

## Chapter 3

# Creating a Focus on Learning

### Part One The Case Study: What Do We Want Our Students to Learn, and How Will We Know When They Have Learned It?

*Professional learning communities create an intensive focus on learning by clarifying exactly what students are to learn and by monitoring each student's learning on a timely basis.*

Principal Dan Matthews had worked successfully with a task force of committed teachers to build support for professional learning community (PLC) concepts among the staff of Genghis Khan High School (nickname: The Fighting Horde). They drafted and approved a new vision statement, endorsed their collective commitments, and established school improvement goals. Principal Matthews then asked department chairs to help teachers work together in their collaborative teams to clarify the most essential learning for students by asking, "What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should each student acquire as a result of this course and each unit of instruction within this course?"

After a few weeks, the department chairs proposed modifications to Principal Matthews' request. The math chair reported that teachers felt the state standards had already clarified what students were to learn, and they saw no point in addressing a question that had already been answered. The English chair informed Principal Matthews that several teachers from her department had worked very hard on the committee that wrote the district's language arts curriculum, and they felt their work was being dismissed as irrelevant or ineffective. The head of the social studies department complained that the teachers in her department were unable to agree on the most essential learning for students because so many were personally invested in particular units that they refused to abandon. After considerable discussion, the principal accepted the recommendations of the department chairs:

1. Every teacher would be provided with a copy of the state standards and district curriculum guide for their area.
2. Teachers would be asked to adhere to the state and district guideline.
3. Teacher teams would no longer be required to clarify the essential learning of their courses.

The task force proposal to engage teachers in creating common assessments for their courses also met with resistance on the part of some teachers. Art teachers argued that there was no way to assess the most essential outcomes of their courses on paper and pencil tests; therefore, they believed they should be exempt from common assessments. Science teachers pointed out that their textbooks included test questions at the end of each chapter, and they could simply use these chapter tests as their common assessments. The English department noted that there were not enough copies of the required novels for all students to read the same novel simultaneously. They argued that since students were reading different novels at different times, common assessments were impossible. The social studies department insisted teachers lacked both the time and expertise to develop quality assessments. They took the position that if common assessments were to be created, they should be developed by the district office. The math department chair contended that he spent 2 years trying to get his teachers to embrace the only test that really mattered: the state test. He finally persuaded them to sit down as a department to analyze the results, assess strengths and weaknesses in student learning, and adjust their curriculum and instruction based on the results. To now ask them to create common, teacher-made assessments would send mixed messages and divert their attention from the state test.

After reviewing these concerns, Principal Matthews and the task force agreed to withdraw the proposal to require teams of teachers to develop common assessments.

### Reflection

Consider Principal Matthews' efforts and the efforts of the task force to engage teachers in clarifying the essential outcomes of their courses and developing common assessments. If you were called upon to consult with the school, what advice would you offer?



## Part Two Here's How

The principal and task force confronted a common dilemma in this case study: There were certain important tasks in which they hoped to engage the staff in order to further their agreed-upon commitment to learning for all students; however, they wanted the staff to be a part of the process and to feel empowered as the school moved forward.

- Should they insist that the faculty develop common outcomes and common assessments for their courses, or should they abandon processes vital to a PLC because of the objections raised by the staff?
- Is the school better served by a culture of control that demands adherence to certain practices or a culture of freedom that encourages individual autonomy?

In their study of high-performing organizations, Collins and Porras (1997) discovered ineffective organizations succumbed to the “Tyranny of Or—the rational view that cannot easily accept paradox, that cannot live with two seemingly contradictory forces at the same time. We must be A or B, but not both” (p. 44). High-performing organizations, however, rejected this false dichotomy and embraced the “Genius of And” by demonstrating the ability to embrace both extremes at the same time. Collins and Porras clarified that the “Genius of And” “is not just a question of ‘balance’ because balance implies going to the mid-point—fifty-fifty. A visionary company does not seek the gray of balance, but seeks to be distinctly both ‘A’ and ‘B’ at the same time” (p. 45).

If Principal Matthews and his task force were to apply these findings to their situation, they would “create a culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship” (Collins, 2001, p. 124) and embrace the concept of “directed empowerment” (Waterman, 1987). In other words, they would create a school culture that was simultaneously loose and tight.

