A New Era in District & School Improvement

The Critical Role of the Superintendent and School Board

Janel Keating and Meagan Rhoades

Gone are the days when school boards had little or nothing to do with student learning or when district-level plans focused on fiscal health and building maintenance with no mention of student achievement. Demands on superintendents and school boards have never been greater. They have been pushed to create policies and practices surrounding educational equity and put the systems in place to ensure the work is accomplished on behalf of all students. They are being routinely called on to analyze data aligned to board and district goals as school board members ask, "Are the kids learning, and how do we know?" They are working with district leaders to advance education research and eliminate teacher isolation and classroom practices that aren't yielding results. They are also expected to act with urgency to ensure that every student is given what they need when needed.

Even with the increased attention, more needs to be done to recognize the importance of this influential team and its responsibility for improving student achievement for all. Although the knowledge base for what makes good district leadership is expanding, the information is sparse on precisely what the work of the superintendent and school board should look like in a high-functioning school district.

Robert Eaker, Mike Hagadone, Janel Keating, and Meagan Rhoades (2021) point out, "Effective top-down district leadership can have a tremendous effect on the quality of the bottom-up work of school teams. It is unrealistic to think that teams throughout a district will be able to function at a high level if the school board and superintendent team is not functioning at a high level to develop a strong PLC foundation—the district mission, vision, values (shared commitments), and goals; embed a collaborative culture throughout the district; and create a commitment to a data-driven, research-based culture at every level within the district" (p. 13). It only makes sense that the more a superintendent and school board understand the systems in place to support student learning at the school and team levels, as well as understanding the PLC process, the more positively they will support the decisions being made and, in fact, work to create alignment and reciprocal accountability starting at the district level.

The school board and superintendent should be the most effective team in the district. The superintendent is responsible for developing, educating, and supporting this team. White River School District Board President Denise Vogel shares, "As a board, we strive to function as a high-performing team working alongside the superintendent on the same goals as every other team in the district—ensuring high levels of learning for all our students. Our daily tasks might look different, but the goal is the same."

We're in a new era in district and school improvement. Rick DuFour (2015) said, "The journey will undoubtedly be hard work. But if there is one undeniable reality for every educator every year, it is that we are going to work hard. The real question is this: Will we work hard and succeed or work hard and fail?" (p. 252). The most productive path is for the superintendent and school board to function as a high-performing collaborative team. Importantly, the work of the school board and superintendent team is grounded in some basic assumptions.
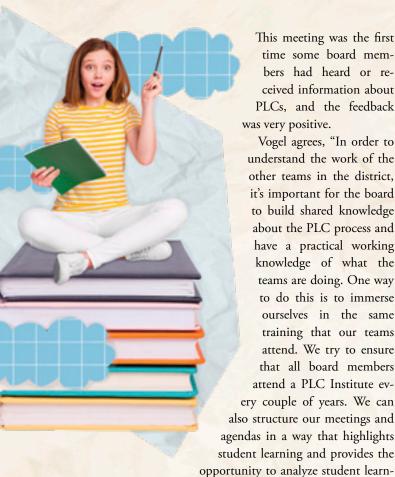
Assumption #1: Educate the Board

The traditional school board in the United States consists of a group of elected folks who may or may not have had any prior experience with the work of a school district. The work of the school board and superintendent team involves educating the board so members understand the concepts, practices, and vocabulary of a PLC at Work—and the expectations and requirements of teams districtwide within the PLC process. We cannot overemphasize the importance of superintendents and district leaders taking time to educate school board members.

Arkansas Board Development Director Tammie Reitenger shares, "Arkansas School Board's mission promotes student-focused leadership, and ensuring that board members have the understanding and knowledge in best practices to promote student achievement is a critical step toward success in the classroom. Including board members in the training sends a strong message that this isn't only a teaching program but the way the district does business. Excellence in the boardroom leads to excellence in the classroom." Arkansas is divided into 14 educational regions. During the fall of 2022, all regions had a practitioner provide training in the PLC process.

This meeting was the first time some board members had heard or received information about PLCs, and the feedback was very positive.

Vogel agrees, "In order to understand the work of the other teams in the district, it's important for the board to build shared knowledge about the PLC process and have a practical working knowledge of what the teams are doing. One way to do this is to immerse ourselves in the same training that our teams attend. We try to ensure that all board members attend a PLC Institute every couple of years. We can also structure our meetings and agendas in a way that highlights student learning and provides the opportunity to analyze student learning data aligned with our board and district goals. We also spend time engaging with the teams and observing the products of the teams that are layered under the four critical questions of learning. This helps keep us all focused on the reason we exist as a superintendent and board team: doing what's best for kids to help them learn at high levels."

To build shared knowledge at the board level, White River School District committed to using one of the two monthly board meetings for learning about the concepts and practices of a PLC. During this meeting, we invited grade-level and content-area teams from our schools to share their essential standards, common formative assessments, processes to analyze data, and ways to add time, support, and extensions linked to their formative assessment data. The school board and superintendent team also had the opportunity to view team products. Through these meetings, board members built shared knowledge and a common vocabulary. It's important to note that school board meetings are open to the public so individual student names and other identifying information were always redacted when looking at data.

