Wonderful news has emerged for those seeking to improve student achievement. Two different comprehensive syntheses of research on the factors impacting student learning have come to the same conclusion: the most important variable in the achievement of students is the quality of instruction they receive on a daily basis (Marrano, 2003; Hartie, 2009). To ensure students learn at higher levels, simply improve teaching.

The question remains, “How?” The challenge is particularly daunting in the traditional K-12 culture which regards each school as a series of independent kingdoms (classrooms) staffed by relatively autonomous sub-contractors (teachers) who are responsible only for what happens inside their individual classrooms. In this culture of isolation, the individual teacher becomes the focus of improvement.

School districts typically create elaborate teacher supervision plans in the hope that superiors can evaluate subordinates into better performance. Teachers are provided financial incentives to pursue random graduate coursework at varied colleges and universities or to attend a myriad of disconnected workshops. Districts have continued with these traditional strategies despite compelling evidence that they have little impact on the quality of teaching.

Furthermore, the assumption behind this approach – improving the effectiveness of an individual teacher will improve the organization – is patently false. The intense focus on the individual discounts the conditions and constraints of the systems within which they work. As W. Edwards Deming observed, put a good person in a bad system and the system will win every time.

**But isn’t it about the Individual Teacher?**

The PLC process does not diminish the significance of the individual teacher. If the classroom teacher remains the most important factor in student learning, the challenge facing schools is, “How can we persuade our teachers to embrace more effective instructional strategies?” The most powerful strategy of persuasion is presenting teachers with irrefutable evidence of consistently better results. As one research study concluded, “Nothing changes the mind like the hard cold world hitting it in the face with real-life data” (Patterson, et. al., p. 51). The transparency of results from the frequent common assessments that serve as the lynchpin of the PLC process provides that ongoing evidence of effectiveness. When teachers see that students taught by a colleague consistently perform at higher levels on team-developed assessments, they become more receptive to changes in their instructional practice. Furthermore, the positive peer pressure of the collaborative team process fosters improvement. Most educators are moved to seek new practices rather than continually preventing their team from achieving its goals because of their poor results.

**Conclusion**

After synthesizing over 800 meta-analyses on the factors that impact student achievement, John Hattie concluded that the best way to improve schools was to organize teachers into collaborative teams that clarify what each student must learn and the indicators of learning the team will track, to gather evidence of that learning on an ongoing basis, and to analyze the results together so that they could learn which instructional strategies were working and which were not. In other words, he urged schools to function as Professional Learning Communities. Robert Marzano came to a similar conclusion when he described the PLC concept as “one of the most powerful initiatives for school improvement I have seen in the last decade.” The quality of the individual teacher remains paramount in student learning, and the PLC concept is our best strategy for creating the system that ensures more good teaching in more classrooms more of the time.

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**The Key to Improved Teaching and Learning**

**Dr. Rick DuFour**

Dr. Rick DuFour is regarded as one of the nation’s leading authorities on bringing Professional Learning Communities to life in the real world of schools. He is a public school educator for 34 years, serving as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. Dr. DuFour is the author of 10 books and over 80 professional articles, and wrote a quarterly column for the Educational Leadership magazine for almost a decade. His newest book, Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever It Takes is available from Solution Tree Publishers. He can be contacted at rdufour@is125.org.