Schools and districts need not choose between demanding adherence to certain core principles and practices or empowering the staff. Certain critical issues must be addressed and certain important tasks must be accomplished in a PLC. The school or district is tight in those areas, demanding faithfulness to specific principles and practices. At the same time, however, individuals and teams can benefit from considerable autonomy and freedom in terms of how things get done on a day-to-day basis because the school or district is loose about much of the implementation. Members of the school have the benefit of clear parameters that provide direction and coherence to the improvement process; however, they are also given the freedom and tools to make their own contribution to that



Create a school culture that is simultaneously loose *and* tight.

process. This autonomy allows the school community to benefit from the insights and expertise of those who are called upon to do the actual work.

Principal Matthews has every right to expect faculty members to unite around and act in accordance with the common purpose, clear priorities, and systematic procedures of a PLC if the school is to become more effective in helping all students learn. At the same time, teachers have every right to enjoy considerable freedom and autonomy as they build their capacity to function as a PLC.

## Exploring the Critical Questions of a Professional Learning Community

One expectation the school must establish is that every teacher will be called upon to work collaboratively with colleagues in clarifying the questions:

Essential Learning  
CFA's

- What is it we want our students to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?

The pursuit of these questions cannot be assigned to others. The constant collective inquiry into these questions is a professional responsibility of every faculty member. Nor can the responsibility be left to each teacher to address on his or her own in a school or district committed to providing all students with equal access to a common, challenging curriculum. The questions of "Learn what?" and "How will we know?" are two of the most significant questions a PLC will consider, the very basis of the collective inquiry that drives the work of collaborative teams. Therefore, members of a PLC can neither ship the questions off to someone else to answer nor disregard their colleagues while exploring the questions. ✓

### Clarifying What Students Must Learn

The personal responsibility of each member of the faculty to work with colleagues in the exploration of the "learn what?" question does not mean teacher teams have license to disregard the curriculum and assessment frameworks that have been developed in their state, province, or district. Principal Matthews should provide the staff with the pertinent resources to help them address the questions and should specifically stipulate that:

*The constant collective inquiry into "What is it we want our students to learn?" and "How will we know when each student has learned it?" is a professional responsibility of every faculty member.*

1. The essential learning they establish must be aligned with state or provincial standards and district curriculum guides.
2. The identified essential learning must ensure students are well prepared to demonstrate proficiency on state, provincial, district, and national assessments.
3. The assessments created by the team must provide timely information on each student's proficiency so students who are struggling can be





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provided with additional time and support for learning. The assessment must also be sufficiently precise to ensure the team can ascertain the specific skills with which a particular student needs help.

Some of the resources Principal Matthews should make available to the teacher teams include:

- State or provincial standards
- Recommended standards from professional organizations (for example, from the National Council of Teachers of Math)
- District curriculum guides
- Prerequisite skills for students entering the next course or grade level
- Assessment frameworks (how students will be assessed on state, provincial, national, and district assessments)
- Data on student performance on past assessments
- Examples of student work and the specific criteria to be used in judging the quality of student work
- Recommendations and standards for workplace skills
- Released test items from state and national assessments
- Recommendations on standards and curriculum design from authors such as Reeves, Jacobs, Marzano, Wiggins, and McTighe

This process should be specifically designed to eliminate content from the curriculum. It is impossible for American teachers to adequately address all the state and national standards they have been urged to teach (Consortium on Productivity in Schools, 1995; Kendall & Marzano, 2000). Ultimately, the problem of too much content and too little time forces teachers to either rush through content or to exercise judgment regarding which standards are the most significant and essential. In a PLC this issue would not be left up to each teacher to resolve individually, nor would it deteriorate into a debate between teachers regarding their opinions on what students must learn. Instead, collaborative teams of teachers would work together to build shared knowledge regarding essential curriculum. They would do what people do in learning communities: They would learn together.

The insights of Doug Reeves (2002) are particularly helpful in guiding this work. He offers a three-part test for teams to consider as they assess the significance of a particular standard:

1. **Does it have endurance?** Do we really expect our students to retain the knowledge and skills over time as opposed to merely learning it for a test?



Does the standard have endurance?

Does it have leverage?

Does it develop student readiness for the next level of learning?

What current content can we eliminate because it is not essential?

(Reeves, 2002)

2. **Does it have leverage?** Will proficiency in this standard help the student in other areas of the curriculum and other academic disciplines?
3. **Does it develop student readiness for the next level of learning?** Is it essential for success in the next unit, course, or grade level?

The teams would also benefit from the discussion of a fourth question as they determine the most essential learning for their students: “What content do we currently teach that we can eliminate from the curriculum because it is not essential?” Principal Matthews could help foster a new mindset in the school if he asked each team to identify content it was removing from the curriculum each time the team planned a unit of instruction.

