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## Module 1: Why PLCs?

### Essential Questions

- Why should we become a Professional Learning Community?
- How can working collaboratively impact student success?
- How can working collaboratively impact teacher and administrative professional growth?

### Expected Outcomes

Participants will:

- Gain a deeper understanding of the importance of PLCs and how they contribute to improved teacher practice and higher student achievement
- Identify the characteristics of high functioning and effective PLCs

### Vocabulary

- **Professional Learning Community:** A school culture that recognizes and capitalizes on the collective strengths and talents of the staff using collaborative structures and dedicated time to meet.
- **Collaboration:** School communities working effectively together on common goals.
- **Collegiality:** Exists in a school/team where people “get along” well but may not necessarily work effectively on common goals.
- **Norms:** Ground Rules established for a group that intends to work together.
- **Protocol:** Consists of agreed upon guidelines for conducting a focused and effective conversation. Protocols vary depending upon the purpose and desired outcome of the conversation.
- **School Culture:** The values and beliefs that are reflected in the way a school looks, and faculty and students behave and work.

## Introduction

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) provide a systematic means of improving instruction and school culture. By design, PLCs overcome the isolated, fragmented cultures in which teachers usually work. Studies have found that schools adopting the PLC model made greater achievement gains in mathematics, science, history, and reading than did their counterparts in other schools, and showed smaller achievement gaps among students from different social classes and racial/ethnic backgrounds. In these schools, teachers collaborate, take collective responsibility for student learning, and strive for continuous improvement in their practice.

Module 1 is intended for a small group of educators or faculty members interested in exploring the characteristics of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and how PLCs will benefit adult and student learning. It lays the basic groundwork for what PLCs are and how they function effectively. The module offers text, tools and discussion materials to work towards the common understanding which is critical to creating the solid foundational trust in which PLCs thrive. It also introduces groups to text-based discussion protocols for use with accompanying reflective readings and offers specific steps and assessment tools that groups may use to move towards creating collaborative community together.

### What do we need to think about in order to make PLCs work?

This is a critical discussion which should involve all stake-holders at the school and district level when the concept of implementing Professional Learning Community is introduced. Assessing where you are and where you want to be is the first step to strong implementation. What do you know about PLCs? What do you want to know? What do you need to know? What questions do you have? Research shows that thoughtful and inclusive introduction of PLC is critical in its long-term effectiveness.

Careful planning, sharing the growth of collaborative work and honest reflection are foundation blocks to the creation of trust needed for educators to productively de-privatize their practice.

Envisioning what PLC success will look like is a valuable exercise in beginning this process. How to get there is the action plan that this guide will help you implement.

### Putting It All Together

**Professional Learning Communities** engage in a number of practices with the goal of improving student learning. Each school and district will take its own unique path to developing a Professional Learning Community, but there are some common elements that all schools and districts should consider.

1. **Using protocols** to de-privatize practice and look at student and teacher work, offering support and feedback in a climate of trust, which allows risk-taking and experimentation in instructional practice.

2. **Employing text-based seminars** which encourage participants to read and share professional journals, videos, websites and software programs using question-driven protocols which guide learning to application.
3. **Looking at student work, teacher work and a broad range of assessment data** collectively to inform teacher practice and student learning.
4. **Creating collaborative Common Assessments** which provide critical data on learning outcome equity.
5. **Using structured agendas** which allow time to be used well.
6. **Implementing Learning Walks and Peer-to-Peer Observations** which focus on teacher-based, data-driven questions arising from practice, data and theory.
7. **Creating a purposeful and community climate of shared values and vision** fostered by a common level of expectation for students and teachers that drives collaborative efforts supporting both collective creativity and personal practice.
8. **Engaging in lesson study cycles** to craft lessons that address identified challenges and increase their effectiveness.

**Beginning the process of becoming a Professional Learning Community** requires deep thought and preparation by all those considering embracing this collaborative work. Critical to this process is:

1. Coming to a common understanding of what success will look like
2. Creating a solid schedule that allows for teams to meet
3. Implementing structures and practices that allow teams to learn together

### **Suggested Activities**

Many schools and districts have dipped their toes into creating PLCs without having these components in place to solidify and sustain the work, leading to frustration and eventual abandonment of the effort.

#### **Step 1: Learn Collectively About Professional Learning Communities**

Take the time to learn.

