> to learn how to become more effective in their work with students.” (Morrissey, 2000)

The National Education Association, America’s largest teaching organization with over 2.7 million members, is committed to making teaching more rewarding and satisfying. In pursuit of its long-term vision of “a great public school for every student,” the NEA has created its own recommended school improvement model: The Keys to Excellence. The model is intended to help educators with school improvement plans and to help them meet the challenges of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Although the model never uses the term professional learning community, its six keys to a quality school are consistent with PLC principles. The NEA keys and examples of some of the specific indicators the organization has identified for each follow:

1. Shared understanding and commitment to high goals
    - “The staff has a collective commitment to and takes responsibility for implementing high standards for all students.”
    - “The school operates under the assumption that all students can learn.”
2. Open communication and collaborative problem solving
    - “Teachers and staff collaborate to remove barriers to student learning.”
    - “Teachers communicate regularly with each other about effective teaching and learning strategies.”
3. Continuous assessment for teaching and learning
    - “Student assessment is used for decision making to improve learning.”
    - “A variety of assessment techniques are used.”
4. Personal and professional learning
    - “Teachers have regularly scheduled time to learn from one another.”
    - “Professional development has a direct, positive effect on teaching.”
5. Resources to support teaching and learning
    - “Computer hardware and software supplies are adequate for students and teachers.”
    - “Support services are adequate.”
6. Curriculum and instruction
    - “Instruction includes interventions for students who are not succeeding.”
    - “Teachers are open to new learnings and rethink their approaches to teaching and assessment practices based on teacher-directed action research and other classroom based inquiries.” (NEA, 2003)

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The president of the American Federation of Teachers, an organization representing 1.4 million members, called for those interested in improving schools to "make schools learning communities for teachers as well as students. Provide for master teachers, teacher centers, real professional development in the schools—with time for teachers to work with one another to overcome children's learning problems as they come up" (Feldman, 1998).

The National Middle School Association issued a position paper titled *This We Believe*, outlining its recommended strategies for improving schools. NMSA called for the following:

> "Building a learning community that involves all teachers and places top priority on the education and healthy development of every student, teacher, and staff member . . . professional development should be integrated into the daily life of the school and directly linked to the school's goals for student and teacher success and growth. To meet these goals, people work together in study groups, focus on learning results, analyze student work, and carry out action research." (2003, p. 11)

Principals have also been urged by their professional organizations to focus their efforts on developing their schools as professional learning communities.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals has clarified the essential responsibilities of principals in its publication *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do* (2001) in which it states:

> "If adults don't learn then students won't learn either. . . . The school operates as a learning community that uses its own experience and knowledge, and that of others, to improve the performance of students and teachers alike. . . . They must be a place where learning isn't isolated, where adults demonstrate they care about kids but also about each other. In such places, learning takes place in groups. A culture of shared responsibility is established, and everybody learns from one another." (p. 5)

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) calls upon high schools to engage in an improvement process that will ensure success for every high school student. In *Breaking Ranks II* (2004), the NASSP urges principals to focus on the development of a professional learning community within each school as a primary improvement strategy. In *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (2006), the NASSP organizes 30 recommendations for improving middle schools into three general areas, the first of which calls for "collaborative leadership and professional learning communities" (p. 23).

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In citing its recommendations for effective professional development, the National Staff Development Council (2007) contends, "Effective staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district."

The North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA) is responsible for the accreditation of more than 8,500 schools in 19 states. Concluding that its process works "hand in hand" with the PLC concept, the NCA reported:

> "Working at complementary levels—the school and classroom—the NCA school improvement and PLC processes reinforce and strengthen one another. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually supportive. If we want to ensure that no child is left behind, we must understand the important relationship between the NCA school improvement process and PLC. . . . The use of PLC at the classroom level has dramatically increased teachers' ability to implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum, monitor student progress with colleagues on school improvement goals and curriculum objectives, and improve the teaching and learning process. The strong link between school improvement goals and PLC at the classroom level allows all children to be successful." (Colliton, 2005, p. 1–2)

Studies That Support Professional Learning Communities

The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools conducted a 5-year study that included analysis of data from more than 1,500 elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States. The Center also conducted field research in 44 schools in 16 states. Schools that were successful in linking their improvement initiatives with improved student learning were characterized by the following traits (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995):

1. A focus on an agreed-upon vision of what students should learn
2. Teaching that requires students to think, to develop in-depth understanding, and to apply academic learning to important, realistic problems
3. Schools that function as professional learning communities in which teachers . . .
    - Are guided by a clear shared purpose for student learning
    - Feel a sense of collective responsibility for student learning
    - Collaborate with one another to promote student learning
    - Enjoy increased autonomy at the school site