When Tom Many works with schools, he uses a simple process called “Keep, Drop, Create” to engage teachers in dialogue regarding essential learning. At least once a quarter, teachers devote a grade level or departmental meeting to analysis of the intended versus the implemented curriculum. Each member of the team brings his or her lesson plan books and a copy of the essential curriculum. Three pieces of butcher paper are posted on the wall of the meeting room and labeled with one of the three categories: Keep, Drop, or Create. Each member of the team is then given sticky notes in three colors—yellow for Keep, pink for Drop, and green for Create—and is asked to reflect honestly on his or her teaching.

Teams begin their analysis using their lesson plan books as the record of what was actually taught (the implemented curriculum) and copies of state or district curriculum guides to review the intended curriculum. Topics identified in the essential curriculum documents and included in each teacher’s lesson plan book are recorded on the Keep page. Topics identified as essential but not addressed in a teacher’s lesson plan book (either because the topics have not yet been taught or because they have been omitted) are listed on the Create page. Finally, topics included in a teacher’s lesson plan book but not reflected in the essential curriculum documents are put on the Drop page.

This process not only assists in discovering curriculum gaps and topics that must be addressed in upcoming units, but it also helps teams to create a “stop doing” list of topics that are not essential. As teachers engage in this activity over time, they become more clear, more consistent, and more confident in their response to the question, “What must our students know and be able to do as a result of this unit we are about to teach?”

### **How Will We Know if Our Students Are Learning?**

Principal Matthews must also resist any effort to exempt teachers from working together to create the frequent common assessments that enable a team to verify the proficiency of each student in each skill. Frequent monitoring of each student’s learning is an essential element of effective teaching, and



no teacher should be absolved from that task or allowed to assign responsibility for it to state test makers, central office coordinators, or textbook publishers.

Teachers should be guided by clear expectations and parameters as they develop their common, formative assessments. Such guidelines might call upon teams to:

- Create a specific minimum number of common assessments to be used in their course or grade level during the semester.
- Demonstrate how each item on the assessment is aligned to an essential outcome of the course or grade level.
- Specify the proficiency standard for each skill.
- Clarify the conditions for administering the test consistently.
- Ensure that demonstration of proficiency on the team assessment will be highly correlated to success on high-stakes testing at the district, state, provincial, or national level.
- Assess a few key concepts frequently rather than many concepts infrequently (Reeves, 2004).

Once again, Principal Matthews could support teachers in their efforts to build common assessments by providing them with time to address the task and resources to help them build quality assessments. Such resources might include:

- State or provincial assessment frameworks to make sure staff are familiar with the format and rigor of the state or provincial test
- Released items from state, provincial, and national assessments (for example, see the National Assessment of Educational Progress web site for released items of different disciplines at different grade levels: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>)
- Data on student performance on past indicators of achievement
- Examples of rubrics for performance-based assessments
- Recommendations from assessment experts such as Rick Stiggins and Doug Reeves
- Web sites on quality assessments such as the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing (CRESST, [www.cse.ucla.edu](http://www.cse.ucla.edu)); the Assessment Training Institute ([www.assessmentinst.com](http://www.assessmentinst.com)); and the Center for Performance Assessment ([www.makingstandardswork.com](http://www.makingstandardswork.com))
- Tests developed by individual members of the team



Frequent monitoring of each student's learning is an essential element of effective teaching; no teacher should be absolved from that task or allowed to assign responsibility for it to state test makers, central office coordinators, or textbook publishers.

Teams should have the autonomy to develop the kind of assessments they believe will result in valid and authentic measures of the learning of their students. They should have autonomy in designating the proficiency targets for each skill; however, they should also be called upon to demonstrate that student success on their assessments is strongly correlated to success on other indicators of achievement the school is monitoring.

## Part Three Here's Why

Organizations are most effective when the people throughout the organization are clear regarding its fundamental purpose. It is not enough that a few key leaders get the big picture. Employees can play a role in the success of their organizations when they know not only how to perform their specific tasks, but also why they do them—when they see how their work contributes to a larger purpose (Covey, 1996; Handy, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 1987). This clarity of purpose directs their day-to-day actions and decisions. As Jim Collins (2001) noted, “Great organizations simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything” (p. 91).

In chapter 2 we argued that the fundamental purpose—the single organizing idea—that unifies and guides the work of a PLC is ensuring high levels of learning for all students. No school or district can accomplish that purpose unless it can answer the questions:

- Exactly what is each student expected to learn?
- How will students be called upon to demonstrate their learning?

