



The ultimate practitioner



A solid idea coupled with savvy marketing has enabled Rick DuFour's vision of PLCs to revolutionize how teachers work with each other.

By Joan Richardson

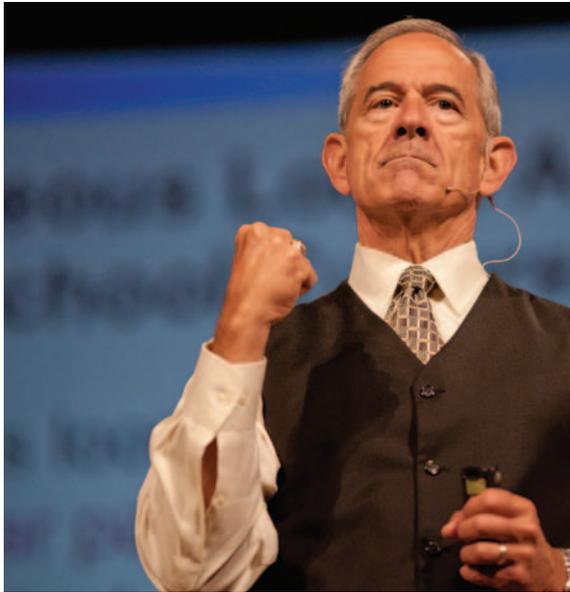
Yellow school buses pepper the lot at the St. Charles, Mo., convention center, surrounded by cars from a broad swath of states stretching from Illinois and Kentucky to Texas and Kansas. The meeting hall swells with a capacity crowd of 1,361 educators from 17 states who are giving up three days of their summer vacation to learn about professional learning communities (PLCs).

Inside, all eyes are on Rick DuFour, the movie star-handsome presenter who is the de facto leader of the PLC movement.

On a brightly lit stage and with his image projected on a series of 10-foot screens, DuFour begins crooning Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" — and the crowd roars. It is a metaphoric moment. In the stolid and often hyper-serious business of education, DuFour, a former history teacher, high school principal, and superintendent, is a rock star. And like any successful rocker, DuFour has a good band of people he works with, and a savvy promoter who markets the message.

At 64, he knows how to both rock the room and entice thousands of skeptical educators to take on some of the hardest work that educators can be asked to do: Change the behavior and attitudes of the adults who work in schools in order to improve student learning.

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DuFour knows exactly how hard it is because he's done it. As principal and then superintendent for 19 years, he transformed Adlai Stevenson High School in suburban Chicago from a good school to one of the most

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highly honored high schools in the country; that's no small task considering that the American high school is traditionally an institution nearly immune to change. But he's forthright in telling teachers that the “stairway to PLC heaven” is steep and littered with resistance and distractions. It helps that in story after story, detail after detail, DuFour shows that he's been there, done that, made mistakes — and still succeeded.

“Rick is the ultimate practitioner,” said Eric Twadell, now superintendent of the Adlai Stevenson High School District 125. “He's the one who rolled up his sleeves and did the work. He's effective because he's speaking from experience.”

Although DuFour has become synonymous with PLCs, he has never operated alone. His partner since the early years of this work has been Bob Eaker, a professor of education and former dean at Middle Tennessee State University. That partnership expanded to include DuFour's wife, Rebecca, a former elementary school principal, after the couple's marriage in 2002.

The reach of the PLC concept is hard to overestimate, especially given that there is no government mandate requiring schools to adopt PLCs. Robert Marzano calls the PLC work “probably the most influential movement with regards to actually changing practices in schools” (*Leaders of Learning*, 2011, p. x). Repeatedly, its adherents say they adopt it because “it just makes sense.” DuFour's 12 books

(most of them co-authored with Eaker and/or Becky DuFour) have sold more than 1.6 million copies. (A typical best seller in education sells about 50,000 copies.) In addition to books, DuFour has penned 80 articles that have appeared in publications read primarily by practitioners. This year alone, the DuFours and Eaker will present at events that reach more than 30,000 educators, most of them coming as part of teams that have started to or intend to implement PLCs when they return home. DuFour estimates that he's spoken before more than a quarter million educators in the past eight years.

Bill Ferriter, a North Carolina language arts teacher who writes and presents frequently about PLCs, believes most teachers come to believe in PLCs because the concept recognizes that “the knowledge and expertise to improve rests within the hearts and minds of the teachers in a school.”

“This is an idea that touches the most motivated teachers, the most accomplished teachers,” and they are the ones who will make the most meaningful contributions in a school, Ferriter said. “PLCs really light a fire under the most motivated people in your building.”

