



THE **POWER** OF COLLABORATION

Working with your colleagues can save you time and help you build a better classroom. **By Caralee Adams**

When Jackie Martin needs inspiration or fresh ideas for her eighth-grade algebra class at Pioneer Middle School in Tustin, California, she turns to her colleagues on her professional learning community team. The group of math teachers meets regularly to provide support, share ideas, and discuss

what is working—and what isn't—in their classrooms.

"At some schools, you might hear, 'I taught the information. I hope they get it,'" explains Martin. "But at Pioneer, we feel differently. If students don't learn, it's not their fault. It's our fault. We are taking responsibility. It makes us better teachers."

Five years ago, Pioneer introduced the professional learning community (PLC) model, in which teachers meet regularly, setting goals and committing to a shared educational vision. As simple as it sounds, the teachers at Pioneer agreed that their purpose was to make sure all their students were learning. This called for a shift in the school's culture. Gone were the days of working in isolation, when asking for help branded a teacher as the weakest link. Instead, teachers found common ground, sharing ideas and teaching strategies, and working together to give their students the best education possible.

The result? Pioneer went from being a good school to having the highest state assessment scores of any middle school in Orange County, placing it among the top one percent of schools in California.

The Beauty of the PLC

If you don't know much about professional learning communities, you're not alone. Although the concept has been around for more than a decade, PLCs are just beginning to take off nationwide as evidence of their success grows in schools like Pioneer. Researchers and teachers' organizations universally endorse improving schools through PLCs, and with good reason: PLCs can help you be a better teacher while saving you precious planning time, thanks to the power of collaboration.

Here's how it works: Your principal or department head builds teams of five or six teachers, arranged by grade level or content area, and chooses a leader. Together, you and your team establish a regular meeting time during the school day and agree upon a structure for the meetings that encourages each member to participate. Your first goal as a team is to articulate a shared vision and mission, deciding collectively what your students must learn, how you will know when each student has learned it, and what kind of intervention and support you'll provide for students who are not learning the material.

One of the most exciting things about a PLC is that you can share problems you are having in your classroom and find solutions without having to

Collaboration



reinvent the wheel. As your PLC progresses, you and your team will review student assessment data together and tailor teaching methods in order to reach all students, which will allow you to pool your knowledge and collaborate on solutions. If something is not working for you, your colleagues are right there to share their experiences and help develop a solution that contributes to the team's shared vision and goals—and to your development as a teacher.

According to Sue Thompson, an expert on PLCs and a professor of education at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, this is exactly the goal. “The idea is that you have this collective intelligence—more than one person working by themselves,” says Thompson. As you swap best practices and work to reach students in new ways, you are making a commitment to continuous personal improvement, which is a cornerstone of the PLC model. And when it works right, it can transform schools.

A Morale Booster

Principal Nicholas Myers of Anne Fox Elementary School in Hanover Park, Illinois, has seen a huge change at his school since implementing PLCs. Many teachers were excited to start working together, and the results were remarkable. “We went from complete isolation to the real deal: peer collaboration,” says Myers.

The class schedule was revamped to allow 45 minutes a day of common planning time for teachers. To help teams use the time efficiently, teachers wrote norms and set a schedule to be as productive as possible. As teachers began to experience the power of collaboration, they started sharing in earnest. And when students achieved the reading, writing, and math goals and

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test scores rose, it was clear that the approach was working. “Teachers here always worked hard, but they weren't getting the results. It's different now,” Myers says. “We've had a morale shift. Fox is now where people want to work.”

At Blue Valley High School in Stilwell, Kansas, where school starts 50 minutes later on Thursdays to allow PLC teams to meet regularly, Principal Scott Bacon has seen great results as well. The department chairs develop protocols and formats for PLC meetings, and the teams provide Bacon with a weekly agenda and a quarterly summary, helping them to keep the established goals first and foremost in their minds. Bacon feels PLCs are successful because of this collective commitment to result-oriented goals, as well as the expectation to contribute. As Richard DuFour, coauthor of *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*, says, “No one wants to prevent the team from meeting its goals.”

Overcoming Resistance

If the concept is so compelling, why haven't more schools adopted professional learning communities? Some of your colleagues are more independent, and that can translate into a resistance to change. For others, the prospect of another meeting on top of an already loaded schedule is exhausting.

More centrally, PLCs challenge the fundamental ways things are done,

right down to the basic tenets that drive schools. For example, schools have generally operated under the assumption that the goal is to give kids the opportunity to learn. But in a PLC, the commitment is to ensure that all kids learn—a much more difficult task, says DuFour. Part of meeting this goal involves changing the manner in which schools use student assessment data—and the change can be intimidating.

Imagine this: When you share student assessment data in your team meeting, every member of the team can see exactly which students are doing well in whose classroom, and which are not. If this information was previously used in your school to highlight teachers who weren't doing a good job, you and your colleagues might be resistant to discussing it in front of one another.

But the goal of the PLC process is to use data to help improve teaching methods, says Travis Colton of the American Productivity and Quality Center, a nonprofit educational resource. PLC teams should view assessment data as a resource that allows them to intervene with a student who doesn't get the material as soon as the problem starts. This shift from remediation to intervention is instrumental to a PLC's success. “In the past, student data was a weapon. Now it is a tool,” says Colton.