School districts are most effective when these questions are addressed in a systematic way by the professionals most responsible for ensuring learning: classroom teachers.

The premise that every teacher must know what he or she must teach and what students must learn is found in virtually every credible school improvement model. Thirty years ago, Larry Lezotte and his colleagues (1991) identified clear and focused educational goals as an essential correlate of effective schools. In their study of school restructuring, Gary Wehlage, Fred Newmann, and Walter Secada (1996) found that high-quality teaching and learning began when teachers developed a common vision of the academic standards their students were to achieve. Jonathon Saphier (2005) contends that excellent schools use a “crystal clear curriculum” to bring academic focus, coherence, rigor, precision, alignment, and accountability to the daily work of classroom teachers. Doug Reeves (2004) calls upon teachers to identify the most essential curriculum or “power



standards” as a first step in improving student achievement. In his summary of 35 years of research, Robert Marzano (2003) concluded the single most powerful impact a school can have on student achievement is providing students with a “guaranteed and viable curriculum” that:

- Gives students access to the same essential learning regardless of who is teaching the class
- Can be taught in the time allotted

All of this research points to the same conclusion: Teachers are most effective in helping all students learn when they are clear regarding exactly what their students must know and be able to do as a result of the course, grade level, or unit of instruction.

This finding presents schools and districts with an important question: “What is the best way to ensure each teacher knows what students must learn?” One approach is to provide each teacher with a copy of the standards that have been established for their subject area or grade level as well as a district curriculum guide for addressing those standards. The assumption behind this practice is that if the right documents are distributed to individual teachers, each will teach the same curriculum as his or her colleagues. This assumption lingers despite decades of evidence that it is erroneous. Almost every veteran educator would agree with the research on the huge discrepancy between the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum (Marzano, 2003). The former specifies what teachers are called upon to teach; the latter reflects what is actually taught. The idea that all students within the same school have access to the same curriculum has been described as a “gravely misleading myth” (Hirsch, 1996, p. 26), and district curriculum guides have been characterized as “well intended, but fundamentally fictional accounts” of what students are actually learning (Jacobs, 2001, p. 20).

School leaders must do more than deliver curriculum documents to teachers to ensure all students have an opportunity to master the same essential learning. They must engage every teacher in a collaborative process to study, to clarify, and most importantly, to commit to teaching the curriculum. All teachers should be expected to clarify essential learning with their colleagues—even in states or provinces with delineated standards and in districts with highly developed curriculum guides. They should do so because:

1. **Collaborative study of essential learning promotes clarity.** Even if individual teachers take the time to review state and district curriculum standards, it is unlikely they will interpret those standards consistently. Dialogue regarding the meaning of standards and the clarification of what the standards look like in the classroom help promote a more consistent curriculum.

*Teachers are most effective in helping all students learn when they are clear regarding exactly what their students must know and be able to do as a result of the course, grade level, or unit of instruction.*

- NOT!

Result of work in  
isolation



2. **Collaborative study of essential learning promotes consistent priorities.** Just because teachers interpret a learning standard consistently does not guarantee that they will assign the same priority to the standard. One teacher may conclude a particular standard is very significant and devote weeks to teaching it while another teacher may choose to spend only a day on the same standard.
3. **Collaborative study of essential learning is crucial to the common pacing required for formative assessments.** If teachers have not agreed on the meaning and significance of what they are being asked to teach, they will not be able to establish common pacing in their courses and grade levels. Common pacing is a prerequisite for common formative assessments, which we believe are some of the most powerful tools for improvement available to a school.
4. **Collaborative study of essential learning can help establish a curriculum that is viable.** One of the most significant barriers to clarity regarding essential learning for students is curriculum overload (Consortium on Productivity, 1995; Reeves, 2004). One analysis concluded it would take up to 23 years to cover adequately all the standards that have been established at the state and national levels (Marzano, 2003). As a result, individual teachers are constantly making decisions regarding what content to omit in their classrooms, making it difficult for subsequent teachers to know what has been taught and what has not (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). If teachers work together to make these decisions, they can establish a curriculum that can be taught in the allotted time, and they can clarify the scope and sequence of the curriculum with colleagues who teach in the preceding and subsequent courses or grade levels.
5. **Collaborative study of essential learning creates ownership of the curriculum among those who are called upon to teach it.** Attempts to create a guaranteed curriculum for every child throughout a state, province, or district often create a uniform *intended* curriculum but do little to address the *implemented* curriculum. Teachers throughout North America often feel neither ownership of nor accountability for the content they are being asked to teach. They were not meaningfully involved in the process of creating that content, and they often critique the decisions of those who were: state or provincial departments of education, district committees, central office curriculum coordinators, and so on. Others do not debate the merits of the curriculum; they simply ignore it. A guaranteed curriculum exists in theory but not in fact.

