
EDUCATORS

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A Conversation with Richard DuFour

*New pressures
have made teaching an
embattled profession. But by
creating conditions for true
teacher collaboration, we can
ensure that both students
and educators thrive.*

Naomi Thiers



Since 1998, Richard DuFour has been a leading voice for creating professional learning communities in schools. As principal of Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Illinois, and later superintendent of the Adlai E. Stevenson High School District, he used the PLC process to dramatically raise achievement, enhance teachers' effectiveness, and improve schools. As an author and consultant, he's helped hundreds of schools implement PLCs successfully. DuFour's most recent book, *In Praise of American Educators*, makes the case that U.S. teachers are accomplishing great things yet being scapegoated for problems in education.

How would you say the working lives of teachers have changed most in the past decade?

The biggest trend is that the job is becoming more and more difficult. For the first time in history, the United States has the majority of students in public schools eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. We have one out of every five families speaking a language other than English at home. So we have increasing numbers of the kind of students we traditionally haven't served well in school at the same time that we have tremendous pressure on teachers to make sure their students score well on one standardized test a year—with a lot of consequences aimed directly at educators themselves.

Bashing schools is a national pastime in the United States. We've done it for a long time. Before NCLB, we heard "let's change

the curriculum, let's add graduation requirements, let's just get tougher and stricter." In the past decade, the focus has been, "let's punish the educators themselves." As a result of that increasing accountability, punitive sanctions, and students with more challenges, the working life of teachers is more pressured and probably less satisfactory to teachers than it's been in the past.

What recent reforms aimed at educators have been especially non-productive?

The thrust of No Child Left Behind was harmful to educators, and Race to the Top was as well. No Child Left Behind established that schools could be designated as failing if they didn't measure up in any one of 38 different categories. Ultimately, the target set by NCLB was that by 2014 American educators were to do something that's

never been done anywhere in the world—raise every single student to proficiency. And it said that if you don't do it, we're going to designate you a failing school and you will suffer the consequences.

There is also an idea that if we increase pressure on schools through vouchers and charters, educators will start to work harder because they'll fear losing their jobs. We've made it easier to fire educators and easier to replace them with people who have no background in education. There's been a move to eliminate due process and counter collective bargaining.

I can't think of a single strategy that's been beneficial to educators. In fact, the National Center for Education and the Economy said that the reform strategies we're using in the United States are rarely used in the countries with high-performing schools.

Has teaching become an embattled profession?

Absolutely. There's no question in my mind that we've been scapegoated.

The push for teacher evaluation based on test scores, on value-added measures, has also been damaging to teachers. This was instituted despite the fact that virtually all the assessment community indicated that that isn't a valid way to determine teachers' effectiveness.

So we saw a very natural instinct of feeling, "I have to teach to the test and limit doing things that take time and are more in-depth." I think educators were very much disempowered—and made the villains of what's wrong with schools.

There's this whole idea that schools are failing, when in fact public schools are getting the best

"The way we're going to improve schools is by creating a culture in which teams of teachers are helping one another get better."



results we've ever had in the history of the United States. We have set new graduation records three years in a row. We have more students taking more rigorous curriculum than ever before. Annual surveys reveal that parents love their local schools. It's a pretty tough situation when you're working as hard as teachers work, getting good results, and all you hear is that your schools are failing and it's primarily because of you—that you don't care and don't work hard enough.

There are so many things teachers can't control now about their working lives. What are some things teachers *can* control that might enhance their practice and working lives?

No one has forbidden teachers to work together collaboratively. I haven't seen anything in any law that prevents teachers from coming together and working as a team that takes collective responsibility for achieving goals. No one has prevented teachers from, say, agreeing on what's the most important skill we're going to teach in this unit, how much time we're going to devote to that skill, and how we're going to assess it. Certainly no one's prevented them from looking at evidence of learning, seeing which instructional strategies seem to be working best, and sharing those strategies.

A lot of things are within teachers' sphere of influence, but a siege mentality makes it difficult for them to embrace those things. They're kind of hunkering down, trying to keep their heads out of the line of fire.

What key conditions need to be in place for teacher collaboration to help teachers improve achievement—and their working lives?

The two overarching conditions are, first, absolute clarity about what we're collaborating on—what is the nature of the work, what is the right work—and, second, supports so people can succeed at what they're being asked to do. If we fulfill those two things, collaboration will have a much greater impact. If we just put teachers together in a room and tell them to collaborate, there's no evidence that that's going to improve student achievement at all.

For example, if you're organizing teachers into teams, there has to be a common goal, a common accountability. You can't just say, we have a lot of people interested in discipline so we'll let them be a collaborative team. All

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the evidence in terms of which team structure leads to the greatest gains in student achievement indicates that we need a course-specific or grade level-specific team structure—all the 3rd grade teachers, say, or all the biology teachers working together.

