

# An Evaluation of the Implementation of Professional Learning Communities in Minnesota Public Schools

MASA Richard Green Scholar Presentation

By Dr. Jim Johnson

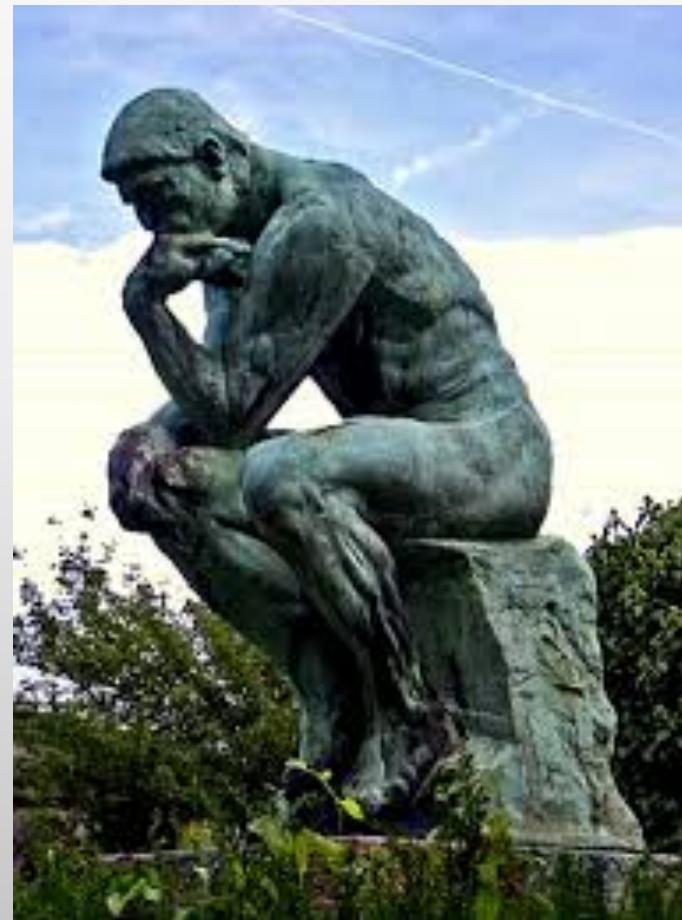
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MASA Fall Conference

# A little about myself....

- Most of my career in Monticello
  - Superintendent since 2005
  - Assistant Superintendent - 2003-2005
  - Middle School Principal – 1999-2003
- New Prague Middle School Principal – 1997-1999
- Sartell Middle School Dean of Students – 1995-1997
- Sartell Middle School Teacher – 1987-1995
- Catalina Foothills Middle School Teacher – 1986-1987
- Education
  - Bachelor of Science – University of Minnesota (1986)
  - Master of Science – St. Cloud State University (1995)
  - 6<sup>th</sup> Year Certification – St. Cloud State University (1996)
  - Doctorate in Educational Leadership – St. Cloud State University (2016)

# Something to think about...



# We all make assumptions

“We all make assumptions about basic things in life, but sometimes those assumptions are wrong. We must never trust in what we assume, only in what we know.”

- *Darren Shan*

# What is a PLC?

- A book study?
- A staff meeting focused on professional development?
- Using data to make decisions?
- Grade level meetings?
- Time to talk about kids?
- Time to talk about professional practice?

# Learning Targets for Today...

- You will be able to explain why PLCs are important for schools today.
- You will be able to identify critical characteristics of PLCs necessary for success.
- You will be able to identify barriers to PLC success.



# Some Recent History to Provide Context....



# Educational Reform Movements

*“The history of American education in the second half of the twentieth century is marked by numerous attempts at reform and by increasing public concern”*(DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 1).

- 1980’s – The Excellence Movement – *A Nation at Risk*
- 1990’s – The Restructuring Movement – *Goals 2000*
- Early 2000’s – *No Child Left Behind*
- 2009 – *Race to the Top*
- Current – *Common Core Standards*
- Next - ESSA

# Response to the Call for Reform

- “Professional development is considered an essential mechanism for deepening teachers’ content knowledge and developing their teaching practices. As a result, professional development could be the cornerstone of systemic reform efforts designed to increase teachers’ capacity to teach to high standards” (Smith & O’Day, 1990).
- “The vision of practice that underlies the nation’s reform agenda requires most teachers to rethink their own practice, to construe new classroom roles and expectations about student outcomes, and to teach in ways they have never taught before” (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

# Formalizing Professional Learning Communities



If you always do what you've  
always done, then you'll  
always get what you've  
always gotten.



