Preface

THE RATIONALE

There seems to be an intuitive notion that "together is better," especially when it comes to professional learning. The concept of professional learning networks, with built-in ideas like commonality of purpose, reciprocity, exchange, and so on, seems to be a good fit for taking up the capacity-building challenges in education. Indeed, the educational landscape is well populated with professional learning communities (PLCs) of various sorts. The problem is that the pace of takeup of PLCs as a "good idea" far exceeds the evidence we have about their effectiveness. When we work with groups of educators—even very large ones—a favorite question of ours is to ask who is in a PLC. Without exception, a very healthy majority of hands go up. Where things get complicated is when we start to dig a little deeper and ask what being in a PLC actually means. What we find is that it means everything to everybody—voluntary "lunch and learns," after-school book studies, scheduled grade and division team encounters, focused lesson studies, and much, much more. And because being "in it together" makes such good intuitive sense, appealing to a basic need for affiliation as human beings, very few people push forward to ask the critical question, Does it translate into changed classroom practice and improved student learning and achievement?

What we find when we look at the research on professional learning collectives of various sorts is that together *can* be better—but it can also make no difference at all or even make things worse. It can preserve the status quo and make change more difficult. Our impetus for writing this book was to draw on our professional development and research experience to unpack the kinds of collaborative professional learning opportunities that can impact positively on student learning and achievement. You will see that these kinds of PLCs work by ratcheting up the quality of classroom practice in focused ways. They do so by building new understandings that are the foundations of impactful practice. And you will see that

these kinds of learning communities are both established and strengthened by linking them with others. This book is about networked learning communities (NLCs)—within-school learning communities that are networked together in purposeful ways. Their mandate is one of professional knowledge creation and sharing for the purpose of enhancing the quality of classroom practice in a needs-based way.

OUR APPROACH

This book has emerged from our ongoing involvement in, and investigation of, a wide range of "NLCs" in education. Over multiple years, we have been engaged in an intensive "development and research program" in both North America and the United Kingdom. We have worked with multiple school districts and jurisdictions to implement NLCs as a central school improvement strategy. We say "development and research" because the relationship has been practice driven and iterative. We take our best shot, we learn from it in a systematic and research-based way, we refine practice on the basis of the evidence, we try again, and so on. In this book, we hope to share our learning and thinking about the challenging process of continuous professional learning in the complex world of schooling. We firmly believe that professional educators are key players in the move from twentieth-century schools with a mandate to teach the elite and sort the rest, to twenty-first-century schools with an obligation to prepare all students for the knowledge society in which they will live and work. We have not written a "how-to" book with lists of tips for teachers but we have tried to contextualize our learning in real situations that we have experienced, and provide examples and stories that can be used as a foundation for discussion among education professionals.

ORGANIZATION

The book is organized into eight chapters. In Chapter 1, we have situated networks as having considerable promise as a mechanism for building and sharing professional knowledge in ways that can have an influence on what teachers do in classrooms every day with students in the pursuit of more and better learning for all. Chapter 2 describes how NLCs work—both in theory and from research. The next three chapters give detailed accounts of the three key enablers of professional learning within networks. Chapter 3 explores the importance of having a clear, evidence-based focus and gives some suggestions about how to identify a defensible and high-leverage learning focus. Chapter 4 describes collaborative inquiry that challenges thinking and practice, as a process for new learning for teachers, in the service of new learning for students. Chapter 5

examines the role of leaders, both formal and informal, in both PLCs and NLCs. Chapter 6 is about how the key enablers work together to create the conditions for focused professional learning for teachers. Chapter 7 extends the professional learning requirement from learning for teachers to learning for leaders, and it considers the role of the network in creating the requisite conditions. In Chapter 8, we move to the issue of sustainability and continuity in NLCs.

READING AND USING THIS BOOK

This book will be of interest to teacher leaders, school administrators, and those—like superintendents—with responsibility for leading district-level change. Throughout the book, we have embedded a narrative drawn from our experiences working with numerous networks in different countries and contexts to give the reader a firsthand view of the intricacies and challenges associated with making NLCs work. Each of the professional roles noted above is reflected within it, and you will likely see yourself and your district represented. You can read the book with or without the narrative, depending on the degree to which you want to "see" what it looks like. The book can be read straight through, or it can be a resource for learning and conversation among school and district teams. In the service of the latter, we have ended each chapter with a reflection task for your group to use to think about how the information included in the prior chapter relates to you and your context.