



February 18, 2022

Lessons from High Poverty, High Success Schools: Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

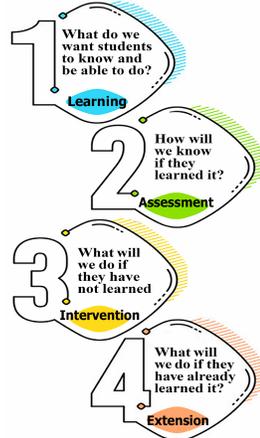
The fundamental purpose of school is to ensure that all students learn and not merely that all students get taught. – Professor John Hattie

In the [January 21st Issues article](#), we provided an overview of seven evidenced-based practices shown to be effective in closing achievement gaps, particularly in high poverty schools while also maintaining equity. In today's article, we focus on one of these practices - [organizing a school as a Professional Learning Community \(PLC\)](#).

What is a PLC?

Schools that are high achieving for all students over time are built around collaborative teams of educators, including both teachers and administrators, known as professional learning communities (PLC), or in Ohio as teacher-based teams (TBT). Regardless of the title, these teams are focused on student learning, working collaboratively with collective responsibility, and assessing their effectiveness (Dufour). The goal of these teams is to ensure high levels of learning for *all* students, and they achieve this best by continuously asking, discussing, and answering the following four critical questions:

Four Critical Questions



Reeves found, in an analysis of more than 750,000 students, that schools engaged in the PLC/TBT process with fidelity (depth and constancy) consistently experience greater gains in student achievement, including reading, math, and science.

Dufour, R., Eaker, R., Many, T.W., & Mattos, M. (2016). *Learning by Doing: A handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
Dufour, R. and Reeves, D. (2016). The Family of PLC lite. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 97(6), 69-71.
Reeves, D. (2020). *Achieving Equity & Excellence: Immediate Results from the Lessons of High-Poverty, High-Success Schools*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press

The Stark Education Partnership (a 501(c)3 non-profit organization) collaborates with education, business, civic and community members across the entire spectrum – cradle to career – to create and respond to opportunities that will provide ALL students with education and career success. [View our Website](#)

PLC School Characteristics

The four critical questions and accompanying research findings should be cause for any educator to pause and consider the primary focus, defined by use of dollars and time spent, within a given school. Several characteristics can be identified in a school that is committed to the PLC/TBT organizational structure, including the following:



- A viable curriculum exists, unit by unit, that specifies knowledge, skills and disciplines students are expected to acquire;
- Collaborative teams are utilized and take collective responsibility for student learning
- Common formative assessments are used grounded in the curriculum;
- Based on the common assessments, teams will identify students who need additional time and support(s); students who will benefit from extended learning; strengths and/or weaknesses in instruction; areas where none of the team members were successful in bringing students to desired level of proficiency; and
- Systems are in place to support needed interventions and extensions.

The effective use of organizing a school as a professional learning community is foundational and fundamental, yet is often ignored or is implemented in name only, without true commitment to the process and ongoing work required over many years. It requires committing both funds and time to effectively answering the four critical questions.

It is important to stress two factors as we conclude:

- 1) The first is that organizing a school in this manner is foundational to implementing other practices. If a school is not organized in this manner, other practices (coming in subsequent *Issues*) will be difficult or impossible to implement effectively.
- 2) We are presenting research-based practices, as opposed to specific programs. Schools often chase after new leaders and/or new programs, while failing to implement practices that are essential to student progress. As a result, we will continue to focus on successful, effective practices!