Certainly teacher ownership of and commitment to the curriculum their students will be asked to master plays an important role in the quality of student



### Collaborative Study of Essential Learning . . .

- Promotes clarity
- Promotes consistent priorities
- Is crucial to the common pacing required for formative assessments
- Can help establish a curriculum that is viable
- Creates ownership of the curriculum among those who are asked to teach it

learning. Successful implementation of any course of study requires people who care about intended outcomes and have a determination to achieve them. One strategy to promote stronger ownership would simply allow each teacher to determine what he or she will teach; however, that strategy eliminates any hope students will have an equal opportunity to learn the same essential content.

So should districts opt for the uniformity that accompanies a curriculum prescribed by a state, province, or district, or should they promote individual teacher autonomy in an effort to generate greater enthusiasm and ownership? The attentive reader will recognize that the wisest course is to reject this “Tyranny of Or” and seek the “Genius of And” by creating processes that promote both equity and allegiance.

Ownership and commitment are directly linked to the extent to which people are engaged in the decision-making process (Axelrod, 2002), and as a result, there is a direct correlation between participation and improved results (Wheatley, 1999). An attempt to bring about significant change in a school without first engaging those who will be called upon to do the work for the change—the meaningful dialogue—creates a context for failure. Seymour Sarason (1996), who studied the culture of schools for over a quarter of a century, described the typical change process:

“Someone” decides that something will be changed and “others” are then *required* appropriately to implement that change. If others have had no say in the decision, if there was no forum or allotted time for others to express their ideas or feelings, if others come to feel they are not respected, if they feel their professionalism has been demeaned, the stage is set for the change to fail. *The problem of change is the problem of power, and the problem of power is how to wield it in ways that allow others to identify with, to gain a sense of ownership of the process and the goals of the change.* (p. 335)

⊗  
Loose

So what is the best way to engage staff in an improvement process? The greatest ownership and strongest levels of commitment flow to the smallest part of the organization because that is where people's *engagement* levels are highest. Teachers are *de facto* members of their state or provincial systems of education, but they feel greater allegiance to their local district than they do to the state or province. Most teachers, however, feel greater loyalty to their individual schools than they do to their districts. They probably feel even greater allegiance to their departments than they do their schools. If their departments have been organized into teams, they probably feel greater loyalty to their teammates than to the department as a whole. It is at the team level that teachers have the greatest opportunity for engagement, dialogue, and decision-making. When teachers have collaboratively studied the question of "What must our students learn," when they have created common formative assessments as a team to monitor student learning on a timely basis, and when they have promised each other to teach essential content and prepare students for the assessments, they have exponentially increased the likelihood that the agreed-upon curriculum will actually be taught.

We are not advocating that a team of teachers should be free to disregard state, provincial, or district guidelines and pursue their own interests. We are instead contending that one of the most powerful ways to bring the guidelines to life is to create processes to ensure every teacher becomes a true student of them.

Tight

When school leaders establish clear expectations and parameters like those we list in part two of this chapter, they create a process that promotes consistency *and* engages teachers in ways that encourage ownership and commitment. Those guidelines also demand accountability because a team must be able to demonstrate that the decisions it has made have led to more students achieving at higher levels as measured by multiple indicators. Furthermore, the team format itself promotes accountability. Teachers recognize that failure to address agreed-upon content will have an adverse impact on their students when they take common assessments and will prevent the team from achieving its goals. Few teachers will be cavalier about letting down their students and their teammates, particularly when evidence of their failure to honor commitments is readily available with each common assessment.

For too long administrators have settled for the illusion of uniformity across the entire district: They dictated curriculum to schools while teachers provided students in the same course or grade level with vastly different experiences. Effective leaders will view engagement in the question of "What do we want our students to know and be able to do?" as a professional obligation incumbent upon every teacher, and they will create the processes and parameters to promote far greater consistency in the *implemented* curriculum.