After those teams have agreed on their purpose and goals, some critical questions have to drive their work. The first question—if they embrace the idea that their team responsibility is to help all kids learn—has to be, learn what? And they have to decide not just what to learn by the end of this year in general terms; they have to decide unit by unit, in specific terms, what they want every student to know and be able to do as a result of this unit. Then they have to agree on the pacing.

Teams have to agree on how they will gather evidence of learning day by day in their teaching and get stronger at



an almost minute-by-minute check for understanding. Their assessment process also has to include—and this is a cornerstone of the professional learning community process—common formative assessments developed by the team itself. They have to use those assessments to identify which kids are still struggling, what they'll do to bring those kids to proficiency, and how they'll enrich learning for kids who are highly proficient. They have to ask which teacher got really good results in teaching this skill and what can be learned from that person, or which teacher struggled to teach this skill and how can we support that person?

When those things are in place for teacher teams, and the school has a systematic way of intervening when kids don't learn, then the school is going to see gains in student achievement. And that's when teachers begin to feel more engaged and much more satisfied.

How well do you think PLCs (professional learning communities) are fulfilling their potential to improve teachers' skills and enhance their professional lives?

In the schools that have sustained a commitment to the process over time and have focused on the right work, it's been terrific. Teachers in these schools virtually all report the highest levels of satisfaction in their careers, the greatest self-efficacy.

When teachers work hard and there's no real evidence of moving forward, that becomes depressing. But when you've got this constant sense of "I'm getting better, my team's getting better, my kids are learning at higher levels"—that's an exciting process to be a part of.

However, I would say that many schools that are engaged in what they call the PLC process really aren't doing any of the things PLCs do. They're

engaged in "PLC lite." They give people time to collaborate, but they collaborate about mundane issues like should we allow kids to bring their phones into the classroom? Or they commiserate with each other about, "Remember the good old days when we had better students?"

We looked at districts that had tremendous results once they implemented the PLC process and districts that had very little to show for it once they implemented it. All the districts gave teachers time to collaborate. What separates a PLC from a pseudo PLC is that question, again, of what is it we're collaborating about? Is there clarity on that?

Don't forget that a key concept of the process is that it's the professional learning community. So whenever it comes time to make decisions, leaders have to make sure people have access to information that will help them make an informed decision. Building shared knowledge, learning together,

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is essential to every step of the PLC journey.

Teacher evaluation is a hot-button issue. How can school leaders use evaluation to empower teachers and help them grow?

That's a tough question for me to answer because I've publicly taken the position that when principals do evaluation, they should do the absolute minimum that they're required to do by law.

I was a high school principal. Imagine me, a former history teacher, evaluating a calculus teacher. That teacher would be much more likely to improve if he met with other calculus teachers every week than if he met with his principal four times a year. The way we're going to improve schools is not by supervising and evaluating individual teachers into better performance; it's by creating a culture in which teams of teachers are helping one another get better. I advise principals, "Don't put your school improvement eggs in the evaluation basket. Put them in the collaborative team and PLC basket."

So it's almost better if teachers together evaluate and motivate themselves?

Absolutely. It's a much stronger system of accountability.

Teachers sometimes tend to dislike being critical of one another. How can a school leader help teachers learn to really evaluate one another and push one another toward growth?

We have to guide teachers to have conversations and make decisions based on evidence rather than on opinion or this-is-how-I've-always-done-it. We

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should ensure that teacher teams' conversations are actually evidence-based. If we've given a test and I have 40 percent of my kids unable to demonstrate proficiency on a particular skill and you had 100 percent of your kids demonstrate proficiency, and these are heterogeneously grouped classes, the evidence speaks for itself.

The other thing is to train team leaders in terms of having difficult conversations and strategies for presenting things in a way that isn't hurtful. If conversations are actually based on evidence and you've got a leader who knows how to lead that discussion, you can move away from the gentlemen's agreement that we won't be critical of one another.

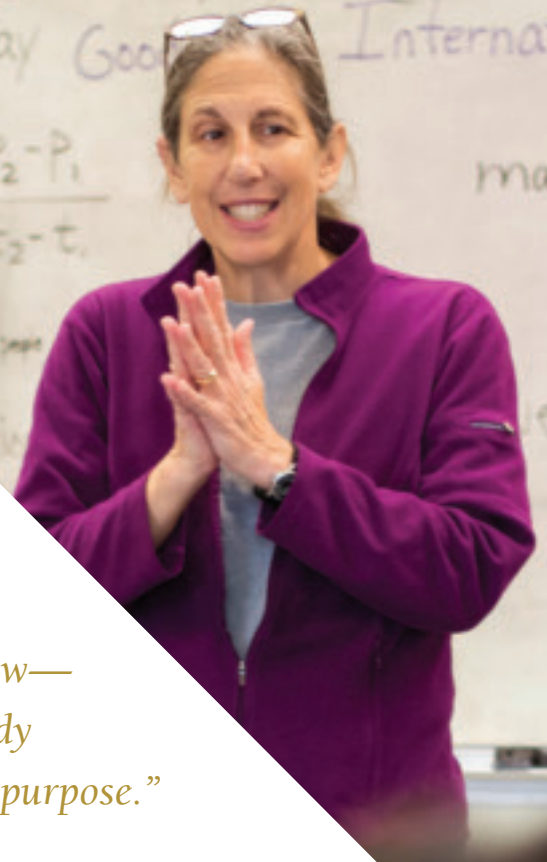
If you had to name the most important thing for a school leader to do to create a supportive culture for teachers, what would it be?