Getting to PLCs

Sheer pragmatism drove DuFour to education in the first place. A native of Kankakee, Ill., and the son of a high school dropout, he was the first in his extended family to go to college. With no family money to support that aspiration, he decided to become a teacher because his loan debt would be reduced by 10% for every year that he taught.

After graduating from Illinois State University, he headed to Batavia, Ill., to teach high school history. “I loved the time in the classroom with the kids. But I had very little interaction with my colleagues. Three of us taught the exact same course. I don't remember a single time that we ever talked about it,” he said.

“I didn't want to be a teacher who worried about providing a good experience in one class, one course. I wanted to be the one who ensures that every kid has a good experience every day in class. That's what pushed me into administration,” he said.

After 14 years at schools in Batavia and West Chicago, DuFour became principal of Adlai Stevenson High School in 1983. He envisioned creating a school with high standards and rigorous curriculum that nurtured every kid and left each feeling that the adults who surrounded them at school cared about their success. Stevenson was typical of most schools in the early 1980s — and of many today. “They were totally committed to a sorting and selecting mentality. They sorted kids into five ability groups based on the results of one test, the California Achievement Test, that they took in 8th grade. They had strict caps

and quotas so no more than 10% of the kids could ever be in an honors program and 25% were automatically assigned to a substandard curriculum.

“That just grated on my philosophy, my egalitarian nature, and the blue-collar chip I had on my shoulder,” DuFour said.

DuFour labored to dismantle that practice by abolishing remedial courses and opening up honors and AP courses to all students. The faculty was the toughest sell. “It wasn’t all peaches and cream,” he said.

But he kept hammering at teachers to support his ideas. A successful pilot program demonstrated that “remedial” students could be successful in grade-level curriculum if they had additional time and support during the school day. In another crucial change, history teacher Paul Fitzgerald volunteered to open up his AP European History class to anyone who wanted to take it, including sophomores. Fifty students signed up and 48 earned honor grades on the AP exam. One by one, other teachers and other departments began to move away from the sorting and selecting mentality, and Stevenson built a system of intervention.

“We went from being a place that said ‘we are a barrier’ to saying ‘we are the bridge.’ If you want to take a course, we will never ban you from taking that course. We will give you help. We will give you extra time. We will give you extra support,” DuFour said. (Stevenson’s Twadell said about 85% of the school’s 4,100 students took at least one AP exam last year.)

But such a philosophy required a dramatic change in how Stevenson operated. If teachers agreed on what students should learn, then wouldn’t they want to know if students had learned what was intended? How would they do that? If students didn’t learn, then what would teachers do? If they had mastered what was expected, then what? Those concepts and challenges became the seedlings to PLC’s core.

“It was an evolution and incremental trial and error,” DuFour said. “There was no point where we said, ‘let’s think through what this should be,’” he said. “I tried to be a student of research, but I learned the most about effective collaborative teams and a school that operates as a high-performing PLC by observing the wonderful educators at Stevenson.”

What is a PLC?

More than the weekly team meetings that have become their trademark, PLCs are intended to usher in a cultural shift in a school or district, DuFour and Eaker said. In the new culture, educators assume collective responsibility for student outcomes. At the heart is the belief that a team of teachers working together can achieve more than one teacher working alone. So, rather than expecting a single classroom teacher to know everything that’s necessary



RICHARD P. DuFOUR

POSITION: Author, educational consultant

AGE: 64

EDUCATION: Bachelor’s degree in history, Illinois State University, 1969; master’s degree, history, Northern Illinois University, 1972; Ed.D. in administration, Northern Illinois University, 1981.

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY: Superintendent, Adlai Stevenson High School District 125, Lincolnshire, Ill., 1991-2002; assistant superintendent/principal, Adlai Stevenson High School District 125, 1983-1991; earlier positions in West Chicago and Batavia, Ill.

BOOKS: *Fulfilling the Promise of Excellence*, with Robert Eaker (Wilkerson, 1987); *The Principal as Staff Developer* (NES, 1991); *Creating the New American School*, with Robert Eaker (NES, 1992); *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, with Robert Eaker (NES, 1998); *Getting Started*, with Robert Eaker and Rebecca DuFour (NES, 2002); *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don’t Learn*, with Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Gayle Karhanek, (NES, 2004); editor, *On Common Ground* (NES, 2005); *Learning by Doing*, with Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many (Solution Tree, 2006 and 2010); *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*, with Robert Eaker and Rebecca DuFour (Solution Tree, 2008); *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever It Takes*, with Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Gayle Karhanek (Solution Tree, 2009); *The Role of the Principal in Improving Schools*, with Rebecca DuFour (Solution Tree, in press); *Leaders of Learning*, with Robert Marzano (Solution Tree, 2011).

