# Chapter 8

# Common Threads

"[Great organizations] simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle, or concept that unifies and guides everything. . . . [They] see what is essential, and ignore the rest."

—Jim Collins, 2001, p. 91

"The most extensive and systematic program of research on organizational power and influence has led to one vital lesson that all leaders should take to heart: the more people believe that they can influence and control the organization, the greater organizational effectiveness and member satisfaction will be. In other words, shared power results in higher levels of satisfaction and performance throughout the organization. It is the most significant of all the five practices of effective leaders."

—James Kouzes & Barry Posner, 1987, p. 10

The preceding chapters tell the stories of four very distinct schools. They represent different grade levels, different sizes, different geographical areas, different communities, and students from very different backgrounds. At first glance, they seem to have far more differences than commonalities; however, closer examination reveals that these schools are similar in many important ways. These schools share:

- Clarity of purpose
- Collaborative culture
- Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality
- Action orientation
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- Focus on results
- Strong principals who empower teachers
- Commitment to face adversity, conflict, and anxiety
- The same guiding phrase

## Clarity of Purpose

Staff members in each of the schools are clear about and focused on the fundamental purpose of the school: high levels of learning for all students. There is no ambiguity and no hedging. There is no suggestion that all kids will learn *if* they are conscientious, responsible, attentive, developmentally ready, fluent in English, and come from homes with concerned parents who take an interest in their education. There is no hint that staff members believe they can help all kids learn *if* class sizes are reduced, more resources are made available, new



textbooks are purchased, or more support staff are hired. In these four schools, staff members embrace the premise that the very reason the school exists is to help *all* of their students—all the boys and girls who come to them each day—acquire essential knowledge and skills given the current resources available to the school . . . period.

In his research on high-performing organizations, Jim Collins (2001) found that great organizations "simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle, or concept that unifies and guides everything" (p. 91). The Big Idea, or guiding principle, of schools that operate as PLCs is simple: The fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. Because the faculties in these four schools held that fundamental conviction in common, they developed a shared vision of the school they needed to create to help all kids learn, made collective commitments regarding what they were prepared to do to help all kids learn, and set goals and monitored data to assess the progress they were making in helping all kids learn. The point to understand, however, is that the journey to becoming a PLC begins with an honest assessment of our assumptions regarding the ability of students to learn and our responsibility to see to it that they do.

## Collaborative Culture

Each of the four schools was designed to promote a collaborative culture by organizing teachers into teams and building time for them to meet in the routine schedule of the school. When asked what advice she would give principals who were trying to improve results in their schools, Freeport's Clara Sale-Davis was quick to respond: "Build a collaborative culture, maintain common planning time for teachers, and turn to

your data." When Mike Schmoker (2001) interviewed Stevenson High School teachers to find the secret of the school's sustained success, he heard a consistent response: our collaborative teams. Boones Mill teachers cited the creation of a schedule that gave teachers time to collaborate with their teammates for 70 minutes each week as the catalyst that launched them on the road to becoming a PLC (*Video Journal*, 2001). Teachers at Los Pen considered working together so vital to their mission that they pledged to "collaborate regularly with colleagues to seek and implement more effective strategies for helping each child to achieve his or her academic potential."

The importance of providing the structures to support meaningful collaboration between teachers is difficult to overstate. As McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) concluded:

> Chorus and refrain in our study of teaching and our understanding of the conditions that support teachers' learning and change is the critical importance of professional discourse and inquiry. Opportunities for teachers to talk with colleagues about teaching, consider new ways of doing things, and hammer out shared understandings about goals were common across diverse environments where practices were rethought in ways that benefited both teachers and students. (pp. 131–132)

These principals did more than put teachers together in groups and hope good things would happen. As Fullan (2001) observes, "Collaborative cultures . . . are indeed powerful, but unless they are focusing on the right things they may end up being powerfully wrong" (p. 67). These principals ensured that



the collaborative teams focused on *learning*. They created a systematic process in which teachers worked together interdependently to analyze and impact their practice in order to improve results for individual teachers, for the team, and for the school.

## Collective Inquiry Into Best Practice and Current Reality

In each of the four schools, building shared knowledge was a critical step in finding common ground. Teachers were more likely to acknowledge the need for improvement when they jointly studied evidence of the strengths and weaknesses of their school. They were more likely to arrive at consensus on the most essential knowledge and skills students should acquire when together they analyzed and discussed state and national standards, district curriculum guides, and student achievement data. They were more likely to agree on the most effective instructional strategies when they worked together in examining results from their common assessments. Teachers in these schools certainly had disagreements and differences of opinion, but they were able to find common ground on critical questions because they engaged in collective study rather than simply sharing their opinions.