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Another analysis of the data collected by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools agreed that development of professional learning communities was critical to improving schools and elaborated on the conditions leading to successful PLCs. Kruse, Seashore Louis, and Bryck (1994) argue that in a PLC, teachers are committed to the following:

1. Reflective dialogue based on a shared set of norms, beliefs, and values that allow them to critique their individual and collective performance
2. De-privatization of practice that requires teachers to share, observe, and discuss each other's methods and philosophies
3. Collective focus on student learning fueled by the belief that all students can learn and that staff members have a mutual obligation to see to it that students learn
4. Collaboration that moves beyond dialogue about students to producing materials that improve instruction, curriculum, and assessment for students
5. Shared norms and values that affirm common ground on critical educational issues and a collective focus on student learning

The study also reported that these five factors are supported by structural conditions such as time to meet during the school day, teachers organized into collaborative teams that work together interdependently to achieve common goals, open communication within and across teams, and teacher autonomy guided by a shared sense of purpose, priorities, and norms. Social resources that support the PLCs include commitment to continuous improvement, high levels of trust and respect, sharing of effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and focused orientation for those new to the school.

WestEd, a research and development agency focusing on how to improve schools, explored the question, "What does it take to translate teacher professional development into impressive learning gains for students?" The agency's report concluded, "Our key finding—the central importance of a professional community to adult and student learning—will be no surprise to those familiar with other educational research." (WestEd, 2000, p. 11)

Research That Supports the Three Big Ideas of a Professional Learning Community

Another approach to presenting the research in support of PLCs is to break the concept down into the three big ideas explained in *Learning by Doing* (2006)—a focus on learning, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results—and share the research or each idea. For example, the following research highlights the importance of a collaborative culture:

> "The single most important factor for successful school restructuring and the first order of business for those interested

in increasing the capacity of their schools is building a collaborative internal environment that fosters cooperative problem-solving and conflict resolution." (Eastwood & Seashore Louis, 1992, p. 215)

"The ability to collaborate—on both a small and large scale—is becoming one of the core requisites of postmodern society. . . . In short, without collaborative skills and relationships it is not possible to learn and to continue to learn as much as you need in order to be an agent for social improvement." (Fullan, 1993, pp. 17–18)

"An interdependent work structure strengthens professional community. When teachers work in groups that require coordination, this, by definition, requires collaboration. When groups, rather than individuals, are seen as the main units for implementing curriculum, instruction, and assessment, they facilitate development of shared purpose for student learning and collective responsibility to achieve it." (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, pp. 37–38)

"The key to ensuring that every child has a quality teacher is finding a way for school systems to organize the work of qualified teachers so they can collaborate with their colleagues in developing strong learning communities that will sustain them as they become more accomplished teachers." (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003, p. 7)

"Collaboration and the ability to engage in collaborative action are becoming increasingly important to the survival of the public schools. Indeed, without the ability to collaborate with others the prospect of truly repositioning schools in the constellation of community forces is not likely." (Schlechty, 2005, p. 22)

"A precondition for doing *anything* to strengthen our practice and improve a school is the existence of a collegial culture in which professionals talk about practice, share their craft knowledge, and observe and root for the success of one another. Without these in place, no meaningful improvement—no staff or curriculum development, no teacher leadership, no student appraisal, no team teaching, no parent involvement, and no sustained change—is possible." (Barth, 2006, p. 13)

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Professional organizations for educators have also endorsed the premise that educators should work together collaboratively. Consider the conclusions of the following organizations:

> "Some of the most important forms of professional learning and problem solving occur in group settings within schools and school districts. Organized groups provide the social interaction that often deepens learning and the interpersonal support and synergy necessary for creatively solving the complex problems of teaching and learning. And because many of the recommendations contained in these standards advocate for increased teamwork among teachers and administrators in designing lessons, critiquing student work, and analyzing various types of data, among other tasks, it is imperative that professional learning be directed at improving the quality of collaborative work." (National Staff Development Council, 2007)
>
> "High performing schools tend to promote collaborative cultures, support professional communities and exchanges among all staff and cultivate strong ties among the school, parents, and community. . . . Teachers and staff collaborate to remove barriers to student learning. . . . Teachers communicate regularly with each other about effective teaching and learning strategies." (National Education Association, 2006)
>
> "It is time to end the practice of solo teaching in isolated classrooms. Teacher induction and professional development in 21st century schools must move beyond honing one's craft and personal repertoire of skills. Today's teachers must transform their personal knowledge into a collectively built, widely shared, and cohesive professional knowledge base." (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee [for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future], 2005, p. 4)
>
> "[Accomplished teachers] collaborate with others to improve student learning. . . . They work with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development and staff development." (National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, 2007a)
>
> "Successful middle level teacher preparation programs place a high premium on teaching prospective and practicing middle level teachers about the importance of collaboration with colleagues and other stakeholders. One of the unique characteristics of