# Support for New Practices

- “teachers that felt supported in their ongoing learning and classroom practice were more committed and effective than those that did not” (Rosenholtz, 1989).
- “When experienced teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry and its related learning, the results was a body of wisdom about teaching that could be widely shared” (McLaughlin & Talbot, 1993).
- “A learning organization is a place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they desire, where new patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990).

# What PLCs are Not...

- Prescription
- New program
- Model
- Innovation to be implemented
- Program
- Fad

# Professional

Professional – someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in it's evolving knowledge base.

- DuFour & Eaker

# Learning

- Learning – ongoing action and perpetual curiosity...the school that operates as a professional *learning* community recognizes that it's members must engage in ongoing study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement.
- - DuFour & Eaker

# Community

In a professional learning *community*, educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone.

- DuFour & Eaker

# A PLC is...

“a guiding framework within which staff learn together and collaborate to improve the achievement of all students” (Lieberman, 2009”.

# The Promise of PLCs

- “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities” (DuFour and Eaker, 1998).
- “Professional learning communities have emerged as arguably the best, most agreed-upon means by which to continuously improve instruction and student performance” (Schmoker, 2006).

# Statement of the Problem

*“The idea of improving schools by developing professional learning communities is currently in vogue. People use the term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education...In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning”(DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker., 2006, p. 2).*

*“Although many schools around the world have claimed to embrace the Professional Learning Community process, it would be more accurate to describe the current state of affairs in many schools as PLC Lite. Educators rename their traditional faculty or department meetings as PLC meetings, engage in book studies that result in no action, or devote collaborative time to topics that have no effect on student achievement -- all in the name of the PLC process. These activities fail to embrace the central tenants of the PLC process and will not lead to higher levels of learning for students or adults” (DuFour & Reeves, 2015).*

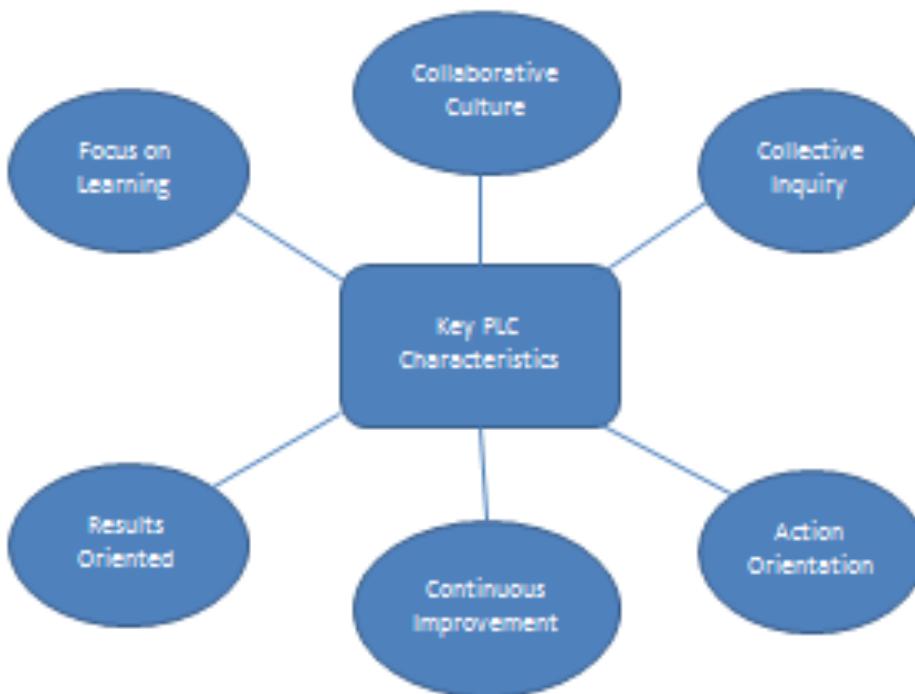
Even though there is significant research regarding PLCs and their intended uses, there is limited research regarding their implementation in public schools in Minnesota.

# My Study



# Conceptual Framework – DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many

## Six Key Characteristics of an Effective PLC



# Purpose of the Study

- Minnesota Statute 122A.60, subd. 2 recommends that public school districts support stable and productive professional learning communities as part of their staff development program.
- This study was done to determine whether professional learning communities were being implemented in public schools in Minnesota using characteristics identified in research as being effective.

