



Professional Learning Communities (PLC): A Brief Guide

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I. Definition

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are social groupings of new and experienced educators who come together over time for the purpose of gaining new information, reconsidering previous knowledge and beliefs, and building on their own and others' ideas and experiences in order to work on a specific agenda intended to improve practice and enhance students' learning in K–12 schools and other educational settings.

The following are 2 accounts by leading educators of the critical elements of a PLC. As can be seen, there is significant consensus among these educators (and others) on the elements.

From Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Many, “Learning By Doing” (2006, pages 2-7)

1. Has a focus on improving student learning and student experiences
2. Involves collaborative teams
3. Engages in collective inquiry into best practice and current reality
4. Is action oriented
5. Has a commitment to continuous improvement wherein members collectively:
 - a. gather evidence of current levels of student understanding,
 - b. develop strategies and ideas to build on strengths and weaknesses in that learning,
 - c. implement those strategies and ideas,
 - d. analyze the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not, and
 - e. apply new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement
6. Focuses on results aligned with goals for student learning

From Kruze, Louis & Bryk, “Building Professional Community in Schools” (1994, pages 2-6)

1. Reflective Dialogue
2. De-Privatization of Teaching Practice
3. Collective Focus on Student Learning
4. Collaboration Among Members
5. Shared Norms and Values

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

If your school has not yet assessed its PLC, we recommend that you next read the section:

II. Assessing Your School's PLC (p. 3)

If your school has assessed its PLC and determined that it is an early stage PLC, we recommend that you next read the section:

III. Starting-Up a PLC at Your School

If your school has assessed its PLC and determined that it is a developing stage PLC, we recommend that you next read the section:

IV. Developing Your School's PLC

II. Assessing Your School's PLC

STEP 1: *Assess the current state of your PLC*

Several tools for assessing PLC are available for schools:

- [SRI's Teacher Survey](#) which focuses more on trust, perception of other teachers
- Michael Fullan's document on [Leadership and Change](#) which focused more on Teachers' common beliefs, practice

We recommend that school leaders give SRI's *Teacher Survey* to all teachers at the school. The *Teacher Survey* contains suggestions for how to administer, score and interpret the results of the survey.

*both documents are available on the Innovative School Network.

STEP 2: *Use the survey results to determine next steps.*

Initial Stage PLC. The school's PLC is in an initial stage if the survey results show that teachers do not feel a common need to change current practice, and do not understand the school's vision for change. In this case, it will be important to work hard on building an innovation culture and teacher support for the school leader's vision for reform. Some suggestions for ways to do this are provided in Section III.A of this guide.

The school's PLC is also in an early stage if the survey results show that teachers are not yet ready and willing to work together, and do not they have time to do so. In this case, it will be important to work hard on building a school culture that supports collaboration and sharing and some suggestions for ways to do this are provided in Section III.B and III.C of this guide.

Developing Stage PLC. The school's PLC is in a developing stage if the survey results show that teachers want to collaborate, are trusting of their peers, and understand and support the new vision for reform. The information in Section IV of this guide will be most relevant to schools in the developing stage that are interested in learning ways to structure PLC to focus on improving students' learning experiences and outcomes.

III. Starting-Up a PLC in Your School

A. Establish common ground and clear priorities toward the school's vision for reform.

If teachers do not feel a common need to change current practice, or do not fully understand the vision for change, encourage school leaders to meet with their teaching faculty. At this meeting, the school community should talk about and find common ground on the need and vision for change.

To promote more open discussion, we suggest that the school's APM or some other neutral 3rd party facilitate the meeting. Teachers may feel that they cannot openly share their concerns, doubts, and questions if the meeting is lead by their director. Establish ground-rules for the meeting. The discussion should be open, involve the entire school community, and include constructive sharing of questions, doubts, concerns and affirmations.

Communicate to participants that the goal of the meeting is for the school community to revisit their vision for change as articulated at the start of the innovation process and to update it as necessary based on the school's experiences since then.

The fact that a school community is collaborating will do nothing to improve a school. The key question is "What are they collaborating about?". In the meeting, guide the school community to establish clear priorities toward changes that improve students' learning experiences and outcomes, and come to a shared understanding of how they will work together as a PLC that is dedicated to this goal.

This session is devoted to "finding common ground" is critical for establishing "buy-in" in the reform process by teachers and will set the course for subsequent planning and decision-making by the PLC.

Appendix A contains suggestions and a set of guiding questions that can be used to facilitate the discussion with faculty on what and how to change.