> middle level schools for teachers is the heavy emphasis on collaboration. . . . Teachers are not operating in isolation. This permits insights and understandings about young adolescent students to be shared with others and therefore maximized." (National Middle School Association, 2006)
>
> "Isolation is the enemy of learning. Principals who support the learning of adults in their school organize teachers' schedules to provide opportunities for teachers to work, plan, and think together. For instance, teams of teachers who share responsibility for the learning of all students meet regularly to plan lessons, critique student work and the assignments that led to it, and solve common instructional or classroom management problems." (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001, p. 45)
>
> "A high school will regard itself as a *community* in which members of the staff collaborate to develop and implement the school's learning goals. Teachers will provide the leadership essential to the success of reform, collaborating with others in the educational community to redefine the role of the teacher and to identify sources of support for that redefined role." (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, p. 4)

The third big idea in a PLC, a focus on results, has been endorsed by many experts. Evidenced-based decision-making is key to producing a results-orientation in education. Consider the following statements:

> "An astonishing number of educational leaders make critical decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and placement on the basis of information that is inadequate, misunderstood, misrepresented, or simply absent. Even when information is abundant and clear, I have witnessed leaders who are sincere and decent people stare directly at the information available to them, and then blithely ignore it. . . . Strategic leaders are worthy of the name because of their consistent linking of evidence to decision making. They respond to challenges not by scoring rhetorical points but by consistently elevating evidence over assertion." (Reeves, 2006, p. 95)
>
> "School systems must create a culture that places value on managing by results, rather than on managing by programs." (Schlechty, 1997, p. 110)

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> "It is essential that leaders work to establish a culture where results are carefully assessed and actions are taken based on these assessments." (Schlechty, 2005, p. 11)
>
> "Concentrating on results does not negate the importance of process. On the contrary, the two are interdependent: Results tell us which processes are most effective and to what extent and whether processes need reexamining and adjusting. Processes exist for results and results should inform processes." (Schmoker, 1996, p. 4)
>
> "What does it take to close the achievement gaps? Our findings suggest that it comes down to how schools use data. Teachers in gap-closing schools more frequently use data to understand the skill gaps of low-achieving students. . . . When data points to a weakness in students' academic skills, gap-closing schools are more likely to focus in on that area, making tough choices to ensure that students are immersed in what they most need." (Symonds, 2004, p. 13)

In fact, evidence-based decisions are so important to establishing a results orientation in any organization that many experts outside education have advocated for using data:

> "The ultimate measure of a great team is results. Effective teams avoid ambiguity and interpretation when it comes to results. They decide what they want to achieve, then they clarify how they will measure their progress. They select one or two indicators they can collectively focus upon and around which they can rally. They create a scoreboard that helps keep them focused on results. These teams use the scoreboard to monitor their progress against the expected achievement." (Lencioni, 2005, p. 69)
>
> "Companies operate under the false assumption that if they carry out enough of the 'right' improvement activities, actual performance improvements will inevitably materialize. At the heart of this assumption, which we call 'activity centered,' is a fundamentally flawed logic that confuses ends with means, processes with outcomes. Payoffs from the infusion of activities will be meager at best. And there is in fact an alternative: results-driven improvement processes that focus on achieving specific, measurable operational improvements within a few months." (Schaffer & Thomson, 1998, p. 191)

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"We found there was something distinctive about the decision-making process of the great companies we studied. First, they embraced the current reality, no matter how bad the message. Second, they developed a simple yet deeply insightful fame of reference for all decisions. . . . You absolutely cannot make a series of good decisions without first confronting the brutal facts." (Collins, 2001, p. 69)

"Unless you can subject your decision-making to a ruthless and continuous *JUDGMENT BY RESULTS*, all your zigs and zags will only be random lunges in the dark, sooner or later bound to land you on the rocks." (Champy, 1995, p. 120)

"Ducking the facts about performance for fear of being judged, criticized, humiliated, and punished characterizes losing streaks, not winning streaks. In a losing streak, facts are used for blame, not improvement; they are turned into weapons to persecute, not tools to find solutions. . . . In winning streaks, players get and use abundant feedback about their performance. Leaders can . . . ensure that measurements ultimately empower rather than punish people." (Kanter, 2004, p. 208)

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