- A. Read professional articles about Professional Learning Communities.
- B. Develop a study group of interested faculty and administrators who can research articles or books that can begin the conversation, identifying readings, videos or books that provide further information about Professional Learning Communities.

- C. Make time for the study group to meet and share, and provide a structure for them to identify the outcome of their learning and present to the rest of the faculty.
- D. Ensure there is willingness, engagement and participation in this study group by building and district administrators.

### **Tools and resources to support step 1:**

*\*Note: All tools & resources listed here can be downloaded as PDFs from our PLC website: <http://plcexpansionproject.weebly.com>*

### **Articles:**

- [Teacher Study Group Can Change A School Culture](#) Brief article from Teaching Tolerance supports the question, “Why Study Groups?”
- [Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Learning and Improvement](#): Outcomes of Professional Learning Communities for Students and Staff. This classic study done in the 90’s is a well-documented research -driven perspective on the positive impact of PLCs.
- [The Tipping Point: From Feckless Reform to Substantive \(Schmoker\)](#): Schmoker looks at past practice and the variety of interpretations of what have been called PLCs and explores what makes well-planned PLCs effective.
- [What Is A PLC?](#) Richard Dufour looks at the challenges schools have with taking on new initiatives (like PLC) without really planning for them.
- [Moving Beyond Talk](#) explores how 6 urban districts used PLCs as the engine towards school reform.
- [Professional Learning Communities Can Build School Culture From the Ground Up](#) Many PLCs are begun by teacher initiative. Their growth is dependent on administrative support.
- [The Culture Builder](#) This classic article (a brief excerpt is included in the “**Reflections**” **segment of this module**) from Roland Barth is a short window into some really hard questions about what we say about our school culture—and what we really think.

### **Videos:**

- [About PLCs](#) Teachers discuss their evolution in becoming a PLC and how that has impacted successful change.

## Step 2: Find Time for Teachers to Read and Discuss PLC Together

- A. If your school already has opportunities for faculty to meet and work uninterrupted (faculty meetings, departmental meetings, grade level meetings) these might be entry points into sharing what PLCs looks like, using the readings selected by your study group or from Step 1 or by other members of the community.
- B. Using a small group [text-based seminar](#) provides the structure and support to engage teachers in deepening their understanding and provides for all voices being heard within a defined period of time. There are several protocols that help to structure those discussions while also introducing faculty to the power of protocols.
- C. Create a framing question to drive the discussion, e.g. *“Why PLCs?”*, or *“What are some implications for our PLCs?”*
- D. Identify members of each group who feel comfortable facilitating a text-based discussion. It is critical that this be a positive experience for all included so being explicit about expectations for powerful discussions include norms of understanding.
- E. Always debrief the experience by documenting: “Where we are now in our understanding? What more do we need to know? “

### Tools and resources to support step 2:

#### Articles:

Use the resources suggested in Step 1 which best capture teacher interest. More are available in the Project Toolkit. Study Groups will likely have explored additional resources on their own.

#### Protocols:

- [Three Levels of Text Protocol:](#) This is a great entry-level protocol that is very specific in actions and facilitation. It can be modified to fewer minutes for individuals to respond (from maximum 3 minutes) depending on time. After the group reads the text silently (or has done so previously and just reviews at the session) and marks the text, each member starts a “round” where she or he lets the group know which sentence or passage she/he will share (“On page 2, second paragraph third sentence”) and then reads it aloud then follows Step 2 (Why she/he chose this to read) and Step 3 (How this piece of chosen text relates to his or her work) and then the group has an open conversation sticking to what they heard the sharing member say—not what they THINK about the passage themselves. Then it’s the next person’s turn. Don’t forget to debrief the process!
- [Final Word Protocol:](#) Similar to Three Levels of Text, this is another very clear, step by step protocol that is structured to allow each voice to be heard and to easily focus on the issue at hand. The purpose of this discussion format is to give each person in the group an opportunity to have their ideas, understandings, and perspective enhanced by