B. Create the structural conditions that will enable the PLC to develop.

Several structural conditions must be met in order for a professional community to develop and grow within a school.

ISN schools have reported that finding time for collaboration as a critical barrier to change. Scheduling solutions that create time for PLCs to meet have been discussed in the professional literature and are provided here for those interested in exploring alternatives.

Some options are--

4 Necessary but not Sufficient Structural Conditions:

1. Time to Meet & Talk
2. Interdependent Teaching Roles
3. Communication Structures
4. Teacher Empowerment

Provide common preparation time—build the master schedule to provide common preparation periods for teachers. Each team might designate 1 day per week to engage in collaborative rather than individual planning.

Parallel scheduling—schedule common prep time by assigning specialists (music, art, etc) to provide lessons to students across an entire grade level at the same time each day. The team should designate 1 day per week to engage in collaborative planning.

Adjusted start and end time—gain collaborative time by starting the workday early or extending the work day one day each week to gain collaborative team time.

Shared classes—combine students across 2 different grade levels or courses into 1 class for instruction. While one teacher or team instructs the students, the other team engages in collaborative work.

Group activities, events, and testing—teams of non teaching staff members coordinate activities that require supervision of students rather than instructional expertise while teachers engage in team collaboration.

Banking time—over a designated period of days, extend the instructional minutes beyond the required school day. After banking the designated number of minutes, end the instructional day early to allow for team collaboration.

In-service and faculty meeting time—schedule extended time for teams to work together on staff development days and during faculty meeting time.

Provide technology solutions—provide hardware/software that enable electronic communities to operate in and out of school/synchronously and asynchronously.

C. Establish explicit norms for PLC communication and collaboration in order to build openness and trust among members.

If teachers are not yet ready and willing to work together as a PLC, it is important to work hard on building a school culture that supports collaboration and sharing. Trust among members is essential for building a collaborative culture. If teachers are to work collaboratively to change teaching and learning, they must overcome their fear of exposing their strengths and weaknesses and trust their colleagues.

To promote trust, members of the school community must begin by engaging in discussions to establish explicitly stated norms for how they will collaborate and communicate with one another. Each school community must create its own norms. These norms must be explicit and shared, and should specify how members of the professional learning community will act, talk and work together and how they will address violations of norms by members. Having norms is fundamental for establishing an environment where members feel safe working as a collective.

AN ACTIVITY FOR SETTING NORMS:

Appendix B contains an activity that APMs can use to help the school community set their norms for communication and collaboration.

D. Create processes for continuous improvement of student learning.

The initial stage of a PLC involves the broad school community and a focus on finding common ground and establishing clear parameters and priorities toward the goal of “innovation for improved student learning”. As the school learning community matures beyond its vision/planning phase, it will likely organize itself into sub-communities.

How to organize into teams depends in part on the school's goals, contexts and information needs.

Some options are—

Grade level teams--teachers who teach the same course or grade level.

Vertical teams—link teachers with those who teach content above or below their students

Electronic teams—use technology to create powerful partnerships with colleagues across the region, country or world....for example, the Innovative Teachers Network.

Logical links teams—put teachers together in teams who are pursuing outcomes linked to their areas of expertise.

University-School teams—link teachers with university educators with expertise in specific content areas.

Regardless of their foci, all learning communities need to be committed to and engage in a process of continuous improvement wherein members collectively:

- a. gather evidence of current levels of student understanding,
- b. develop strategies and ideas to build on strengths and weaknesses in that learning,
- c. implement those strategies and ideas,
- d. analyze the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not, and
- e. apply new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

IV. Developing Your School's PLC

Consider using one or more of the following to guide the PLC toward a focus on student learning and instructional improvement.

SRI Lesson & Student Work Analysis – In their evaluation work SRI has used analysis of actual teacher lesson assignments and student work related to those assignments as a window into teaching and learning. In a Virtual University meeting in November SRI will present ways for a PLC to use a similar process to analyze teacher assignments and student work as a means for focusing on student learning and progress over time.

Peer Coaching -- Principles of peer coaching can be used in teacher professional development and to further the overall school change process. The concept of peer coaching and how it can be applied in schools was presented in 3 Virtual University sessions led by Les Foltos and Matt Huston of the Puget Sound Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology.

Start by helping the school use the Puget Sound Center's Reflection on Innovative Learning process. Schedule 1.5 hour to review the recording of the second Virtual University on Peer Coaching (Peer Coaching: Part 2, August 21, 2008) with the school leadership team and discuss how it could be used in the school. Then encourage the school to schedule a workshop with teachers to follow the protocol presented in the meeting. This workshop will help the group reflect on innovative learning and develop positive norms of collaboration. The Puget Sound Center is available to contract with schools to provide this and other workshops face-to-face.