Members of the school board and superintendent team also attended collaborative teacher team meetings as observers, watched videos of White River teams doing collaborative work, and engaged in a number of book studies. You would also find board members seated next to staff during districtwide professional development opportunities, included in meetings about the response to intervention process, and involved in the administrative retreat.

Eaker et al. (2021) contend if the board is educated and has a deep understanding of the why, what, and how involved in advancing the mission of the district, student learning will dramatically increase—not to mention the superintendent will experience longevity in the position.

Assumption #2: Focus on the Why

Eaker et al. (2021) highlight, "From the school board and the superintendent down to the teacher teams, it is important to start with the why. Typically, educators will not oppose change if they understand why the change is so critically important. As Anthony Muhammad and Luis F. Cruz (2019) point out, 'A leader has to create a compelling, fact-based case for change, and then use his or her ability to convince people to make the organizational challenge their personal challenge' (p. 25)" (pp. 14–15).

In White River School District, we posited that to create system change, to ensure equity across our district, we had to create an aligned system where every person in every position played a part in supporting the district mission.

Simon Sinek (2009) says, "For values or guiding principles to be truly effective they have to be verbs. It's not 'integrity,' it's 'always do the right thing.' It's not 'innovation,' it's 'look at the problem from a different angle.' Articulating our values as verbs gives us a clear idea—we have a clear idea of how to act in every situation" (p. 67).

In White River School District, our mission is ensuring high levels of learning for each student and preparing them for success after high school. *Ensure* is a big verb—it requires alignment to the mission from every role. As we have said, hope is not a plan. We need to do more than just hope that each student achieves.

If the superintendent and school board are committed to improving learning, they must focus on implementing PLC at Work concepts and practices. Why? Because by doing this work we can improve adult professional practice and student achievement levels at every school, on every team, and in every classroom, as measured by multiple indicators, including:

- Grades
- Attendance
- State assessment results
- Student growth data
- Graduation rates
- Enrollment and completion of postsecondary education
- Dual credits earned
- Increased enrollment in AP courses and increased AP courses being offered for successful student completion of a more rigorous and challenging curriculum
- ACT and SAT results
- Positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS) and multitiered systems of support (MTSS) data
- Special education data
- Historically underserved student data

At the end of the day, why should leaders work so hard to align the work of every team, every day? The answer is clear: to improve Tier 1 instruction to ensure high levels of learning for all students—grade by grade, course by course, subject by subject, unit by unit, lesson by lesson, skill by skill, and name by name, and to improve the professional practice of every adult in the district.

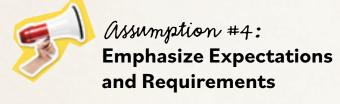## Assumption #3: Engage in Collaborative Teaming

In *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*, Daniel Coyle (2018) shares his research into widely varied successful groups. He summarizes the three basic requirements that tap into the power of our social brains to create powerful working interactions. He states, "Skill 1—Build Safety—explores how signals of connection generate bonds of belonging and identity. Skill 2—Share Vulnerability—explains how habits of mutual risk drive trusting cooperation. Skill 3—Establish Purpose—tells how narratives create shared goals and values. The skills work from the bottom up, first building group connections and then channeling it into action" (p. xix).

In other words, building successful collaborative teams is more than just putting people into a group. We just talked about focusing on the why, or establishing purpose. Our purpose isn't siloed based on grade level, content area, school, or department. We share a universal purpose.

Eaker et al. (2021) share, "The school board and superintendent team realized that engaging educators to work in collaborative teams was truly the best hope for significantly improving learning across the district. In the White River School District, the school board and superintendent team aligned the work of teams under the four critical questions of learning that are central to the PLC at Work process" (p. 16).

As *Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2016) reminds us, "The very reason any organization is established is to bring people together in an organized way to achieve a collective purpose that cannot be accomplished by working alone" (p. 75). Building that shared purpose in your school board and superintendent team is critical. A board and superintendent that deeply understand the PLC process will implement policies that support that work and align the budget to allow for innovation supported by data. Creating a collaborative team at the superintendent and board level requires time and deliberate work. But we would contend that it's the most important work that can happen.

Assumption #4:
Emphasize Expectations and Requirements

Eaker et al. (2021) state, "District office staff often struggle with delivering deliberate messages regarding expectations. However, most educators—actually, most people—are far more productive and satisfied when they know what expectations are and have a clear direction to work toward" (p. 17).