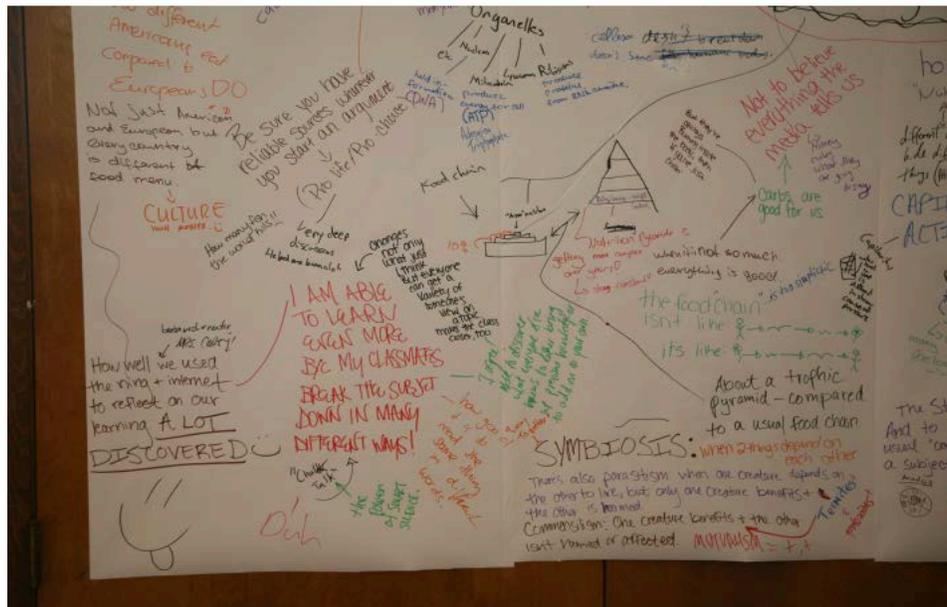
hearing from others. With this format, the group can explore an article, clarify their thinking, and have their assumptions and beliefs questioned in order to gain a deeper understanding of the guiding question.

- **Facilitating Text-Based Discussion Tips:**  
Facilitators can join in the conversation but their job is to keep the group with the protocol. Challenges may be where some members wonder why, as professionals they “need” to use a structured protocol to discuss a text, and a response is simply that this is a great way to allow all of us to have a chance to better listen to each other. As educators we are all experienced facilitators but that doesn’t necessarily mean we have had a lot of experience being listeners!

### Step 3: Define Collectively What it Looks Like in an Effective PLC

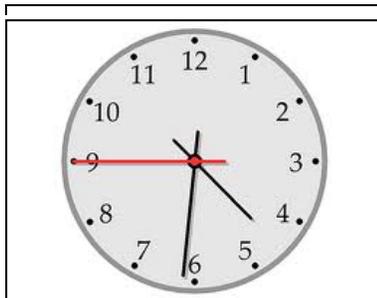
It is incredibly valuable to have everyone on the same page in terms of expectation when developing a professional learning community across the school community. Don’t assume that because everyone read the same article or was in the same discussion that they have the same vision. Be explicit.

- A. In small groups similar to those generated for [Learning About PLC](#), Share the vignette that follows (**What A PLC IS...**) and use it to generate responses to where there are instances of what this looks like in your school.
- B. In facilitated small groups, use round –table responses to driving questions (example: *Where do see this in our school? How did it evolve? Why?*) Chart. Collect the charted responses as data about how people in your school community see PLC. In notes shared with the whole community, recap the meeting agenda and goal and list responses in a bulleted form to each prompt (no names). Keeping everyone informed is part of creating community. What does this data tell us about what we now know about PLC? What more do we need to know?
- C. Alternatively, if you have some experienced facilitators in house, this is an excellent opportunity to use the [Chalk Talk Protocol](#) (using chart paper taped to a wall and markers) which allows for a silent conversation. Write the statement or question on the chart paper on the wall and circle it. Hand out a few (nonpermanent) markers. Everyone stands. No talking—the conversation is all on the paper. Participants respond to the prompt and the conversation is lines connecting conversations. 10 minutes is plenty.
- D. When the protocol is finished, take a photograph of the chart paper, record each entry as bullets under the prompt (no names) and share with the community with notes from the meeting and post the chart paper in a common faculty room. Chalk Talk is a great protocol to use with students as well!