# Research Questions

- To what extent have the six characteristics of successful PLCs, as identified by DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, been implemented in practicing PLCs in public school districts in Minnesota?
- What characteristics of successful PLCs, beyond those identified by DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, do public school districts in Minnesota PLCs exhibit?
- What barriers have been encountered by public school districts in Minnesota in their attempts to implement PLCs?

# Methodology

- A quantitative research methodology, classified as descriptive methodology, was used to identify the extent to which characteristics of professional learning communities, as identified in the research, are currently being used in public schools in Minnesota. This method was selected because, when used in quantitative research, it measured the characteristics of a population on prespecified variables.

# Instrumentation

- An electronic survey was used to gather data. The survey was designed by the researcher using the conceptual framework of DuFour and Eaker and based on information acquired from *Professional Learning Communities at Work Plan Book* by DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2006) as well as the Prairie South School District located in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.
- Data was collected through the use of Survey Monkey

# Research Design

- There were nine sections in the survey:
  - Section 1 – Demographics
  - Sections 2 – 8 – Level of implementation of key characteristics of PLCs as identified in literature
    - Five choice Likert scale
    - Three to Five items per section
  - Section 9 – Frequency of issues identified in research as barriers to PLC implementation
    - Three choice Likert scale

# Respondents

- The electronic survey was sent to 328 public school superintendents in the state of Minnesota (100%) in order to demonstrate the level of implementation on a state-wide scale.
- There were 121 respondents which were considered valid as they answered all of the questions in the survey
- 96% (n=116) of respondents reported their district used professional learning communities.

# Demographic Information of Participants - Position

- 67% (n=78) of respondents reported their position as superintendent
- 12% (n=14) of respondents reported their position as director of curriculum, teaching and learning or staff development
- 10% (n=11) of respondents reported their position as principal or assistant principal
- 6% (n=7) of respondents reported their position as Q-Comp advisor, teacher or other
- 5% (n=6) of respondents reported their position as assistant or associate superintendent

# Demographic Information of Participants – District Enrollment

- 12.1% (n=14) of respondents reported their district enrollment as 0-500 students.
- 24.1% (n=28) of respondents reported their district enrollment as 501-1000 students.
- 30.2% (n=35) of respondents reported their district enrollment as 1001-2500 students.
- 21.6% (n=25) of respondents reported their district enrollment as 2501-5000 students.
- 7.8% (n=9) of respondents reported their district enrollment as 5001-10,000 students.
- 4.3% (n=5) of respondents reported their district enrollment as greater than 10,000 students.

## Demographic Information of Participants – Years of District PLC Implementation

- 21% (n=24) of respondents reported their district had been implementing PLCs for 0-2 years.
- 44% (n=51) of respondents reported their district had been implementing PLCs for 3-5 years.
- 27% (n=31) of respondents reported their district had been implementing PLCs for 6-10 years.
- 8% (n=10) of respondents reported their district had been implementing PLCs for more than 10 years.

# Research Question One

- To what extent have the six characteristics of successful PLCs, as identified by DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, been implemented in practicing PLCs in public school districts in Minnesota?
  - Focus on Learning
  - Collaborative Culture
  - Collective Inquiry
  - Action Orientation
  - Continuous Improvement
  - Results Oriented

# Research Question One Findings and Analysis

- All of the respondent's districts were using some or all of the characteristics.
- For all six characteristics the research results indicated a significant difference in the level of implementation based on the number of years the respondent's districts had been using PLCs.
  - Districts using PLCs for 0-2 years were implementing the six characteristics at a lesser level those districts which had been using PLCs for 3 years or more.
    - These findings are consistent with the literature

# Research Question One Findings and Analysis Continued

- Eight practices which were used by fewer districts.
  - 1) Common grading and reporting procedures
  - 2) Common Assessments
    - These practices require collaboration
  - 3) Teachers have identified evidence/indicators they use to measure student outcomes
  - 4) Teachers understand they must teach differently to get different results
  - 5) Teachers provide feedback at the time of learning that is descriptive and corrective
  - 6) Teachers base their actions on research and documented effective practice
  - 7) Teachers measure their effectiveness based on student results
  - 8) Teachers have identified the evidence needed to show student understanding
- These practices require a belief that all students can learn
- These practices require collaboration and abandoning isolated teaching
- These are more advanced PLC practices

