

## Plainville Citizen Op-Ed, October, 2015

### **Strengthening a Collaborative Culture**

As a means of accelerating the positive change we have seen in the Plainville Community Schools over the past decade, we have recently begun to provide structures and practices that foster a climate of working together toward common goals. Instead of 200 teachers working on separate goals, our teachers are working collaboratively this year on just two systemic goals. At the elementary level, all teachers are working to ensure that all children are reading informational and literary text for pleasure as well as to accomplish assigned tasks. And at the secondary level, teachers are working to increase student motivation and ownership of learning by creating a culture of self-assessment and goal setting.

Providing time for teachers to work on a shared goal and encouraging a culture of collaborative problem solving are two ways to build teacher leadership that translates into stronger and more productive instruction for our students. During regularly scheduled cross district meetings (called professional learning communities or data teams), Plainville teachers are working together to examine student work as well as benchmark assessment data in order to make decisions about changes to instruction designed to help students improve their work. Agreeing on a change in strategy and then implementing that change and making note of the impact on students is a significant part of instructional improvement. As our teachers continue to work collaboratively to solve problems of instructional practice, they grow in their skills, confidence, and expertise. Learning from one another and sharing what is working and what continues to be challenging is a significant component of building a collaborative culture within and across schools in the district.

To assist teachers in the work of professional learning communities, Dr. Kitching gave every teacher in the district a copy of the book, *Cultures Built to Last* by Richard DuFour and Michael Fullan. This short, easy to read book sets forth the three “big ideas” that are the core of the PLC process: a relentless focus on learning for all students; a collaborative culture and collective effort to support student and adult learning; and a results orientation to improve practice and drive continuous improvement. The leadership team - consisting of administrators and teacher leaders - meet together to collaboratively plan PLC meetings. Sending a clear message that our efforts must be focused relentlessly on learning for each student, we continuously explore four critical questions: What do we want our students to learn? How will we know if each student is learning each of the skills related to our goals? What will we do when some students do not learn? How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are already proficient? As we work collaboratively throughout the year, we believe that the systemic PLC process will cultivate and deepen our sense of common purpose, mutual accountability, and collective efficacy/ability to work together to get the job done.

In short, we believe that collaborating and striving toward a common goal, will enable our teachers to solve problems and achieve positive results for each of our students. This year will be a year of learning the processes of PLCs as we work as grade level or interdisciplinary teams across schools.