## The Power of Common Assessments

One of the most powerful, high-leverage strategies for improving student learning available to schools is the creation of frequent, common, high-quality formative assessments by teachers who are working collaboratively to help a group of students develop agreed-upon knowledge and skills (Fullan, 2005a; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Reeves, 2004; Schmoker, 2003; Stiggins, 2005). Such assessments serve a distinctly different purpose than the state and provincial tests that have become the norm in North America, and we draw from the work of Rick Stiggins (2002, 2005) to clarify the differences.

State and provincial tests are summative assessments: attempts to determine if students have met intended standards by a specified deadline. They are assessments *of* learning, typically measuring many things infrequently. They can provide helpful information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of curricula and programs in a district, school, or department, and they often serve as a means of promoting institutional accountability. The infrequency of these end-of-process measurements, however, limits their effectiveness in providing the timely feedback that guides teacher practice and student learning.

Formative assessments are assessments *for* learning that measure a few things frequently. These timely in-process measurements can inform teachers individually and collectively regarding the effectiveness of their practice. Furthermore, these teacher-made assessments identify which students have learned each skill and which have not, so that those who are experiencing difficulty can be provided with additional time and support for learning. When done well, they advance and motivate, rather than merely check on student learning. The clearly defined goals and descriptive feedback to students provide them with specific insights regarding how to improve, and the growth they experience helps build their confidence as learners (Stiggins, 2002). These timely team assessments, when combined with classroom teachers' skillful ongoing assessment of student proficiency in precise skills on a daily basis, create a powerful synergy for learning.

Doug Reeves (2000) uses an analogy to draw a sharp distinction between summative and formative assessments, comparing the former to an autopsy and the latter to a physical examination. A summative test, like an autopsy, can provide useful information that explains why the patient has failed, but the information comes too late, at least from the patient's perspective. A formative assessment, like a physical examination, can provide both the physician and the patient with timely information regarding the patient's well-being and can help in prescribing antidotes to help an ailing person or to assist a healthy patient in becoming even stronger.

Common, team-developed formative assessments are such a powerful tool in school improvement that, once again, no team of teachers should be allowed to



Summative assessments are assessments *of* learning that measure many things infrequently.

Formative assessments are assessments *for* learning that measure a few things frequently.

opt out of creating them. Schools can use a variety of assessments: those developed by individual teachers, a state or provincial test, district tests, national tests, tests that accompany textbooks, and so on. But school leaders should never allow the presence of these other assessments to be an excuse for ignoring the need for common, team-made formative assessments for the following reasons:

1. **Common assessments are more efficient than assessments created by individual teachers.** If all students are expected to demonstrate the same knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to which they are assigned, it only makes sense that teachers would work together to assess student learning. For example, four third-grade teachers will assess their students on four reading skills during a unit. It would be more efficient for each teacher to develop activities or questions for one skill and present them to teammates for review for inclusion on the common assessment than for each teacher to work separately, duplicating the effort of his or her colleagues. It is ineffective and inefficient for teachers to operate as independent subcontractors who are stationed in proximity to others, yet work in isolation. Those who are called upon to complete the same task benefit by pooling their efforts.

2. **Common assessments are more equitable for students.** When schools utilize common assessments they are more likely to:

- Ensure that students have access to the same essential curriculum
- Use common pacing
- Assess the quality of student work according to the same standards

It is ironic that schools and districts often pride themselves in the fair and consistent application of rules and policies while at the same time ignoring the tremendous inequities in the opportunities students are given to learn and the criteria by which their learning is assessed. Schools will continue to have difficulty helping all students achieve high standards if the teachers within them cannot develop the capacity to define a standard with specificity and assess it with consistency.

3. **Common assessments represent the most effective strategy for determining whether the guaranteed curriculum is being taught and, more importantly, learned.** Doug Reeves (2004) refers to common, teacher-made formative assessments as the “best practice in assessment” (p. 71) and the “gold standard in educational accountability” (p. 114) because they promote consistency in expectations and provide timely, accurate, and specific feedback to both students and teachers. Perhaps most importantly, teachers’ active engagement in the development of the assessment leads them to accept greater accountability for the results.