In a PLC, leaders are tight about what all students must learn—in every course, subject, grade, and unit, as agreed on by the teams—and about providing evidence of student learning student by student, skill by skill. Leaders are tight on best practices and teaching and instructional strategies while encouraging creativity, individuality, ownership, empowerment, and teachers' professionalism. Leaders cannot expect or require behaviors and actions until they themselves are clear about best practices, expectations, and what the evidence of meeting those expectations looks like. In other words, leaders can't effectively be tight on anything unless they can explain and describe it with great clarity.
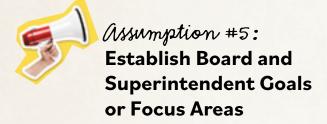
The school board and superintendent team should expect and require that each school, grade level, and department:

- Make student learning the priority and align all practices and procedures to promote student learning.
- Measure all major decisions against the probable impact on learning.
- Ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum is in place at every grade level and course (Tier 1 core content).
- Monitor the data and results and have a "then what?" plan (for Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention).
- Create systems that house the guaranteed and viable curriculum work and advance the work of teams.

The superintendent and district leaders should provide written collaboration expectations to all teams. For example, team members should arrive at collaboration with evidence of student learning (data or student work) from the last five days of instruction. Teams should engage in a process to analyze the evidence of student learning. Based on the evidence of student learning, the team should design a plan for additional time, support, and extensions. Finally, teams should agree on the next learning targets and checks for understanding that will land at collaboration the following week.

Eaker et al. (2021) explain, "The superintendent, board, and district leaders must confidently state, 'We're going to expect, require, and support our staff to do the work of ensuring high levels of learning for all of our students by embedding the concepts and practices of the PLC at Work model in our day-to-day work and confront the behaviors that are incongruent with the expectations!'" (p. 17).

Setting clear expectations and requirements is a powerful tool to build trust. When we work in an environment of slippery expectations and requirements that change based on the day of the week or the weather, we don't experience safety or trust. Doing the work of developing, documenting, and communicating those expectations and requirements will also refine your own thinking. Check in frequently to ensure what you are asking is fully aligned with your mission of student learning and the four critical questions.

Assumption #5:
Establish Board and Superintendent Goals or Focus Areas

In the White River School District, there are structures in place that ensure all teams—the district leadership team, building leadership teams, and teacher collaborative teams—receive clear direction and communication from the school board and superintendent team. The board and superintendent can accomplish this, for example, when they analyze student learning data by grade level, subject, and course. As a result of the data analysis, the school board and superintendent team are able to provide focused direction and goals for each academic year. There's an expectation that individual schools and the teacher collaborative teams within them mirror the same process—analyzing data, setting school SMART goals, establishing team goals unit by unit, and student goals target by target. It's this process that ensures teams are doing the right work at the right time, for the right reason, and in the right way.

The board and superintendent team should establish both student achievement and process implementation goals or focus areas. For example, a student achievement goal might reflect a 90 percent achievement goal for students in K–2 in reading and math or to improve mathematics achievement by a certain percentage per grade level. A process implementation goal or focus area could include implementing a guaranteed and viable curriculum across the district; implementing effective Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions; building additional time, support, and extensions into the school day; or implementing a half-day preschool program for all four-year-olds.

In this simultaneous top-down, bottom-up cyclical process, the results flow upward from the students and teacher teams. Teacher teams share learning data, coupled with feedback and needs requests, with the school leadership team. This information is then forwarded to the district leadership team, where members analyze data, disaggregate it, and share it with the school board and superintendent team. These data then serve as the primary tool for the school board and superintendent's goal-setting process for the next cycle. Goals and direction flow down, while data results, suggestions, input, and needs requests flow up.

Assumption #6:
Celebrate Improvement

One crucial way leaders communicate what they truly value is with frequent monitoring of the work of teams and timely and meaningful recognition and celebration along the way (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). When leaders monitor—pay attention to—the *quality of the products* teams produce and the results of each team's improvement efforts, the message is clear: this work is important. The same is true with recognition and celebration. As Tom Peters (1987) writes, "Well-constructed recognition settings provide the single most important opportunity to parade and reinforce the specific kinds of new behaviors one hopes others will emulate" (p. 307).

Soccer champion Abby Wambach (2019) shares, "It might appear to the crowd that the team is celebrating the goal scorer, but what the team is really celebrating is every player, every coach, every practice, every sprint, every doubt, and every failure that this one single goal represents. . . . I've never scored a goal in my life without getting a pass from someone else. Every goal I've ever scored belonged to my entire team. When you score, you better start pointing" (pp. 56–57).

This is a powerful message for any school district to keep in mind. Third-grade state assessment scores don't increase without the work of the kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade teachers; the paraeducators; the cafeteria workers; and the bus drivers. High school graduation rates don't increase without the work of the middle school staff. A district that has created an aligned system to ensure high levels of student learning should be able to point to everyone when they experience success.

The expectation that all students can learn at high levels is now a part of our cultural belief. And great strides have been made in changing the practices in schools. But we also need to acknowledge that progress can be hampered or excelled by the policies and budget allocations that are set at the district and board level. A complete alignment of the PLC at Work practices, from board and superintendent to grade-level and content-area teams, will create a system truly aligned to the goal of equity for all students. ▪

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Discussion Questions

1. In what ways are your superintendent and school board responsible for high levels of learning for all?
2. Brainstorm ways in which board members could be better educated about PLCs. Choose one idea and create an implementation plan for it.
3. What should the work of the superintendent and school board look like in a high-functioning school district?