AWARDS: Numerous personal awards, including twice receiving the Illinois Distinguished Educator award (once as principal, once as superintendent) and the Milken Educator Award (1988). In addition, Stevenson High School received four Blue Ribbon Awards for Excellence in Education from the U.S. Department of Education (1987, 1991, 1998, and 2002) during his leadership at the school. Stevenson also received the U.S. Department of Education’s New American High Schools Award in 1998. *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* consistently have ranked Stevenson among the top high schools in America.

WEB SITE: allthingsplc.info



to respond to every student's needs, teachers work together to identify the needs and determine the response. Typically, those teachers teach the same course, the same subject, or the same grade.

What does DuFour want educators to do: Change the behavior and attitudes of the adults who work in schools in order to improve student learning.

The "learning" in PLC refers to both student learning and adult learning. In a more formal definition, PLC "is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators" (*Learning by Doing*, 2nd ed., 2010, p. 11).

"You always begin the process with the learning. Every time you begin a new phase, you begin with the learning," DuFour said.

PLCs have encountered little opposition despite their vast reach. But occasionally, teacher unions have objected to requiring teachers to work with colleagues, fearing that teachers will lose valuable planning time and be forced to do their planning during personal time. And many bargaining teams have tried to negotiate the work that teachers will do during PLC meetings. In particular, they have opposed sharing the results of common assessments, fearing that they would be used in teacher evaluations.

DuFour is adamant that teachers should be expected to collaborate with their peers. "We should

not be issuing invitations to teachers to collaborate," he said. And he is equally adamant about using team-developed common formative assessments. They are, he says, the linchpin for the entire process. By examining evidence of student learning through frequent team-developed common formative assessments, team members are able to provide timely intervention or enrichment for specific students on specific skills. Furthermore, the transparency of results helps individual team members identify their strengths and weaknesses and learn from one another. Finally, the team can identify its own learning needs when they see students consistently struggle to achieve regardless of the teacher to whom they're assigned.

DuFour talks at length about the logistics and has been pressed to do so in recent years, something that's reflected in the PLC books that have moved from describing roles and assumptions to such topics as finding time for PLC team meetings, writing norms for those meetings, and having conversations with resistant teachers.

"They really have made huge gains about what it looks like in practice," said Michael Fullan, the University of Toronto education professor who is one of the leading change theorists in education. "Their work gets more and more specific and more and more precise. It's become more and more clear."

Fullan points to the PLC work by the DuFours and Eaker as an example of the kind of knowledge that should be driving change in schools. "Practice should be driving practice. Research is not a good driver (of change in school); practice is. My belief is that you should immerse yourself in practice first and then plug yourself into research second," he said.

Eaker concurs. "Most 'scholars' don't put much stock in the people who do the work. If you look at what Rick and I have done, you'll see that we haven't been sitting around writing term papers to each other," Eaker said. "We've deliberately worked with schools and districts to learn how it works in practice."

Marketing the idea

As Fullan and Eaker suggest, PLCs have gained legitimacy among educators because of DuFour's extended experience with it and because of the increasing evidence that it is working in schools of all sorts. But two other relationships have also played enormous roles in the successful reach of this idea. The first is a longstanding professional partnership with Jeff Jones, president and CEO of Solution Tree; the second was Becky DuFour's addition to the DuFour-Eaker team.

The DuFour-Jones partnership has added a marketing dimension to the work unequalled in education. The two men met in 1998 soon after Jones and D.G. Elmore bought National Educational Services (NES).

The Bloomington, Ind.-based NES had published a few books, including DuFour's early books, and done some professional development. But NES was a backwater operation compared to other education publishers like ASCD, Jossey-Bass, and Corwin Press. In 2005, Jones renamed NES Solution Tree, Inc.

The fortunes of Rick DuFour and Solution Tree have been intertwined, each benefiting the other. Without the marketing know-how of Solution Tree, DuFour's work might never have found the vast audience it has. Without the quality of DuFour's work, prolific writing, and the appeal of the idea to educators, Solution Tree might never have been able to fully realize Jeff Jones' vision of what Solution Tree could provide for the field.

Jones envisioned a company that would "advance the work of our authors" in order to "create schools where all children succeed" — a mission statement that separates Solution Tree from other education publishers. The typical publisher issues an author's book and markets it via catalogs, direct mail, and booths at education conferences. Solution Tree acts more as a comprehensive agent for an author's work and a full-service provider for schools and districts that want to implement an author's ideas.