## Action Orientation

Teachers and principals in most schools can reflect upon the school year each June and conclude that, once again, their school has been characterized by an "action orientation." They can point to the launching of new initiatives, the diverse professional training they have received, and their response to the myriad of directives that descended upon them from the central office as evidence of their often frenetic activity. As the Consortium on Productivity (1995) concluded:

> The issue is not that individual teachers and schools do not innovate and change all the time. They do. The problem is with the kinds of change that occur in the education system, their fragile quality, and their random and idiosyncratic nature. (p. 23)

What distinguishes these four schools is not their "busyness," but the fact that their efforts were guided by what Michael Fullan has described as *coherence*—"the extent to which the school's programs for students and staff are coordinated, focused on learning goals, and sustained over a period of time" (p. 64). The unrelenting focus on the three critical questions helped these schools bring coherence to their efforts. Assessments became linked to common essential outcomes. Staff development became linked to specific skills teachers needed to help students achieve those outcomes. School and team goals became linked to results. These schools illustrate one of Fullan's findings: The shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning is a "powerful coherence-maker" (Fullan, 2001).

It is important to recognize the focus and coordination that guided the work of these schools, but it is equally important to understand that, ultimately, the teachers and principals were required to *act*. The process of changing the culture of any organization begins by changing the way in which the people of that organization behave (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). None of the four schools experienced gains in student achievement merely by writing a new vision statement or developing a strategic plan. These schools did not see improvement until staff members began to *act* differently. They worked collaboratively rather than working in isolation. They developed common



assessments and applied consistent standards rather than acting autonomously. They changed instructional pacing and strategies based on new insights into pedagogical effectiveness. They recognized that, until they began to *act* differently, to *do* differently, there was little reason to expect different results. These schools were not characterized by studied, deliberate musings. They were places of action, experimentation, and a willingness to test ideas that seemed to hold potential for improving student achievement.

## Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Each of the four schools has been recognized as an exemplary school, yet there is no evidence that any of them have elected to rest on their laurels. The perpetual disquiet and constant search for a better way that characterizes these schools results from the continuous improvement processes that are embedded in the routine practices of the school. Although each is attentive to celebrating the success of individuals, teams, and the school at large, the systems that are in place call upon every team and every teacher to identify and attack areas for improvement.

If a team analyzes student achievement data and discovers that a particular math concept is the most problematic for their students, the team discusses the issue, develops strategies for addressing the problem, implements the strategies in their classrooms, and gathers new information to assess the impact of the strategies on student achievement. If their efforts have been successful, they can (and should) celebrate the improvement, but they will also shift their efforts to identifying and addressing the next, most problematic concept. There will always be an area where students do "least well"—an area that can be targeted for improvement.

The creation of a PLC does not call for the completion of a series of tasks, but rather for a process of continuous improvement and perpetual renewal. It is a constant challenge that is never quite completely solved. Yet talk to the teachers in these four schools and they will tell you the PLC process is energizing rather than frustrating because month by month and year by year they see new evidence that their collective efforts do indeed have an impact on student learning. These teachers have a clear sense of purpose and a powerful sense of self-efficacy. They will attest to the fact that becoming a PLC is a wonderful journey, even if the journey has no final destination.

## Focus on Results

Each of the four schools assesses the impact of its efforts and decisions on the basis of tangible results. When teachers in a school are truly focused on student learning as their primary mission, they inevitably seek valid methods to assess the extent and depth of that learning. The teachers in these four schools all found that frequent, locally developed common assessments were a vital resource in their efforts to assess student learning. Doug Reeves (2004) found that "schools with the greatest gains in student achievement consistently used common assessments" (p. 70). He contends that common assessments, collaboratively developed and scored by every teacher at a grade level, represent "the gold standard in educational accountability" because these assessments are used to "improve teaching and learning, not merely to evaluate students and schools" (pp. 114–115).

The teachers in the four schools featured in this book embraced data and information from their common assessments because the assessments provided timely and powerful



insight into the learning of their students. They can attest to the fact that these assessments *for* learning give them greater power, individually and collectively, to meet the needs of their students. They do not denigrate data that suggest all is not well, nor do they blindly worship mean, modes, and medians. They have a healthy respect for information that can help them understand areas of strengths and weaknesses in the learning of their students because they are keenly interested in results.

