

## **Do PLCs Enable Students to Act Irresponsibly by Asking Educators to Assume Greater Responsibility for Student Learning?**

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Those familiar with our work know that we contend schools committed to helping all students learn provide students who are not being successful with additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, and systematic. This proposal is sometimes met with skepticism by those who feel a system of interventions “enables” students. They argue that if students fail to study, fail to complete their work, or fail to meet deadlines, they should suffer the logical consequence of their actions—failure. This consequence, the argument goes, will teach the student to become more responsible in the future.

When this challenge is raised, we respond with the following questions:

1. Can we agree that virtually all educators would prefer their students demonstrate self-discipline, a strong work ethic, the ability to manage their time in order to meet deadlines, diligence, resilience, and other qualities that might come under the general heading of responsibility because those qualities increase the likelihood of student success?
2. Can we agree that some students do not demonstrate these qualities?

If we can agree on the first two questions, the only question to be resolved is how can we instill these qualities in students who are not innately responsible? Anyone who has ever taught should be willing to acknowledge that if students are told, “You must do this work and turn it in on time, or you will fail,” some students will be perfectly content to fail. Allowing them the option of not doing the work merely reinforces their irresponsibility. A school that is committed to helping all students learn—helping all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success—will teach students to demonstrate responsibility by insisting students do what responsible people do.

As parents, we would never consider telling our own child, “You must mow the lawn by Saturday, and if you don’t mow it by Saturday, you will never have to mow it!” Yet, educators continue to defend taking that exact position with other people’s children. It is illogical to argue that we teach students responsibility by allowing them to choose to be irresponsible, and we have a century of evidence that this strategy does not work!

Consider two very different schools. The staff of the first school exhorts students to study for tests, complete their homework on time, and persevere if they experience initial difficulty. Alas, some of their students elect to ignore these admonitions. Teachers then impose a penalty—failing grades or zeros on missed assignments. In effect, students are free to opt for the penalty rather than do the work. The second school offers no such option. If students do not put sufficient time into their studies, the staff requires them to

spend time in a tutorial situation. If students do not complete their homework, they are placed in an environment where completion of homework is carefully monitored. This school strives to teach students responsibility by insisting students act responsibly—even if under duress—in the hope that students will ultimately internalize the lesson. Which of these schools is holding students accountable? Which has “enabled” irresponsible behavior?

A pyramid of interventions is not the same as saying that students should not experience consequences for lack of effort or irresponsible behavior. It is reasonable to provide students with incentives for completing their work on time and consequences for failing to meet deadlines or achieve the acceptable standard of work. A school that made learning its primary focus, however, would never consider absolving the student of the responsibility for completing an assignment as an appropriate consequence—particularly if the assignment was given with the assumption that it would promote student learning.

When schools make working and learning optional, both students and teachers can take the easy way out. Conversely, when schools create an effective system of interventions, students are held accountable. Their schools bombard them with the message, “We will not let you off the hook. We will see to it that you do what is necessary to be successful. We won’t place you in a less rigorous curriculum, nor will we lower our standards for this course or grade level. We will give you the support, time, and structure to help you be successful, but we will not lower the bar.” This approach is the antithesis of enabling.