# Research Question Two

- What characteristics of successful PLCs, beyond those identified by DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, do public school districts in Minnesota PLCs exhibit?
  - Shared Leadership
  - Teacher Authority Within the PLC
  - Reflective Practice

# Research Question Two Findings and Analysis

- All of the respondent's districts were using some or all of the characteristics.
- For all three characteristics the research results indicated a significant difference in the level of implementation based on the number of years the respondent's districts had been using PLCs.
  - Districts using PLCs for 0-2 years were implementing the three characteristics at a lesser level those districts which had been using PLCs for 3 years or more.
    - These findings are consistent with the literature

# Research Question Three

- What barriers have been encountered by public school districts in Minnesota in their attempts to implement PLCs?
  - Teachers not wanting to collaborate with other teachers.
  - Conflict within the learning community regarding power.
  - Lack of trust among members of the learning community.
  - Lack of consistent time provided for collaboration.
  - Lack of commitment on the part of the district to sustain learning communities.

# Research Question Three Findings and Analysis

- All of the barriers had been encountered by some districts
- A majority of respondents reported they encountered three of the barriers from time to time
  - 1) Teachers not wanting to collaborate with other teachers
  - 2) Conflict within the learning community regarding power
  - 3) Lack of trust among members of the learning community
- This is consistent with the findings in question one regarding PLC practices which were implemented by fewer districts

# Research Question Three Findings and Analysis Continued

- Two barriers were encountered less often by small enrollment districts than districts with enrollments over 10,000 students
  - Conflicts within the learning community regarding power
  - Lack of trust among members within the PLC

The researcher found no literature related to district size and barriers to PLC implementation

# Research Question Three Findings and Analysis Continued

- There was a moderately strong correlations between the following barriers:
  - Teachers not wanting to collaborate and conflict regarding power within the PLC
    - Consistent with the literature
  - Teachers not wanting to collaborate and lack of trust among members of the PLC
    - Consistent with the literature
  - Power within the PLC and lack of trust among members of the PLC
    - Consistent with the literature
  - Lack of consistent time for collaboration and lack of commitment from the district
    - Consistent with the literature

# Recommendation for Districts Implementing PLCs

- The successful implementation of the PLC process will require several years. Districts are encouraged to keep this in mind as they think about the implementation of the various components of the PLC process.
- Before true implementation of PLCs can be initiated, districts are counseled to ensure that the groundwork has been completed to create a proper foundation on which PLCs can succeed. This foundation includes:
  - A strong mission and vision for the organization.
  - A collective commitment to the values of the organization.
  - Setting goals that are measureable so the PLC can mark their progress.
- District leaders should anticipate there will be issues with the implementation of a PLC culture and they will encounter barriers.
- District leaders are encouraged to make the commitment to follow-through on the practices they control that are essential for PLC success.

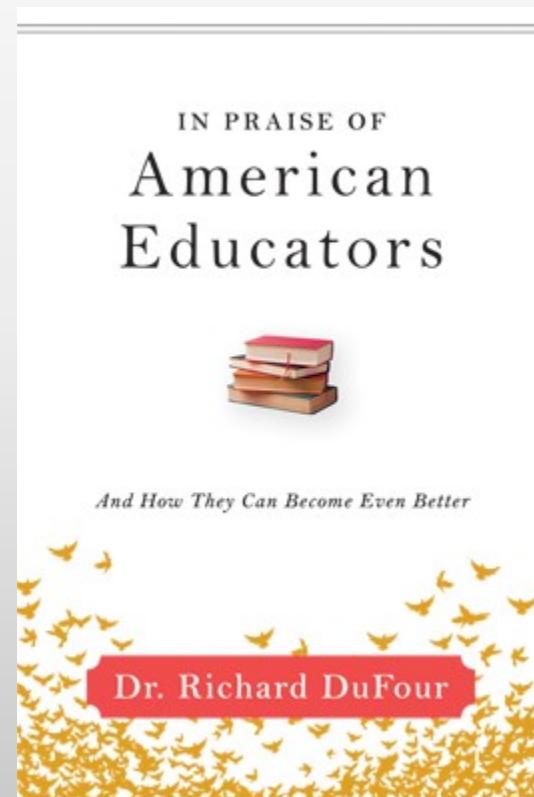
# Final Thoughts

- “The PLC process provides the best environment for powerful professional development, and the best professional development builds staff capacity to function as members of a high-performing PLC” ( DuFour, 2014).
- The very culture and belief system of a school district must change in order to meet the enticing outcomes PLCs promise.
  - “This level of change is difficult – very difficult. In the end, many schools struggle because too many adults in the building are unwilling to accept the level of temporary disequilibrium and discomfort required to significantly change what they do all day” (DuFour, 2015).