<http://mwsu-bio101.ning.com/photo/semester-one-chalk-talk-vi/next?context=user>

## What a PLC is:



The closed door to the classroom bears a cheery sign: “PLC in Progress, Please Do Not Disturb!” with a smiling clock face showing 11-11:45, 4<sup>th</sup> period. A curious visitor peeking through the door window would see a cluster of grade level core academic, special education, English Language Learning, and specials teachers gathered around a common table looking at the work-in-progress that three teachers – math, science and special education teachers - are presenting as an upcoming

math/science project for their 9<sup>th</sup> graders. The team is using a structured protocol to use their time effectively as they tune the project design and give feedback to the three teachers. Everyone is listening as one teacher shares a question she has about the work she sees. “I wonder about the possible limitations of the project rubric. It seems to me that although it would be easy for me as a teacher to assess student work using this format, is it as user-friendly for students to use themselves?”

One teacher nods that the speaker’s time is up and the conversation goes on to the next speaker who builds on what he heard. Only one voice is heard at a time and all speakers focus on the work at hand. Everyone seems engaged, focused and involved. The three presenters write notes about what they are hearing, knowing they will have an opportunity to share and reflect on what they are thinking after their colleagues’ mindful feedback. They know that the teacher-facilitator and teacher-timekeeper will be keeping an eye on the clock, allowing the protocol to come to a conclusion focused on student learning before the next period bell rings.

Key behaviors and commitments drive the work of strong PLCs. This becomes the culture of the school/district. Dynamic PLCs are always refining, tuning and adding to their vision of what makes them effective. Professional learning communities are successful when:

- There is substantive, intellectual discourse focused on improving instruction
- There are defined norms and protocols
- There is a culture of publicly sharing work
- It results in publicly questioning assumptions, and trying on new lenses to solve problems
- It allows for differences in a respectful manner

#### **Step 4: Define Collectively What it Looks Like in an Ineffective PLC**

In a top-down “traditional” meeting, one person’s agenda is disseminated to the rest of a passive group. Yes, the group does have a scheduled time to meet (usually an add-on to the day) but the gist of the agenda is not about teaching and learning, and there is no opportunity for collaborative discourse guided by norms of structure and behavior. Perhaps most obviously, there is little teacher–perceived value to this regularly scheduled “team” time. The outcome of each meeting’s agenda item is not about its effect on students—it is often perceived as, “How will this affect me as a teacher?”

- A. In small groups similar or the same (ideally this activity happens at the same meeting time) to those generated for Step 3, share the vignette that follows, [What A PLC is Not...](#) and the chart [PLC Meetings versus Typical Teacher Meetings](#), and use it to generate responses to where there are instances of what this looks like in your school.
- B. In these facilitated groups, use round –table responses to driving questions (example: *Where do we see this in our school? How did it evolve? Why?*) Identify a facilitator and chart responses or have the scribe record them to share as bulleted (no names) data with the whole community. The facilitator will want to be sure that there are some simple norms of conduct to support this conversation, especially keeping responses brief, thoughtful and positive. This is an exercise in exploring current practice—not critiquing it.
- C. After rounds, ask the group to look at the data they have collected (responses). What does this data say about participants’ understanding of PLC? Where do successes already exist? Where are there challenges?
- D. Alternatively, if you have some experienced facilitators in house, again, this is an excellent opportunity to use the [Chalk Talk Protocol](#) (using chart paper taped to a wall and markers) which allows for a silent conversation. When the protocol is finished, take a photograph of the chart paper, record each entry as bullets under the prompt (no names) and share with the community and/or post the chart paper in a common faculty room.

- E. If you use small groups-chart responses. In Chalk Talk, take a snapshot and in both cases “bullet” responses and share with the community, as “Here is where we see ourselves as a PLC. Here are questions we have.”
- F. Use the Characteristics of PLCs, Reflections on PLCs and Do PLCs Make a Difference? Sections that follow to continue the conversation. The goal of this work is just to start your school or district “thinking” about PLC—not solving, structuring –or worrying.

### What a PLC is not:

<p><u>Team Meeting Agenda</u>          Bathroom Duty          Copier Repair          Permission Slips for Field Trip          Superintendent Visit Schedule          Open House          Smart Board Sign-Up          Late Progress Reports          Other?</p>	<p>It’s 2:30, it has been a long day and it’s another PLC grade-level “team” meeting. No one rushes to get there, so it’s nearly 3 before the meeting begins, even though this is the only time teachers have to meet as a teacher group outside of monthly faculty meetings. No one seems to notice-- or care. The agenda is “laundry list’ style and as usual it’s read aloud. If there’s something on it that someone wants to talk about, they do –a lot. There are a few predictable hot heads. Most of the meeting is focused on schedules, forms and upcoming events. One teacher sits in the back and grades papers. Two share photos from their smartphones. More than one teacher has trouble trying to stay awake. The team chair is doing most of the talking anyway and the safest thing is just to stay out of it. It’ll be time to leave soon, anyway.</p>
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In a top-down “traditional” meeting:

- One person’s agenda is disseminated to the rest of a passive group.
- The gist of the agenda often a Laundry List and is not about teaching and learning.
- There is little or no opportunity for collaborative discourse guided by norms of structure and behavior.
- Often the strongest voices are the only ones heard.
- There is little teacher-perceived value to this regularly scheduled “team” time.
- The outcome of each meeting’s agenda item is not about its effect on students—it is often perceived as, “How will this affect me as a teacher?”

## PLC Meetings versus Typical Teacher Meetings

Quality	Typical Teacher Meetings	PLC Meetings
Sense of Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Often Vague</li> <li>Usually Not Discussed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clear</li> <li>Frequent Reminders</li> </ul>
Style of Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faculty Meetings</li> <li>Department Meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work Groups</li> </ul>
Focus of Agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Often Housekeeping</li> <li>Often Announcements</li> <li>Sharing of Anecdotal Stories</li> <li>Sometimes Gripe Sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student Learning</li> <li>Collaborative Designing</li> <li>Collecting and Responding to Data</li> </ul>
Basis for Discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cordial</li> <li>Cooperative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trusting &amp; Honest</li> <li>Collaborative</li> </ul>
Leader/Facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Directs</li> <li>Speaks a Lot</li> <li>Answers Easy Questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guides</li> <li>Listens a Lot</li> <li>Asks Hard Questions</li> </ul>
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Often Complacent</li> <li>Usually Compliant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interested</li> <li>Engaged</li> </ul>
Agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fixed</li> <li>Mostly Dictated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defined, yet Flexible</li> <li>Shared</li> </ul>
Atmosphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commiserating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Problem Solving</li> </ul>
Silence Due To...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Passive Disagreement or</li> <li>Passive Acceptance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflection</li> <li>Deep Thinking</li> </ul>
Mentality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“How will this idea impact me?”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“How will this idea impact student learning?”</li> </ul>
Time Together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mostly Self-Contained, Often Isolated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing, Sustained, Connected</li> </ul>
Questioning and Disagreeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tacitly Discouraged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Openly Embraced</li> </ul>
Attitudes That Are Valued	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being Positive</li> <li>Conforming</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Always Being Truthful</li> <li>Getting Results</li> </ul>
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Too Often Superficial</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Essential</li> </ul>
Decision Making Litmus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What’s Good For Teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What’s Good for Students</li> </ul>

*The Practice of Authentic PLCs, Daniel R. Venables*

## Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities

- A. Shared vision and values – Collective commitment of school and district staff, which is expressed in day-to-day practice across teams.
- B. Working teams with active communication structures – Collaboration to achieve common goals
- C. A culture of actively seeking solutions – Openness to new ideas
- D. Norms of collegiality – Allowing trust needed for effective discussion, sharing and problem-solving
- E. Reflection – Allowing for collaborative process to study the operation and impact of actions taken.
- F. Questioning the status quo – Ongoing quest for improvement and professional learning
- G. A willingness to change – Improved practice based on reflective and collaborative use of a variety of data.
- H. A culture of accountability - Team goals, decisions, and who's responsible are recorded and tracked

Reflecting about the work of PLCs is an active and ongoing activity. Experts in the process come from within and outside of the classroom. What would the experts in your school or district have to say about their work as PLC?

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## Reflections about PLCs

### **“How can working collaboratively impact teacher and administrative professional growth?”**

- *“Even the grandest design eventually translates into hard work. The professional learning community model is a grand design—a powerful new way of working together that profoundly affects the practices of schooling. But initiating and sustaining the concept requires hard work. It requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning and hold itself accountable...”*
- *“When educators do the necessary hard work to implement these principles, their collective ability to help all students will rise. If they fail to demonstrate initiative and sustain the work then their school is unlikely to become more effective, even if those within it claim to be a professional learning community. “  
Richard DuFour, “What is a Professional Learning Community”? Educational Leadership, May 2004, Vol 61, Number 8 pp 6-11*

