

The Front Porch Story

Note to the reader: *This is my teaching and leading journey and reveals how I made it to this PLC Front Porch Moment.*

My entire life distills down to a series of gatherings!

For 53 school seasons now, I have either traveled on foot, by bicycle, car, bus, or on a plane to where my colleagues and my students gathered.

These gatherings would take place in the school buildings and classrooms where I taught, in meeting rooms, offices, homes, kitchen tables, hallways, auditoriums, gymnasiums, and conference centers – and I loved them all. I loved the companionship of a wide range of educators, parents, and guardians rowing in the boat together (and sometimes not so much together) to help children – our students – to learn.

For 6 years, I taught in a small rural northern Illinois school district where I was the only math teacher grades 6-12, drove a morning bus route as a side hustle to make a little extra money, and coached basketball, baseball, and volleyball. In the summers I worked for the school district, mowing grass.

I taught math for 1 year at a state university while I earned my master's degree. There were more ongoing gatherings included our study group that often felt overwhelmed by the demands of our professors. I learned how to be both teacher and learner during those days. I loved our daily gatherings sharing the stress and joy that came from our work and effort as students and as teachers.

For the next 6 years I worked at a more urban than suburban area of Chicago. I taught algebra I in Spanish (and learned a lot of interesting words), started a math competition team and gave my first presentation at our state math conference - A new gathering place for me.

My topic was *Trigonometry, Calculus, and the Calculator: A Love Triangle*. Which in my head I thought was really funny, fortunately so did those teachers that gathered with me at Stevenson Hall, room 323, on the university campus that fall day.

At that urban school, my first day on the job was a teacher's strike. Not a great start. Yet looking back on those years, my 13 fellow math teachers and I, despite our low salaries, gathered every day in our department office to share and learn, and argue about how to teach math really well.

Our 34-year-old principal was a guy named Rick DuFour, and without really knowing it, the early stages of the PLC process were bubbling up in different gatherings with my fellow teachers and coaches.

It was there that I experimented and created a classroom structure and model built on student learning communities and student engagement in conversations and dialogue...and a few of my colleagues would gather together every day in my room 212 to talk about our ideas and practice.

Sometimes we would gather after school for extra math practice, as we too were learning the technology tools of our discipline.

My next stop along the journey was 22 school years at a north suburban school district. I followed Rick DuFour there. For the first time, I was responsible for other adults. That type of leadership, as I soon discovered was much harder than leading my students during my daily classroom gatherings. I stayed long enough at Stevenson – to eventually be the successor to Rick DuFour as Superintendent.

I was fortunate to be at Stevenson to help teach and learn with my colleagues at the beginning of what would become the *national* professional learning community process *movement*. Designed and led by Rick DuFour and his colleague Robert Eaker. They were indeed the original architects.

As I like to remind my colleagues, the first ever PLC collaborative team was an algebra team. Yes, indeed *math rocks*.

After 35 school seasons in Illinois schools, I decided to expand the venues of my gathering places. I left the safety of the place and the people I loved so much, to start a new adventure of speaking at events, attending schools I did not know, walking their hallways and visiting their classrooms. I was very aware I was entering their gathering places. I needed to respect their work, their effort, their commitment – while also challenging them to think about ways to improve individual and collective practices and routines.

As I traveled the country I was able to gather with hundreds of educators to listen and hear their stories, their hopes, and to be honest, their struggles and frustrations with our profession.

For the next 18 school seasons, Solution Tree presented me with a forum for gathering with school and district teachers and leaders as a member of our PLC faculty during our summer and fall “tours” to cities and school districts throughout North America.

Along the way I came to realize that the most meaningful conversations were rarely the ones that happened under the bright lights when I was on a stage, or in a breakout room at round tables. They happened afterward—in hallways where a teacher team was sitting on the floor, at the front of the room after a presentation, or during our day 2 “Team time” conversations. Maybe these conversations occurred with a colleague over a cup of coffee, or at lunch, or on a quiet walk, or while lingering in the hotel lobby waiting for an elevator.

The best conversations about work and life mostly happened when the stories we shared allowed us sit at a proverbial table and feel seen, safe enough to ask a question without judgment, and willing to share a story of real suffering or joy.

And then, about two years before I knew I was no longer going to be on the PLC tour with my colleagues, I heard my good friend Tim Brown mention the “Back porch” conversations he would have at home in Missouri. His idea, for me, was like a “light bulb”!

My brain was struggling to create a space and a place where my conversations with you about work and life could continue. And so I built a “front porch.” For us. Not a platform. Not a blog. A gathering place of sorts.

A place where you can stop by for a few minutes, read a funny or sad, or relevant short story (a short essay 750 words or less – I promise), discover a question, reply if you want to, and hopefully leave a little more encouraged than when you arrived.

Notice there are 3 categories of Essays: PLC’s with Heart, Soul, and Joy, K-12 mathematics, and Hope.

Think of the essays as **companions** to your work life. I hope you will feel as if you are sitting across from me on the front porch, coffee in hand, while you wonder aloud about something that, by the end, turns out to matter more than you might have expected.

Feel free to just browse one of the categories or participate in all three. Your time matters. I hope these essays, over time, will provide some quiet joy, insight and encouragement when it is needed.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'TK' or 'Tim Kanold'.

Tim Kanold