

# The Professional Learning Community and the Catholic Administrator

By Barbara McMorrow, Professional Development Director

The term Professional Learning Community (PLC) has been in use for several years and the concept is widely recognized by leading educational researchers, theorists and practitioners as a powerful means for transforming schools and improving student achievement. The attributes of a professional learning community are:

- ♦ shared mission, vision and values
- ♦ collaborative teams
- ♦ collective inquiry
- ♦ action orientation and experimentation
- ♦ continuous improvement
- ♦ results orientation (*Whatever It Takes*, Dufour & Ecker).

A school that operates as a professional learning community engages all members of the staff to work together in embracing fully the belief that the fundamental purpose of a school is learning, not teaching. It challenges the status quo and the assumption that the school is an institution primarily geared toward a systematic process of sorting, selecting and certifying students to determine who among them is deemed capable of higher learning.

Instead, a PLC asserts that schooling must be about ensuring that all students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be life-long, self-directed learners. The staff in such a community is driven by an urgent sense of moral purpose in their desire to make a positive difference in the lives of students. A professional learning community is a place that clearly values the voice and contributions of all members: students, teachers, support staff, parents and administrators. It allows for each person to have a meaningful voice and creates a culture where people are willing to take risks to maximize the achievement of all students. It calls for an approach to leadership that empowers others and that has a clear focus on being innovative, creative and passionate about learning.

The concept of the PLC - its philosophical underpinnings and its framework for translating the notion into action - may resonate deeply with the Catholic administrator. There is a clear focus on community and collaboration. It emphasizes communication and reflective dialogue and debate. It is an approach to leadership that encourages a shared sense of responsibility and an acknowledgement that we are all called to be engaged in life-long, self-directed learning. And it embraces a vision rooted in the moral imperative of inclusion that is at the heart of Catholic education.

This philosophy is reflected in the *Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations* which emphasize the development of:

- ♦ a discerning believer formed in the Catholic faith community
- ♦ an effective communicator
- ♦ a reflective and creative thinker



- ♦ a self-directed, responsible, life-long learner
- ♦ a collaborative contributor
- ♦ a caring family member
- ♦ a responsible citizen.

The expectations that we have for our graduates need to be rooted in their lived reality of school. Our Catholic schools in their structures, culture and daily practices should reflect an authentic learning environment in which these expectations are able to be fully realized.

The school that is a professional learning community is clearly grounded in a shared vision and mission that shifts the focus from teaching to learning, from summative assessment to formative assessment, from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning and even towards assessment *as* learning. The focus is to move away from working in isolation; to move toward a genuine team approach that values the voice of everyone, where teachers and students are not afraid to take risks and challenge traditional assumptions and practices in order to maximize the achievement of all students.

Dufour & Ecker describe the concrete, practical changes that characterize a transformed school:

*When educators embrace learning for all as the fundamental purpose of their school, they begin to recognize that some students will require additional time and support in order to be successful, and they develop processes for providing time and support during the school day on a timely, directive and systematic basis. They concentrate on each student's mastery of each essential knowledge and skill rather than relying on averages. They recognize the need to work together collaboratively rather than in isolation (p.16 On Common Ground).*

The kind of leadership called for to ensure that these expectations are met in our Catholic schools is eloquently articulated by J. Mulligan in *Catholic Education: The Future Is Now*:

*The leader, the single authority figure, no longer has the same impact as the collabora-*

*tive, consistent and conscientious witnessing of the group or community. In education, the commitment and the dedication of the school community will make a deeper, more relevant statement to the public than the single leader no matter how great her charisma or his public relation skills. Real authority is diffused throughout the Catholic school community. The contemporary challenge for authority in the Catholic school then is to release the potential of the core community, the Catholic educators in the school. It is to facilitate the liberation of others who will be leaders in their different spheres of influence. (p.114)*

In *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities*, Michael Fullan articulates a similar approach to this notion of “shared leadership, lateral capacity building, deep learning and a collective moral purpose” and maintains that:

*The main mark of a school principal at the end of his or her tenure is not just his or her impact on the bottom line of student achievement, but equally on how many good leaders he or she leaves behind who can go even further. This is the long lever of leadership.*

There is a compelling case for Catholic educators to embrace the challenge of understanding deeply the concept of a PLC and to work together to overcome the barriers that prevent them from beginning the journey toward creating and sustaining their schools as authentic professional learning communities.

Building relationships and establishing trust are integral to this journey of hope and faith. It will take time and energy but both the process and the end results make this labour of love worth the effort.

*For further information contact Barbara McMorrow at [bmcorrow@cpc.on.ca](mailto:bmcorrow@cpc.on.ca).*