

A Big Picture Look at Professional Learning Communities

What is a PLC?

"A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators."

—adapted from *Learning by Doing*

3 Big Ideas of a PLC

Focus on Learning

The fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. This focus on learning translates into four critical questions that drive the daily work of the school. In PLCs, educators demonstrate their commitment to helping all students learn by working collaboratively to address the following critical questions:

- 1) What do we want students to learn? What should each student know and be able to do as a result of each unit, grade level, and/or course?
- 2) How will we know if they have learned? Are we monitoring each student's learning on a timely basis?
- 3) What will we do if they don't learn? What systematic process is in place to provide additional time and support for students who are experiencing difficulty?
- 4) What will we do if they already know it?

Build a COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

- No school can help all students achieve at high levels if teachers work in isolation.
- Schools improve when teachers are given the time and support to work together to clarify essential student learning, develop common assessments for learning, analyze evidence of student learning, and use that evidence to learn from one another.

Focus on Results

- PLCs measure their effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions.
- All programs, policies, and practices are continually assessed on the basis of their impact on student learning.
- All staff members receive relevant and timely information on their effectiveness in achieving intended results.

6 Essential Characteristics of a PLC

Shared mission, vision, values, goals

Educators in a PLC benefit from clarity regarding their shared purpose, a common understanding of the school they are trying to create, collective communities to help move the school in the desired direction, and specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound (SMART) goals to mark their progress.

Collaborative teams focused on learning

In a PLC, educators work together interdependently in collaborative teams to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable. The structure of the school is aligned to ensure teams are provided the time and support essential to adult learning.

"Collaboration is a systematic process in which we work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results."

—adapted from *Learning by Doing*

Collective inquiry

Teams in a PLC relentlessly question the status quo, seek new methods of teaching and learning, test the methods, and then reflect on the results. Building shared knowledge of both current reality and best practice is an essential part of each team's decision-making process.

Action orientation and experimentation

Members of a PLC constantly turn their learning and insights into action. They recognize the importance of engagement and experience in learning and in testing new ideas. They learn by doing.

Commitment to Continuous improvement

Not content with the status quo, members of a PLC constantly seek better ways to achieve mutual goals and accomplish their fundamental purpose of learning for all.

All teams engage in an ongoing cycle of:

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implementing the strategies and ideas
- Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

Results orientation

Educators in a PLC assess their efforts on the basis of tangible results. They are hungry for evidence of student learning and use that evidence to inform and improve their practice.

The success of the PLC concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the commitment and persistence of the educators within it.

—Richard DuFour

Adapted from the work of Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker.

Critical Issues for Team Consideration

Team Name:

Team Members:

Use the following rating scale to indicate the extent to which each statement is true of your team.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not True of Our Team Our Team Is Addressing This True of Our Team

1. ____ We have identified team norms and protocols to guide us in working together.
2. ____ We have analyzed student achievement data and established SMART goals to improve upon this level of achievement we are working interdependently to attain. (SMART Goals are Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results oriented, and Time bound. SMART Goals are discussed at length in chapter 6.)
3. ____ Each member of our team is clear on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions (that is, the essential learning) that students will acquire as a result of (1) our course or grade level and (2) each unit within the course or grade level.
4. ____ We have aligned the essential learning with state and district standards and the high-stakes assessments required of our students.
5. ____ We have identified course content and topics we can eliminate to devote more time to the essential curriculum.
6. ____ We have agreed on how to best sequence the content of the course and have established pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learning.
7. ____ We have identified the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need in order to master the essential learning of each unit of instruction.
8. ____ We have identified strategies and created instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.
9. ____ We have developed strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking in those areas.
10. ____ We have developed frequent common formative assessments that help us determine each student's mastery of essential learning.

11. _____ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our common assessments.
12. _____ We use the results of our common assessments to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.
13. _____ We use the results of our common assessments to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learning, and we work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.
14. _____ We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learning of our course, and we continually practice applying those criteria to ensure we are consistent.
15. _____ We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and provided them with examples.
16. _____ We have developed or utilized common summative assessments that help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of our program.
17. _____ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our summative assessments.
18. _____ We formally evaluate our adherence to team norms and the effectiveness of our team at least twice each year.