A fixation on results will ultimately, inevitably, lead educators to immerse themselves in the question of "How will we respond when, despite our best efforts, our students experience difficulty in learning key concepts?" What is so striking about each of the four schools is that each has addressed this question so directly. Each has created systems to monitor students on a *timely* basis, but more importantly, each has developed a *systematic* process of *intervention* that provides students with additional time and support for learning. Furthermore, because they are committed to the success of each student, these schools do not simply offer time and support; they *direct* students to devote the time and avail themselves of the support that will lead to success.

## Strong Principals Who Empower Teachers (Simultaneous Loose/Tight Leadership)

A comprehensive study of the restructuring movement in education led to two significant conclusions: first, a strong professional learning community was critical to gains in student achievement, and second the principals who led those learning communities were committed to empowering their teachers. As the study concluded:

> "Leaders in schools with strong professional communities . . . delegated authority, developed collaborative decision-making processes, and stepped back from being the central problem solver. Instead they turned to the professional communities for critical decisions." (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996, p. 193)

This description captures a key element of the leadership styles of the principals who built the learning communities in the four schools this book has considered. Leadership was widely distributed in each of the four schools. Each school had the benefit of a guiding coalition for its change process, and all of the schools made a conscious effort to give teams and individuals the authority and autonomy that is often reserved for the highest levels of leadership.

Stevenson's guiding coalition was an administrative team made up of the principal, assistant principals, and the chairperson of each department. The team met every day of the school year. At both Boones Mill and Los Penasquitos, the implementation of the PLC process was led by a School Site Council made up of a teacher from each grade level as well as representatives of the parent community. In both elementary schools, all teachers also served on one of several school improvement committees. At Freeport, all teachers were members of one of six school-improvement cadres. The Campus Advisory Team, which included the chair and co-chair of each cadre, functioned as the leadership structure for the school.

Stevenson, Boones Mill, and Freeport extended leadership opportunities still further by designating a team leader for their course-specific, grade-level, and interdisciplinary teams.



Los Pen created an Assessment and Curriculum Committee that directed the school's process for clarifying essential outcomes and monitoring the learning of each student.

The collaborative team process in place in each of the schools was designed to encourage very fluid situational leadership. If the team discovered that one its members had special expertise in a particular content area, in teaching a concept, in developing effective assessments, or in meeting the needs of a particular kind of learner, that member would naturally assume temporary leadership based upon expertise, rather than on position, when the team focused on that topic.

## Commitments to Face Adversity, Conflict, and Anxiety

The faculties of each of the four schools cited in the preceding chapters became enthusiastic advocates for the collaborative culture and systematic interventions that are so critical to the PLC concept. It is important to note, however, that in every case, the principals faced the challenge of one or more staff members who were either aggressively or passively resistant to the new direction of their school. In one case, a teacher refused to adhere to agreements regarding essential outcomes and pacing. In another, a teacher made it evident that he felt his teaching was superior to that of his colleagues, and therefore collaborating with them was a waste of his time. In one of the schools, a teacher was consistently absent from team meetings and was adept at presenting excuses for the absences. In the fourth school, a teacher consistently failed to fulfill her responsibilities when the team divided tasks among its members. The issues may have varied, but ultimately each principal became aware of the fact that the behavior of a staff member was undermining the work of his or her team.

The consistent way in which each principal dealt with this challenge offers important insights into leading the PLC process. In every case, the principal met with the teacher privately, stated concerns very directly, and identified the specific steps the teacher was to take to remedy the situation. Finally, the principal asked how he or she might help the teacher make the necessary changes. The teachers did not always respond positively to these discussions. In some of the situations the teachers became quite emotional and defensive. The principals, however, did not hedge. They made it clear that the current behavior was unacceptable and that the need for change was imperative. They did so without rancor, but they left no room for doubt regarding their expectations. Sale-Davis even went so far as to hand out transfer requests to all her staff, encouraging them to apply for a transfer if they were unwilling to embrace the ideas of consistent learning outcomes, common assessments, and a collaborative culture. The faculty came to understand that the school stood for certain principles that every staff member was expected to honor.