*An important pedagogical skill that atrophies in isolation*





4. **Common assessments inform the practice of individual teachers.**  
Tests constructed by an individual teacher generate plenty of data (mean, mode, median, percentage of failing students, and so on), but they do little to inform the teacher's practice by identifying strengths and weaknesses in his or her teaching. Common assessments provide teachers with a basis of comparison as they learn, skill by skill, how the performance of their students is similar to and different from the other students who took the assessment. With this information, a teacher can seek assistance from teammates on areas of concern and can share strategies and ideas on skills in which his or her students excelled.
5. **Common assessments build a team's capacity to improve its program.**  
When collaborative teams of teachers have the opportunity to examine indicators of the achievement of all students in their course or grade level and track those indicators over time, they are able to identify and address problem areas in their program. Their collective analysis can lead to new curriculum, pacing, materials, and instructional strategies designed to strengthen the academic program they offer.
6. **Common assessments facilitate a systematic, collective response to students who are experiencing difficulty.** Common assessments help identify a group of students who need additional time and support to ensure their learning. Because the students are identified at the same time and because they need help with the same specific skills that have been addressed on the common assessment, the team and school are in a position to create a timely, systematic program of intervention. We will address this topic in detail in the next chapter.

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### Common Assessments . . .

- Are more efficient than assessments created by individual teachers.
- Are more equitable for students.
- Represent the most effective strategy for determining whether the guaranteed curriculum is being taught and, more importantly, learned.
- Inform the practice of individual teachers.
- Build a team's capacity to improve its program.
- Facilitate a systematic, collective response to students who are experiencing difficulty.

*- Embedded  
Formative  
Assessments*

Of course the most effective teachers are constantly assessing student learning. Multiple times each day they will check for student understanding, use precise assessments, and engage students in reviewing their own comprehension and progress. This ongoing, daily assessment is crucial to good teaching and can serve as a powerful motivator for students, and we endorse it whole-heartedly. We are certainly not suggesting that common formative assessments take the place of this continuous monitoring. There will be times, however, that assessments become more formal, and we think there are compelling reasons that at least some of those formal assessments be developed by the team rather than by the individual teacher.

One of the most important factors in student learning is the quality of the teaching they receive (Haycock, 1998; Marzano, 2003; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). And the “most immediate and direct influence on teaching expertise is the workplace of the school itself” (Saphier, 2005, p. 220). As Jonathan Saphier (2005) goes on to say:

The reason Professional Learning Communities increase student learning is that they produce more good teaching by more teachers more of the time. Put simply, PLC improves teaching, which improves student results, especially for the least advantaged of students. (p. 23)

Teachers in a PLC work together collaboratively in constant, deep collective inquiry into the questions, “What is it our students must learn?” and “How will we know when they have learned it?” The dialogue generated from these questions results in the academic focus, collective commitments, and productive professional relationships that enhance learning for teachers and students alike. School leaders cannot waffle on this issue. Working with colleagues on these questions is an ongoing professional responsibility from which no teacher should be exempt.

## Part Four Assessing Your Place on the PLC Journey

### The PLC Continuum

Working individually and quietly, review the continuum of a school’s progress on the PLC journey (on pages 60 and 61). Which point on the continuum gives the most accurate description of the current reality of your school or district? Be prepared to support your assessment with evidence and anecdotes.



After working individually, share your assessment with colleagues. Where do you have agreement? Where do you find discrepancies in the assessments? Listen to the rationales of others in support of their varying assessments. Are you able to reach agreement?

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The challenge confronting a school that has engaged in the collective consideration of a topic is answering the questions, “So what?” and, “What, if anything, are we prepared to do differently?” Now consider each indicator of a professional learning community described in the left column of the Where Do We Go From Here? Worksheets on pages 62–64, and then answer the questions listed at the top of the remaining four columns.

*(continued)*

## Part Five

### Tips for Moving Forward: Clarifying and Monitoring Essential Learning

1

**Less is more.** Remember that the main problem with curriculum in North America is not that we do not do enough, but rather that we attempt to do too much. As Doug Reeves (2005) writes, “While academic standards vary widely in their specificity and clarity, they almost all have one thing in common: there are too many of them” (p. 48). We recommend that teams start by identifying the 8 to 10 most essential outcomes students will be expected to achieve in their course or subject area for that semester. There is nothing sacred about that total; it is merely meant to serve as a guideline for team dialogue.

2

**Focus on proficiency, rather than coverage, in key skills.** Teachers throughout North America are confronted with a multitude of standards, and they fear that any one of them may be addressed on state and provincial tests. Therefore, they focus on covering the content rather than ensuring students become proficient in the most essential skills. But not all standards are of equal importance. Some are vital to a student’s success and others are simply nice to know. By focusing on essential skills, teachers prepare students for 80% to 90% of the content that will be addressed on state and provincial tests and provide them with the reading, writing, and reasoning skills to address any question that could appear (Reeves, 2002).