Groom other leaders. No one person has enough energy, influence, or expertise to do this on his or her own.

You have to have a guiding coalition of leaders working hand in hand with the principal, shaping practices, and then look for ways to keep expanding leadership outward. You have team leaders, and then you have situational leadership. Say I'm the leader on my chemistry team, but as we look at the evidence of student learning on one skill, you're the one who had great results, so now you take the lead in the conversation. Everybody has a chance to put on that leader hat.

How can school leaders encourage reluctant leaders? Or does everybody need to be a leader?

I don't think everybody needs to be a leader. But everybody needs to have an opportunity to lead. Some will choose not to, and that's fine. But I don't think the ability to lead is reserved for an elite few—it's available to anybody who's got passion and purpose. If we can tap into that ability—and to me, that's not sending somebody to a how-



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do-you-become-a-leader workshop. It's having them rehearse the practices they're going to do when they work with a team, and giving them feedback. That's how we spent a lot of our time with team leaders at Stevenson.

What kind of support do school leaders need, and where can that support come from?

Whenever the PLC process is successful on a districtwide basis, the district creates processes for principals to learn from one another. Central-office meetings take on a different tone, one of, "let's learn together, let's brainstorm together." The opportunity for principals to come together and see what's working and isn't working in one another's schools is a kind of support. But those principal meetings have to become very transparent. You can't blue-sky it—everything's great, everybody's happy—you actually have to present evidence of student learning and trends.

Are principals also embattled?

Absolutely. There's a lot of research indicating that that they don't feel the job is doable anymore. They feel like, "I'm responsible for everything that happens in my building, but I don't have a lot of authority to address some of the problems my school is having." I'm worried we won't find people willing to do the job.

What can principals control that might enhance their working lives?

It really comes back to realizing that you don't need permission from other people to make your school a better place. I think we have a tendency in our profession to look out the window, you know: "When the state

comes up with a better assessment . . ." or "when the central office does this or that . . ." You probably haven't been forbidden by the central office to have teachers work collaboratively or to create a guaranteed curriculum. The fundamental message to get out to educators is, don't wait for somebody else to do it. Superintendent, don't wait for a more enlightened state policy. Principals, don't wait until the central office decides it's a good thing to do. And teachers, influence up—go to your principal and say, could we do this?

How do you think the general public should perceive the role of educators—and how might society support educators?

Educators deserve much more than we've given them in the past decade or so. Look at how educators are viewed in some of the high-performing countries, like Singapore or Finland. They're viewed as nation builders. They're viewed as one of the most important professions. Teaching is the profession that creates all other professions. In Finland, to become a teacher, you have to earn a master's degree, the nation pays for the cost of educating you, and when you start your first job, you're making 108 percent of what the average graduate with a bachelor's degree in other fields makes. In the United States, the average college student graduating with a bachelor's degree last year graduated \$29,000 in debt, and new teachers made 68 percent of what the average new graduate made.


I'm not saying if we just give everybody huge raises that's going to help our schools, but money shows what you value. And we haven't demonstrated that we value educators

from that standpoint. And we're not going to do much, as a society, to support them as long as they remain the whipping boy for people who, in my view, are often more interested in privatizing education than in building a strong public education system.

What do you feel most hopeful about in the education profession today?

I'm hopeful that the PLC process will one day become the norm and that if a school isn't functioning as a PLC, it will be seen as an outlier. Twenty years ago, you'd be hard pressed to find many schools that had successful PLCs. Now we have hundreds. Entire districts have shown it can work. We've gotten people into teams; we've given them time to collaborate. If we can just help them understand what the focus of the collaboration is, and they begin to see benefits, then I think collaboration sustains itself. I have my fingers crossed.

What's been a highlight of your career in education?

I couldn't imagine any other profession that would have been more satisfying for me. This was what I was born to do. I look at other professions and wonder, How could you be excited about that every day or passionate about that? So I feel that it's been my life's work, and I look at it with a sense of satisfaction and peace. 

Richard DuFour is an author and consultant on implementing the PLC process. His most recent book is *In Praise of American Educators and How They Can Become Even Better* (Solution Tree, 2015). **Naomi Thiers** (nthiers@ascd.org) is associate editor of *Educational Leadership*.

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