Perhaps there are schools that have made the transition to a PLC without conflict or anxiety, but we are unaware of any. Disagreements and tension are to be expected. The question schools must face is not, "How can we eliminate all potential for conflict as we go through this process?" but rather, "How will we react when we are immersed in the conflict that accompanies significant change?" In *Crucial Conversations* (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002) the authors contrast how teams respond when faced with conflict. Ineffective teams will ignore the problem, letting it fester and build until resentment and frustration lead to an explosion of accusations and recrimination. Good teams will take the matter to the boss and ask



that he or she deal with the problem and find a satisfactory solution. Great teams deal with the issue themselves, engaging in open dialogue and applying positive peer pressure to bring about the desired change.

The problem in schools is that teams almost never start out as great teams. Before they can get to the point where team members can work together to resolve the matter, it is likely that they will need the "boss" or principal to help remedy the situation. If, at that critical moment, the staff observes their principal is unwilling to confront obvious violations of PLC concepts, the initiative will soon begin to unravel. The norms of behavior for any organization are shaped by what the leaders tolerate (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). Principals must place a higher priority on promoting PLC concepts than on "getting along" with staff or avoiding conflict.

Thus, creating a PLC presents an interesting paradox for principals who hope to lead the process. On the one hand, they must disperse rather than hoard power because "shared or 'distributive leadership' brings the learning community together in a common commitment and shared responsibility for sustaining improvement" (National Commission on Teaching, 2003, p. 17). Unless teachers feel that they have a voice in the improvement process, they will view change as something that is done *to* them rather than *by* them. Most teachers will be unwilling to accept responsibility for the success or failure of the initiative unless they have had some authority in making key decisions and some discretion in implementing those decisions.

The ability of the principal to foster widespread leadership in the PLC initiative will play a major role in determining whether or not the initiative is sustained. Unless teachers come

to embrace PLC concepts, the PLC process will always depend on the energy and tenure of the principal. When, however, the concept is owned by the entire staff, the school can endure changes in key leadership positions without missing a beat.

In all of the schools except Freeport, the principal who helped the staff launch the Professional Learning Community journey has left the school. The PLC concept, however, continues to thrive in those schools. The ability of the principals to encourage widespread leadership and shared responsibility helped drive PLC concepts so deep into the culture of the school that the process survived their departure. The transformation in the schools was the result of the altered assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and practices of the staff rather than the result of a single charismatic champion. A study of Stevenson High School illustrates the point. The author of that study concluded that the school had "built a culture of learning that is far more enduring than a shrine to a single man and his ideas. The vision and beliefs that make Stevenson High School what it is today are deeply embedded in the daily practices of its teachers, counselors, and administrators" (Richardson, 2004, p. 115).

On the other hand, at the same time that they are encouraging autonomy and discretion, principals must insist on adherence to certain tenets that are essential to the PLC concept and make it clear that teacher autonomy does not extend to disregarding those tenets. When Damen Lopez became the principal of Los Penasquitos several years after the school had begun the journey, he surveyed the staff to identify the most important thing he could do as the new principal to sustain



their PLC. The most consistent response he received was, "hold us accountable." His staff was right.

As Peter Drucker (1996, p. xiv) wrote, "Leaders . . . delegate a good many things; they have to or they drown in trivia. But they don't delegate the one thing that they can do that will truly make a difference, the one thing they want to be remembered for. They do it." Principals who hope to lead learning communities must be unequivocal champions, promoters, and protectors of key PLC concepts, and that is not a job they can delegate to someone else.

In our earlier work we refer to this paradox of strong and forceful principals empowering teachers as "simultaneous loose/tight properties" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Those who become skilled in this approach to leadership clarify the core concepts of the organization for its members, concepts that are sacred and not to be violated. At the same time, however, they give those within the organization tremendous autonomy in applying those concepts on a day-to-day basis. These leaders encourage freedom within parameters—"an ethic of entrepreneurship within a culture of discipline" (Collins, 2001, p. 124).

## The Same Guiding Phrase

One of the most striking consistencies among the four schools is their use of the same phrase. When questioning the principals and teachers of these schools regarding the strategies of intervention to help all students learn, they inevitably provide the same answer: "We do whatever it takes." Unlike most schools, these schools have a plan for responding to a student who experiences difficulty in mastering key concepts. Furthermore, in these schools, the plan does not end with one or two

steps. If Plan A does not work, there is a Plan B, and a Plan C, and so on. There are a series of steps that are taken on behalf of any student, in any class, whenever that student struggles. Although the details of the plans vary in the schools we have described, the final step of the plan is the same for all four: "**Whatever it takes**."