A common core curriculum can allow for some variation within courses and grade levels. A frequent, but often unstated, objection to common curriculum is that teachers may be forced to forgo their favorite unit, the one they most enjoy and are most passionate about. But a common core curriculum does not mean a uniform curriculum. A team could develop a curriculum and pacing guide that members feel will enable them to address all of the essential skills in 15 weeks of an 18-week semester. This provides each member of the team with 3 weeks to teach his or her favorite thing. The team’s common assessment will cover the common curriculum, while individual teachers can create their own assessments for content unique to their students.

3

**Recognize that common assessments might create teacher anxiety.** Common assessments are likely to create anxiety among teachers who recognize that the results from these assessments could be used to expose weaknesses in their instruction. The inner voice of teachers may very well say, “But what if I am the weakest teacher on my team? My teammates will lose respect for me. The principal may use the results in my evaluation. If



the results become public parents may demand that their children be removed from my class. I don't want to participate in a process that can be used to humiliate or punish me. I would rather work in blissful ignorance than to be made aware of the fact that I may be ineffective."

These very real and understandable human emotions should be acknowledged, but should not be allowed to derail the effort to create common curriculum and common assessments. There are certain things leaders can do in an attempt to address these initial concerns. For example, teachers could be assured that their individual results from the assessments will not be distributed to their teammates. Each teacher could see how his or her students performed on each skill compared to the total group of students who took the test, but not compared to other individual teachers on the team. Principals could promise teachers that the results will not leave the building, appear in board of education reports, or show up in district newsletters. They could assure staff that student performance on common assessments will not be used as a factor in teacher evaluation. The process to assess student learning should be distinct from the process to evaluate teachers. Certainly a teacher's failure to contribute to the team process or unwillingness to change practices to improve results when students are not being successful are topics that can be addressed in the teacher's evaluation; however, scores from common assessments should not be.

**4 Use technology as a tool to support the process.** Teachers should not be expected to become either statisticians or data entry clerks in order to analyze the data generated from common assessments. A variety of software programs provide teachers with user-friendly analysis to help them identify the strengths and weaknesses of their students' learning at a glance.

**5 Districts can play a role.** Districts make a mistake when they create common assessments as a substitute for teacher-developed assessments at the team level. Districts should create their own assessments to monitor student learning throughout the entire district, but these assessments should supplement rather than replace team-level assessments. Districts can also create test item banks as a resource for teachers, but teams should be expected to engage in the process of developing their own tools to answer the question, "How do we know our students are learning?"

**6 Create shared understanding of the term "common assessment."** Once again, we have discovered that people who use the same terms do not necessarily assign the same meaning to those terms. For example, a team of teachers that agrees to use the quiz provided at the end of each chapter of the textbook could claim they are using common assessments, but they would not experience the benefits outlined in this chapter. Common





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assessments "are developed collaboratively in grade-level and departmental teams and incorporate each team's 'collective wisdom' (professional knowledge and experience) in determining the selection, design, and administration of those assessments" (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006).

Kildeer Countryside School District 96 in suburban Chicago worked with staff to create a shared understanding of the term. Teachers there recognized that their common assessments were to be:

- Connected to the guaranteed and viable curriculum
- Given on a regular and frequent basis to all students enrolled in the same course or grade level
- Administered at about the same time
- Created by a collaborative team of teachers
- Analyzed by that collaborative team of teachers
- Considered highly formative (to identify weaknesses in student learning in order to provide students with additional opportunities to learn)
- Used to help students see their progress toward a well-defined standard

**7 Use assessments as a means rather than an end.** In too many schools in North America, the pursuit of higher test scores has become a preoccupation of the staff. Test scores should be an indicator of our effectiveness in helping all students learn rather than the primary focus of the institution. They should be viewed as a means rather than an end. Doug Reeves (2004) does a wonderful job of providing schools with fail-safe strategies to improve test scores: increase the dropout rate, assign higher percentages of students to special education, warehouse low-performing students in one school, create magnet programs to attract enough high-performing students to a low-performing school to raise its average, eliminate electives to devote more time to areas of the curriculum that are tested, and so on. Sadly, these strategies are routinely being used in schools that are attempting to increase scores without improving learning.

Educators will not be driven to extraordinary effort and relentless commitment to achieve the goal of increasing student performance on the state test by five points. Most entered the profession because they felt they could make a significant difference in the lives of their students, and school leaders are more effective in marshalling and motivating faculty efforts when they appeal to that moral purpose.

Test scores will take care of themselves when schools and the people within them are passionately committed to helping each student develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to his or her success.

Solution Tree