- *“I used to tell myself that it didn’t matter if the teacher across the hall was assigning “read the chapter and take the test” with his students while I actively taught our history curriculum. I just shut my door, he shut his and we agreed to disagree. That’s pretty much the way it was throughout our school with cliques and seniority. It wasn’t until we were offered the opportunity every week to meet as a PLC that we started thinking about our students as being, well, “our” students—collectively. We use protocols and PLC structures to non-defensively share our work, commonly address challenges and to enjoy those lovely moments when we know that what we have done—together—has made a difference for all of our children learning well. I can’t imagine teaching any other way.”* Veteran teacher urban high school, Massachusetts
- *“The professional learning community model represents a fundamental shift away from this traditional model of professional development. Professional learning communities at their best are grounded in generation of “knowledge OF practice”* Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999
- *“What’s the difference for me as a teacher since we really grew invested in PLC work? I have a relationship with my colleagues which is about improving our work—and not about complaining about our kids or our administrators. What is the difference for me as a person? I look forward to being in school every day (well nearly every day!) and I can see myself growing in teaching as a career. Before we did this work I figured I would teach just long enough to pay off my college loans.”* New urban teacher middle school Massachusetts
- *“Probably the most significant action school districts can take in changing the nature of professional development is to provide meaningful and engaging programs that respect the intelligence and good will of teachers. ... The conditions in which they work are often trying. If we are to keep good teachers in the classroom, [we] need to find ways to create environments in which teachers can form strong collaborative relationships with their peers and in which they can continue to learn about themselves, their students, and their students' communities.”* Sonia Nieto in *Educational Leadership* February 2009 | Volume 66 | Number 5 How Teachers Learn pp 7-7.
- *“Strong professional learning communities produce schools that are engines of hope and achievement for students .... There is nothing more important for education in the decades ahead than educating and supporting leaders in the commitments, understandings, and skills necessary to grow such schools where a focus on effort-based ability is the norm.”* Saphier, 2005, p. 111
- *“Our School Is a Community of Learners!” How many times do we see and hear this assertion? It is both an ambitious, welcome vision and an empty promissory note. The vision is, first, that the school will be a community, a place full of adults and students who care about, look after, and root for one another and who work together for the good of the whole, in times of need and in times of celebration. Every member of the community holds some responsibility for the welfare of every other and for the welfare of the community as a whole. Schools face tremendous difficulty in fulfilling this definition of a community. More are organizations, institutions, or bureaucracies.*

*As if community were not ambitious enough, the defining, underlying culture of this community is learning. The condition for membership in the community is that one learns, continues to learn, and supports the learning of others. Everyone. A tall order to fill, and one to which few schools aspire and even fewer attain.*

*When we come to believe that our schools should be providing a culture that creates and sustains a community of student and adult learning—that this is the trellis of our profession—then we will organize our schools, classrooms, and learning experiences differently. Show me a school where instructional leaders constantly examine the school's culture and work to transform it into one hospitable to sustained human learning, and I'll show you students who do just fine on those standardized tests. [Roland Barth, The Culture Builder, ASCD, 2002](#)*

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## Do PLCs make a difference?

In a study of successful schools, the educator/researcher Carl Glickman (1993) found that in these schools:

- Faculty is less satisfied with their teaching than are faculty in less successful schools.
  - Faculty supervises and guides one another, plan courses together, and works in collaboration.
  - Faculty and administrators have established norms for discussing the big questions of how to improve learning for all students.
  - Faculty seeks, produce, and consume information; they see educational renewal as a continuing process, not as an event.
-

## Necessary Ingredients to Create an Effective PLC

1. **Alignment** – A clearly articulated vision for our school/district that focuses on educational achievement for all students. What does our school look like? What should it look like?
2. **District Support** – Systematic embedding of PLC practice at the District level in both leadership and district teams.
3. **Purposeful Collaboration** – Systematic embedding of collaboration into the routine practices of the school, “Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning.” *DuFour On Common Ground, p. 37*
4. **Time** – Collaborative team time that is ‘sacred’ to the school’s schedule; dedicated team time
5. **Culture Committed to Improvement and Growth** – Creating a culture that focuses on improving learning of adults and students. Enhancing that culture by creating and honoring “norms” of collaborative behaviors that allow team members to decide what will be discussed, the manner in how it will be discussed and the openness with which they offer and absorb various perspectives.
6. **Clear Objectives** – Clarification of essential learning outcomes (What do we want each student to know and be able to do?) and of formative assessments of learning progress (How do we know they have learned what we intended them to learn?).