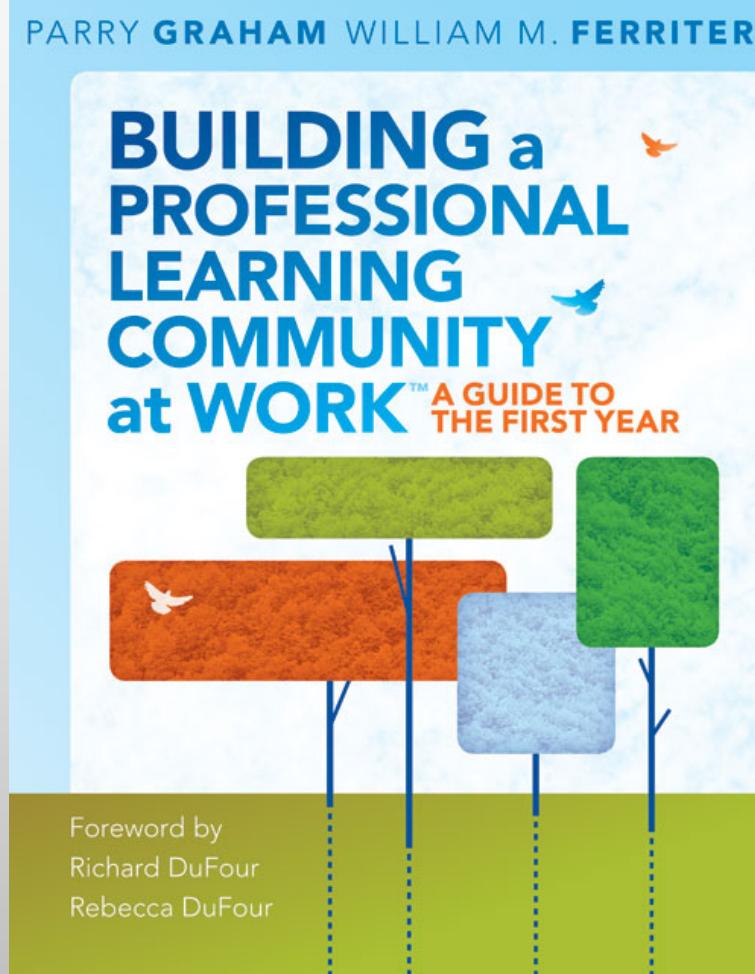
# Final Thoughts Continued

- Education leaders must commit themselves to staying true to the PLC process through the challenge of changing culture because, “If the PLC process proves beneficial to students, provides resistant staff with a positive experience, and leads to better results, changes in beliefs and higher levels of commitment are likely to follow” (DuFour, 2015).

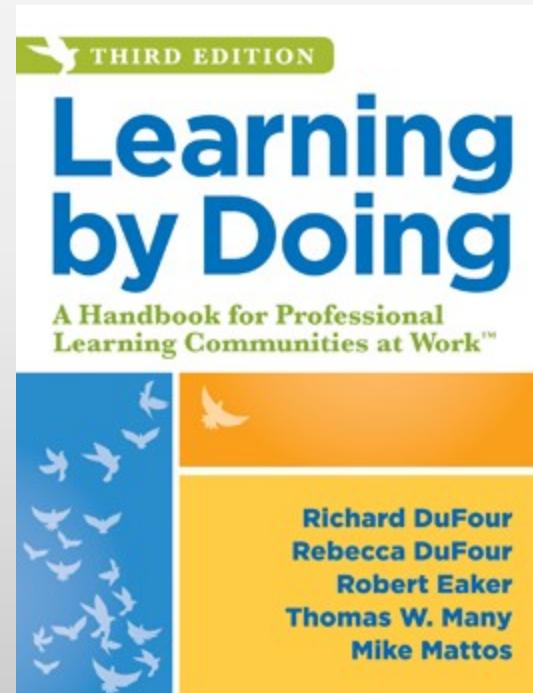
# Resource



# Resource



# Resource



Thank you to each of you that participated in  
my study

Thank you to Cunningham Group Architects  
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