Japan's Lesson Study Model – The practice of lesson study originated in Japan. Lesson study is credited with dramatic success in improving classroom practices for the Japanese elementary school system. A particularly noticeable accomplishment in the past 20 years of lesson study has been the transformation from teacher-directed instruction to student-centered instruction in mathematics and science. The success of lesson study can be found in two primary aspects: improvements in teacher practice and the promotion of collaboration among teachers.

Lesson study embodies many features that researchers have noted are effective in changing teacher practice, such as using concrete practical materials to focus on meaningful problems, taking explicit account of the contexts of teaching and the experiences of teachers, and providing on-site teacher support within a collegial network. It also avoids many features noted as shortcomings of typical professional development, e.g., that it is short-term, fragmented, and externally administered.

Lesson study promotes and maintains collaborative work among teachers while giving them systematic intervention and support. During lesson study, teachers collaborate to: 1) formulate long-term goals for student learning and development; 2) plan and conduct lessons based on research and observation in order to apply these long-term goals to actual classroom practices for particular academic contents; 3) carefully observe the level of students' learning, their engagement, and their behaviors during the lesson; and 4) hold debriefing sessions with their collaborative groups to discuss and revise the lesson accordingly.

One of the key components in these collaborative efforts is "the research lesson," in which, typically, a group of instructors prepares a single lesson, which is then observed in the classroom by the lesson study group and other practitioners, and afterwards analyzed during the group's debriefing session. Through the research lesson, teachers become more observant and attentive to the process by which lessons unfold in their class, and they gather data from the actual teaching based on the lesson plan that the lesson study group has prepared. The research lesson is followed by the debriefing session, in which teachers review the data together in order to: 1) make sense of educational ideas within their practice; 2) challenge their individual and shared perspectives about teaching and learning; 3) learn to see their practice from the student's perspective; and 4) enjoy collaborative support among colleagues (Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004).

CEL's Classroom & Video Analysis - Several tools for improving learning by developing teacher expertise were presented in the February 2008 Virtual University led by Steve Fink, Executive Director of the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership (CEL).

"Book Club" Meetings – In this process, participants read selected relevant material and meet to discuss it on a regularly scheduled basis. Material can be books, articles, or even multimedia. Material may be chosen by school leaders or other participants.

For example, you could encourage the school leaders to organize a book club around *How Students Learn* (National Research Council, 2005). Building on the research presented in the 1999 report *How People Learn (HPL)*, this book provides examples of how the *HPL* principles can be used to guide the teaching of common curriculum in mathematics, science, and social studies in innovative, effective ways. Ask the headmaster to select one of these subject areas (math, science or social studies) to begin with, understanding that book clubs focusing on the other subject areas can be started up consequently.

Organize an initial 30-minute to 1-hour session during a faculty meeting or other time regularly available to school leaders and teachers in the selected subject area. 4 weeks in advance of the meeting send invitations to the participants explaining the purpose of the Book Club (to improve student learning by improving instruction by collaboratively exploring a research-based, thought-provoking book on teaching in their subject area) and assigning the group to read the Introduction chapter before the meeting date. During the meeting, you or the headmaster can facilitate discussion. Encourage initial thoughts about what the section on their subject area might be like based on ideas given in the Introduction. Conclude by inviting a faculty member to facilitate discussion in the next meeting and assigning the next reading. You might request anonymous feedback on what teachers especially liked, did not like, and suggestions for improvement.

For More Information on PLCs

Consider using one or more of the following to guide the development of PLC from beginning stages to maturity.

Leading for Learning: Reflective Tools for School and District Leaders by Knapp, Copeland and Talbert (University of Washington: Seattle, WA, 2003)

<http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/LforLSummary-02-03.pdf>

This guide offers practical steps toward defining a learning improvement agenda and developing strategies for action. The 6i Innovation Framework is adapted from the model presented in this 2003 report by Michael S. Knapp, University of Washington, Michael A. Copland, University of Washington, and Joan E. Talbert, Stanford University. While the entire report is written as a how-to guide, Chapter 2 (pages 16-18) focuses specifically on “Building Professional Communities that Value Learning.”

Learning by Doing by Dufour, Dufour, Eaker and Many (Solution Tree: Bloomington, IN 2006)

This handbook offers practical steps and templates for assessing, starting and developing a PLC.