

Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn

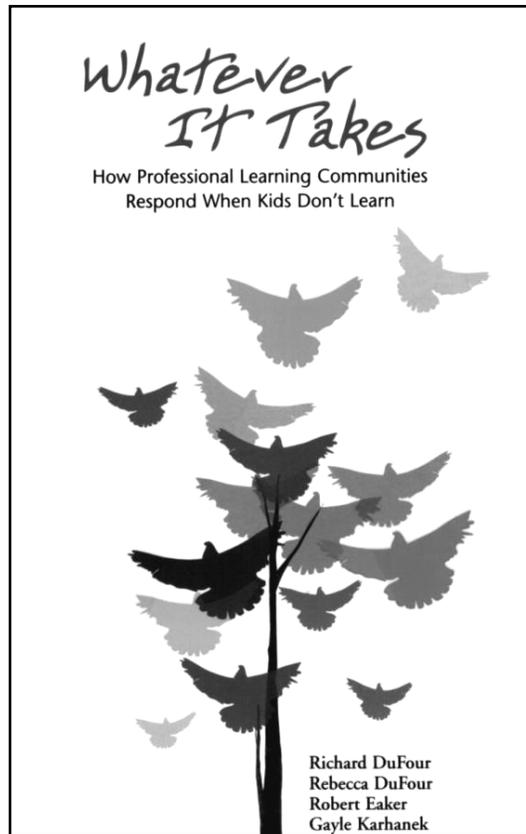
A Book Review by Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Everyone working in schools today knows that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) tells us that “all kids will learn - or else.” However, while NCLB gives us the outcome and the tests that claim to measure our students’ progress, it does little to answer the question addressed in the new book by Richard DuFour and his associates, namely: “What happens in our schools when, despite our best efforts in the classroom, a student does not learn?”

In their new book, *Whatever it Takes*, the authors assume that we have taken steps to develop the Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) they’ve been writing about for years. However, they don’t assume that these PLCs are responding collaboratively and consistently to the needs of students who are still falling behind.

An early “given” in the text states that most staffs agree, “all kids can learn.” The authors then show that four different sets of assumptions about kids and their learning can be built from this “commonly” held belief. Using four descriptive school models the authors show how a supposedly common belief can be played out in widely divergent approaches. Here are the fictitious schools:

- The Charles Darwin School where they maintain, “All kids can learn based on their ability.”
- The Pontius Pilate School that believes “all kids can learn, if they take advantage of the opportunity we give to them.”
- The Chicago Cub Fan School where “all kids can learn something, and they help all students experience academic growth in a warm, nurturing environment.”
- The Henry Higgins School, where they believe “all kids can learn



and they work to help all students achieve high standards of learning.”

The authors go on to describe an activity that asks readers to choose the prevalent model of schooling currently in place in the U.S. Following this safe national assessment of schools the authors ask people to consider the possibility that all four models are in fact operating in most schools simultaneously. I would go a step further and say that I think some combination of these models co-exist in most classrooms. I know that my best days were those in which I was a “Henry Higgins” doing whatever it took to reach all of my kids. However, I cannot honestly say that I was always at my best, especially when I factor in the size of my classes and the impact of my own unconscious biases as a white teacher working with students of color. Did I maintain the same expectations for all my kids every day throughout the year? Despite my good intentions, I’m afraid I did not.

So how do we align our belief that all students can learn at high levels with our instructional practices and models? One idea that the authors promote is a shift from the current paradigm of time as the constant and quality as the variable. Instead of saying we have “X” number of classes or hours to teach “Y” material, they say we need to figure out all of the ways both in class and out that we can support all kids learning “Y” and then find the time and supports to make their learning a real possibility.

The authors go on to challenge readers to develop a pyramid of collective supports for students that put an end to the “lottery” they say now exists in each child’s school experience. The authors describe the current lottery like this, get a good teacher and you win an opportunity for real support. Land in a marginal teacher’s class and you lose big time. When we consider its impact on students’ lives, I think we can agree that this reality of student placement is more like Russian Roulette than a lottery.

Whatever we call it, as long as teachers continue to work in isolation they usually take responsibility for just the kids they teach. In *Whatever it Takes*, DuFour and Co. challenge us to take responsibility for all the kids in our schools, especially those who are currently falling through the cracks. This book pushed me to think about my individual practice and my work as a CFG Coach differently. Our current system is gambling away the future of too many of our kids and I think this book can help us move forward more equitably where we collaboratively decide to do “whatever it takes” to help all kids succeed.

Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker & Gayle Karhanek

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