Solution Tree not only publishes and markets the books, it also produces events — two-day workshops, three-day institutes, and summits — that promote an author's work, develops online courses, and trains associates who can work with schools and districts that want to implement an author's ideas.

While authors publishing with other companies are largely on their own to translate their written ideas into other opportunities, "We take care of everything from soup to nuts," said Douglas Rife, president of Solution Tree Press and formerly president of Corwin Press. With DuFour's PLC work, for example, Solution Tree has created a no-commerce web site (www.allthingsplc.info) that provides a place for educators to turn to with their questions about PLCs and to receive research and resources to support their efforts. Solution Tree has also created a web-based network where the PLC associates can talk with each other about the challenges they're uncovering — in essence, creating their own professional learning community. Every other year, Solution Tree hosts a face-to-face event where they can learn from each other.

Introducing PLCs in Australia, for example, Solution Tree has worked with the DuFours to develop 11 pilot PLC schools. Rick and Becky DuFour traveled to Australia in January 2011 to introduce the ideas and help launch the schools in this work. Solution Tree is helping the schools collect data on how they change and expects that some of the teachers and administrators from those schools will become PLC associates

who can further spread the word in Australia.

At first, Jones had a nice idea without much traction. The first book-specific conference for DuFour in 1998 attracted only about 90 participants; the next

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year was worse with only 76 participants. But the books were selling, and DuFour was writing and presenting frequently on the topic and continuing to refine his ideas and his work with PLCs at Stevenson.

Adding Becky

DuFour really seemed to pick up steam after meeting and marrying Rebecca Burnette in 2002, the same year both retired from their respective school districts. Burnette had been principal of Boones Mill Elementary School in Franklin County, Va.

The fortunes of Rick DuFour and Solution Tree have been intertwined, each benefiting the other.

DuFour also found in Becky a colleague as deeply interested in his vision of reforming schools and whose experience quickly expanded his knowledge about how PLCs could function. “She was a godsend to me. All of my experience was secondary. She was proving that it works very easily in an elementary setting. I’m north, she’s south. I was suburban, she’s rural. My school had 4,500 students; hers had 450. She helped show that this process could work in schools that are very different from Stevenson,” DuFour said.

Eaker said Becky DuFour’s experience was crucial. “It’s true that she brought a whole new perspective to his view of schooling, not just because she was from the elementary. She’s also very good at seeing connections and seeing details that we might paint with a broader brush,” he said.

Having a loving partner who also shared his professional passion enabled DuFour to embark on the grueling life of being a fulltime presenter/consultant/writer. So, in 2002, the newly married couple hit the road to spread the word about PLCs. That

year also marked the tipping point for Solution Tree’s PLC work. With both DuFours on the stage, every PLC event was suddenly drawing about 500 educators. From there, the growth has been steady. This year, Solution Tree will sponsor 21 PLC institutes in North America that are expected to draw nearly 30,000 educators.

And the collection of books that were once available only in English have been translated into Arabic, Dutch, and French and are being distributed in Australia, China, Hong Kong, Ireland, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, and Singapore.

What’s ahead for PLCs?

Regardless of PLCs success, DuFour says challenges remain. He fears the growing disparity between the professional development experiences of urban and suburban teachers. PLCs and efforts at capacity building are flourishing in suburban and small-town districts, but they’ve seen far less growth in urban schools where teachers experience more directive professional development.

“PLCs take a constant, persistent push over time, and urban districts find that very difficult,” said DuFour. “Urban districts just have a really hard time staying focused because they have so many initiatives going on at once.”

“If I ever found an urban district that would commit to doing this for three years and promise to stay focused and buffer people from other issues, I’d donate my time to work with that district,” he said.

He also worries that educators will be tempted to seek shortcuts to avoid doing the real work of PLCs. “Rather than discuss essential curriculum with colleagues, they will argue that the state standards or textbook establish the curriculum and will avoid the dialogue. Rather than working together to create team-developed common assessments, they will ask the district to create or purchase assessments. Rather than using evidence of student learning to inform and improve their practice, they will use common assessments merely to assign grades. So, if there’s one bit of advice that I give schools these days: Beware of the seductive shortcuts,” he said. “The ‘learning’ part of the PLC requires that you work through the process in order to learn. To be a PLC, you must actually do what PLCs do.”

After all he’s experienced and with all the stories of success he’s heard from schools and districts that have implemented PLCs, DuFour is more convinced than ever that this is the right way to transform schools. “There’s no evidence that we can supervise and evaluate people into better performance. But there is a lot of evidence that, when you can create the right conditions, you allow ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.”