The Benefits for You

Although you may be concerned that a PLC will create more work, collaborating can actually lighten your load. As a team begins to refine what it does, teamwork kicks in and you become specialists, essentially dividing the work of problem solving. “The PLC empowers each teacher to focus on what he or she does best,” says Colton. This can help you to solve one another's problems faster and more efficiently.

As problem-solving dialogue increases between teams and curriculum becomes more closely linked, you may begin talking to teachers in different grades about expectations, which can provide a more seamless transition for students. This can ensure that students in your school are better prepared as they advance,

which will make your job easier and your students more successful.

Another exciting benefit of PLCs is that they set up new teachers for success by providing structure and continuity. John Shaughnessy, principal of Lafayette High School in Wildwood, Missouri, says the collaborative process introduced to his school 10 years ago has helped relieve the stress of new teachers joining the staff. "They are joining a team with already established goals," he says. This fosters a sense of community and teamwork, and invites new teachers to get on board with the shared vision already put in place by a PLC team.

No Looking Back

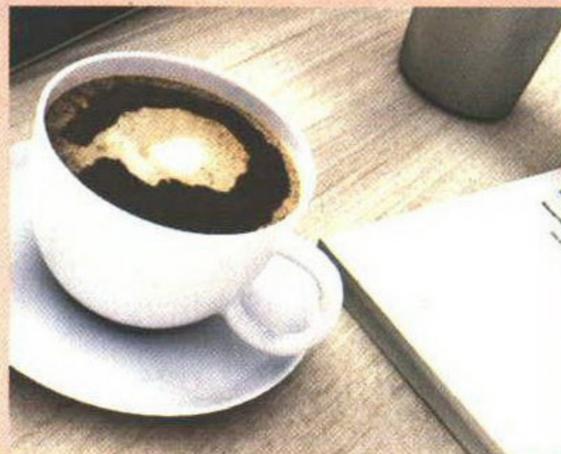
Professional learning communities are having a big impact on schools in many ways. Parents, teachers, and students at Anne Fox Elementary see the positive results in better test scores and improved student behavior. "We would never go back," says Principal Myers. "It's easier on teachers because we are sharing the planning load, and we are having a greater impact on students."

PLCs don't take off everywhere they are initiated—some go off the rails when the focus ends up on behavior rather than learning, or when schools change the PLC process to meet their practices rather than the other way around. But teachers are finding that well-established PLCs can improve the overall culture of a school, fostering a spirit of collaboration among colleagues that spills out of team meetings and into other interactions.

Just ask Principal Shaughnessy at Lafayette High School. Since implementing PLCs, he has noticed that even at lunch, teachers are talking about what particular students might need in order to catch up. Teachers have always wanted students to do their best, but now they have the channels for conversation. "It's like a powwow," he says. "That never would have happened 10 years ago."

Caralee Adams is a contributing writer for *Instructor*. Her last piece for the magazine was "Is Teaching Online Right for You?"

Learning Community: Do It Yourself



No support from above for a PLC in your school? Follow these tips to get the ball rolling on a small scale.

Choose... one or two colleagues who teach the same subject or grade level—and who believe that teacher collaboration can benefit students.

Set... a regular meeting time to which you can all commit.

Discuss... goals for your students. What should each student learn this year? Develop a shared vision.

Share... your methods, tools, and resources, and learn from one another. Discuss what works and why.

Focus... on results. Monitor your success by sharing specific information about your students' progress—and your own.

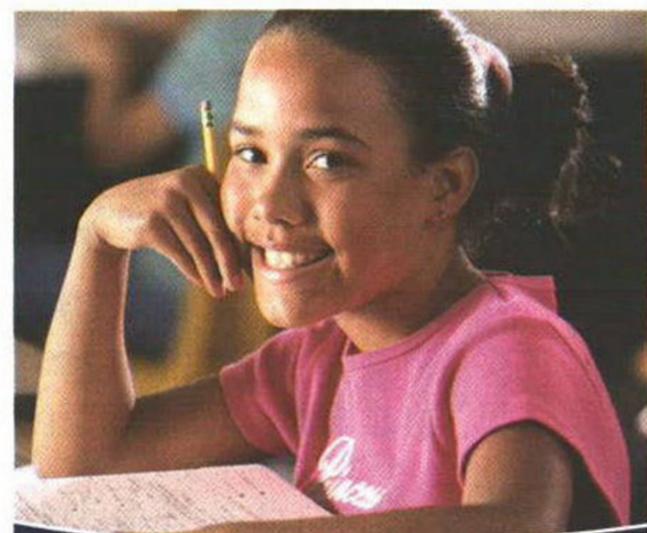
Develop... creative strategies to help students who are not meeting the goals you've set.

Invite... team members to bring a new problem to each meeting and collaborate on a solution.

Read... websites and blogs to keep up with what other PLCs are doing.

Support... one another in your commitment to helping students learn.

For more on PLCs, visit:
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