*Math teachers discuss how to phrase test questions during a team meeting before morning classes at the Adlai E. Stevenson High School staff cafeteria in Lincolnshire, Illinois.*

*—John Zich for Education Week Working Smarter By Working Together, v27 n31 p25-27 Apr 2008*

## PLC s Impact on Equity and Excellence

Professional Learning communities create the dynamic opportunity for educators to open their doors to equity. Once schools operate in a culture of shared learning where student work is constantly being examined as the product of equitable teaching practices, the scales are righted in favor of all students having access to high quality instruction.

### Communities Flourish When Equity Matters

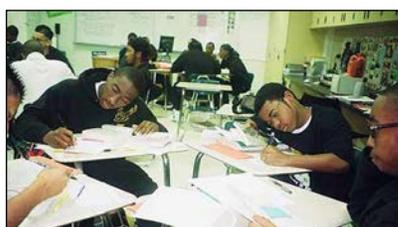
- Education expands our understanding of ourselves, the worlds in which we live, and the possibilities of what we can become.

- Students have a right to high-quality learning opportunities in which their cultures, language, and experiences are valued and used to guide their learning.
- Equity is measured by the degree to which people belong, feel included, and are empowered.
- Universal equity cannot be achieved without creating systems that embody the principles of everyday justice.

[Professional Learning for Culturally Responsive Teaching, 2009 The Equity Alliance at Arizona State University, King, Artilles, Kozleski,](#)

Structured conversations about student work lead to more reflective teaching in schools with PLCs.

### Case Study



North Adams, MA elementary schools were working to identify how to translate Common Core requirements into unit and lesson planning student learning objectives. There had been a history of some of us do, some of us don't (and won't). They realized that their greatest challenge was that they did not share a common understanding of why or how to use student learning objectives and collaboratively thought about how to create that. A consummate barrier

they felt for SLO implementation was in faculty "owning" and personalizing the process. Using the PLC structure built into the district at the elementary level, each school's ILT (Instructional Leadership Team) decided to use the same protocol to support three common goals which would help them define their question: What makes a good learning objective? They identified three areas that they felt would truly impact teaching:

1. **Assessment** – How will I know if my students are "getting" it? What will mastery look like? What will they have accomplished?
2. **Student Learning Objective** – How will my students know what they will learn and be able to do today? How will my students know they are getting it?
3. **Teacher** – How Will I teach this standard? Why will I teach it this way?

Combining a relevant reading they found online with a comfortable text-based protocol which would allow them to come from the same understanding, they moved on to use a protocol which allowed each team member to have equal voice without airtime competition and looked at how skills and understanding are intended to spiral from K-12 in content areas. Individually they worked to craft SLOs from one grade level standard, came back together to compare notes and re-craft, ultimately (with lots of dialogue) creating what they felt to be accurate and student-friendly SLOs. Their goal was to be able to facilitate and share this process with all teachers in PLCs in their schools. ILT reflections at the end of each session were positive, and each member felt enthusiastic about sharing back with their teams. A walk-through just a few weeks later showed student-friendly SLOs in most classrooms. Students looked for them or took pride in helping to post them, and knew, when asked what their purpose was. "We're having science right now," said a third grader. By the end of this lesson I'm going to be able to make water stay stuck in a straw even when it's not in the glass—and I'm going to know why!"

## Next Steps

1. Having read Module 1, use the resources in this module to go deeper into your group's understanding of what makes a PLC and why it might be a good fit for your school or district.
2. Text-based protocols are included which allow you to begin the process of understanding how protocols can help you to structure your time well. These particular protocols allow groups to share articles of common interest (relevant texts are included in the tools section of our website) in a specific period of allotted time. They require a facilitator, who is familiar with the process, copies of the protocol and the text for each group member and a quiet, protected time to work. Please see Module 3 or the resources on our site for a walk through of how to facilitate text-based discussions.
3. Use the District and School Self-Assessment Tool (Module 2 Resource) for PLC to see where your district is on the spectrum of best practices to begin intensive PLCs.
4. Use the "Futures" Protocol (Module 2 Tool) to create a vision for your school and district on what a PLC would successfully look like using your data from the Self-Assessment Tool.
5. Identify what you understand about the process and what more you need to know.