have we organized our staff into collaborative teams?

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2. Have teams been organized on the basis of common courses and common grade levels whenever possible?

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3. If we have used the interdisciplinary team structure, have members of the team identified specific, overarching student-achievement goals, and do they use those goals to guide their work?

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4. Have specialist teachers and singleton teachers found meaningful collaborative teams?

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5. Have we avoided assigning people to teams whose disparate assignments make it difficult if not impossible to focus on the critical questions of learning?

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6. Have we provided time for teachers to meet in their collaborative teams on a regular basis?

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7. Do teams focus on the critical questions of learning identified in this book?

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8. Are teams asked to submit specific products according to a designated timeline? Do these products reflect their focus on the critical questions?

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9. What systems are in place to monitor the work and the effectiveness of the teams on a timely basis?

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10. Has every team developed explicit norms that clarify the commitments members have made to one another regarding how they will work together as a team?

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11. Do teams honor the norms they have established? What happens when faculty members do not honor their commitments?

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12. Have we given teams the knowledge base, time, and support essential for their effectiveness?

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### Final Thoughts

A collaborative culture does not simply emerge in a school or district: Leaders cultivate collaborative cultures when they develop the capacity of their staffs to work as members of high-performing teams. People throughout the organization, however, must always remember that collaboration is a means to an end—to higher levels of learning—rather than the end itself. Chapter 6 addresses the challenge of creating a results orientation that impacts the work of teams, the school, and the district.



## Part Six

### Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

#### To Assess the Commitment to a Results Orientation in Your School or District, Ask:

1. What evidence do we have that district goals are directly impacting the work of schools and collaborative teams within the school?

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2. Does every collaborative team have a goal that aligns with district and school goals?

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3. Are team goals SMART: strategic, specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound?

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4. Is there a plan in place to monitor the progress of each team? Does the plan include monitoring products created by the team as it works towards its goals?

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5. Are teams provided with relevant and timely feedback regarding their progress? Remember that goals are effective motivators, but only if teams receive feedback (Kouzes & Posner, 1999).

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6. Is a plan in place to identify, acknowledge, and celebrate small wins as teams make progress toward their goals?

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7. Do district goals include stretch goals?

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## Part Six

### Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

#### To Assess the Results Orientation of Your School or District, Ask:

1. What evidence do we have that district goals are directly impacting the work of schools and collaborative teams within the school?

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2. Have we identified the evidence we must gather to determine if all students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions we have determined are most essential? What does that evidence include?

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3. Do we provide students with a variety of ways to demonstrate they are proficient? Can we identify a variety of ways in which students in our school are able to demonstrate they are proficient? What does our list include?

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4. Who analyzes evidence of student learning in our school and district? What happens as a result of that analysis? What evidence can we cite that it impacts classroom practice?

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5. Does our assessment program enable us to identify, on a timely basis, students who need extra time and support for learning? At what point does our systematic process enable us to identify students who require intervention?

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6. Does our assessment program provide every teacher with timely and valid feedback on the extent to which his or her students are becoming proficient in comparison to other similar students in our school or district who are attempting to meet the same standard? If not, what steps must we take to provide every teacher with this timely information?

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7. Do we have a balanced assessment program that includes formative and summative assessments, local and state or provincial assessments, and a variety of performance-based and written assessments?

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8. Do we use evidence of student learning as part of a continuous improvement process? Is our assessment program helping us to become better as a school?

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9. Does our assessment program encourage or discourage student learning?

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### Final Thoughts

If working together effectively and making data easily accessible and openly shared among team members are critical elements of a PLC, then unproductive conflict and individuals resistant to collaboration and attention to results represent significant obstacles to progress on the PLC journey. Chapter 8 considers those obstacles and offers strategies for addressing them.



## Part Six

### Questions to Guide the Work of Your Professional Learning Community

#### To Assess the Climate for Creating Consensus and Responding to Resistance in Your School or District, Ask:

1. What evidence do we have that district goals are directly impacting the work of schools and collaborative teams within the school?

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2. Do we have an operational definition of consensus in our school? Do we know at what point in the decision-making process we will move forward with an initiative?

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3. Do we have a sense of what decisions require consensus? When do we want to involve all staff in the decision-making process? Who decides who decides?

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4. Should individual members of our staff be permitted to disregard agreements we have made as a staff? What is the appropriate response if they do?

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5. Identify a conflict that has emerged in our school in the past. How was that conflict addressed?

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6. Are we building shared knowledge and conducting action research in an effort to address conflict productively? Can we cite an example in which we resolved a difference of opinion through examining the research or conducting our own action research?

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7. Describe the process we currently use to resolve conflict. What skills could we identify and practice to become more effective in this important area?

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8. Do we view conflict as something to be avoided?

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9. Do we expect administrators to resolve conflict or do we work together to address it in ways that improve our effectiveness?

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10. Are we developing our skills to hold crucial conversations? (For a free team assessment tool, go to [www.vitalsmarts.com/CrucialSkills/FreeStuff](http://www.vitalsmarts.com/CrucialSkills/FreeStuff) and click on “Where Do You Stand.”)

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11. Do we have a common understanding of our purpose—learning for all—and of our priorities, our goals, and our expectations of one another that are aligned with that purpose? Does this shared understanding allow us to be open with each other? Do we operate with an assumption of the good intentions of our members?

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### Final Thoughts

Educational leaders who make a good faith effort to implement every suggestion presented in the preceding chapters will nevertheless confront a brutal fact: Leading a substantive change process, one that impacts the very culture of the organization, is a complex and often bewildering endeavor. Chapter 9 examines what we have come to understand about the change process in schools and school districts.

