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Module 5: District Professional Learning Communities

Essential Questions

- What do we need to know in order to create a district Professional Learning Community?
- What would distributive leadership look like for our PLC district and schools? How do we get there?
- How do we support and sustain an effective PLC culture throughout our district?

Expected Outcomes

Participants will:

- Identify the key structures of collaborative and distributive district and school PLC teams.
- Understand how to create and sustain effective district-wide structures to support PLC at both district and school levels.
- Create a viable structure which connects the data-based projected work of districts and schools through the lens of PLC.

Vocabulary

- **PLC District Instructional Leadership Teams** – Collectively plan, monitor and collaborate for student success across the district.
- **PLC School-based Instructional Leadership Teams** - Collaboratively plan for student success at the school level.
- **School Improvement Plan (SIP)** - Data-based school action plan focused on student success outcomes for student learning in an academic year which aligns with the District Improvement Plan (DIP).
- **District Improvement Plan (DIP)** - Data-based district action plan focused on student success outcomes for student learning in an academic year.
- **Instructional Leadership Teams** – School or district team members who represent teachers and students in their own collaborative decision-making PLC with a core focus on teaching and learning.

Introduction

There has been an increasingly significant body of research that tells us that if we really want to improve teaching and learning through Professional Learning Communities, that community has to be well established throughout the district. This means not only the way we change the collaborative structures at the school level, but also rethinking how decisions are made, and by whom, at the district administrative level. The key purpose of supporting this two year Massachusetts ESE pilot on PLCs was to see if districts in our state would be willing to rethink the way they do business. What we have learned over the two years with 20 districts is that they are.

This PLC implementation guide actually ends where it should start. All of the work that is happening in schools and teams should be happening at the district level as well. In fact, it might be even more effective to start your district PLC work first. One thing we have discovered is that if PLCs aren't happening comprehensively and collaboratively from top down and bottom up, they are too often doomed to failure in the long run, as they rarely become the embedded culture that survives personnel changes.

Module 5 brings our work full circle in introducing the work of District Administration in thinking about a profound change in practice that supports, sustains and embraces the concept of Professional Learning Community as synonymous with district-wide collaboration. Module 5 offers words from administrators who share their own stories about the journey towards establishing effective PLCs.

Walking the PLC Talk –District Administration Instructional Leadership Teams

Imagine a school in which most teachers have high levels of trust in their leadership. Teachers, school leaders, and staff—even if pushed outside their comfort zones—support reforms related to teaching and learning on behalf of student success. Such schools do exist. And all have one ingredient in common: Teachers continually collaborate on making key decisions and share responsibility for reforms that improve student learning.

Everyone at the Table Ellen Behrstock-Sherratt and Allison Rizzolo, Educational Leadership, 2-14-14, Vol 17, #5

Building a District-level PLC is very much the same process as outlined in Modules 1-4 for schools. First step: build trust. While many districts already use a structure that allows for shared decision-making, it needs to be intentional, non-hierarchical and transparent. The protocols suggested for use in structuring conversations at the school level are just as useful in district teams.

You may choose to call it any name you like (Instructional Leadership team, District PLC, District Admin, etc...) but it helps to give your team a name that represents the way they work.

Team is a very important part of that! Instructional helps keep the focus on student learning. The same driving question that is heard at school level PLCs defines the work of a District PLC, that is: “How does this practice, decision, agreement impact student learning?”

Who should be at the table? Many District PLC teams include the traditional members: school administrators, key district personnel and often representatives from teacher ILTs. Large groups are unwieldy and there are some discussions that might not require the Transportation Director, Buildings and Grounds or other non-academic personnel. Effective district PLCs are built from

a concept of distributive leadership that means creating strong systems of shared decision-making that are the antithesis of superintendent as uber-directive CEO.

What's the Agenda? District Leadership Teams conduct *all* of their work through the lens of PLC structures. Tempting as it is to separate out the “everyday stuff” from the meatier conversations, the *entire agenda* needs to operate under the same structure, transparency and norms. Consistent use of a structured template that identifies rotating roles for facilitator, scribe, and timekeeper is of great value. Prioritizing what absolutely needs to be on the agenda as it relates to improving student learning often allows teams to identify the “stuff” that can happen via other forms of communication. Often these items are “yes” or “no” inquiries concerning schedules, permissions or concerns that do not involve the rest of the team who can be informed via email or other methods of communication. Building from one agenda to another with action steps and their resultant benchmarks is what often moves a team from one that ticks off the agenda items to one which closely looks at the real work of schools — learning. Honoring norms is critical. Using the Data-Based Inquiry Cycle (DBI) - see Module 4, part 2- as a bedrock function can really help.

Walking the PLC Talk -- School Instructional Leadership Teams

It's all about the conversation! Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) mirror District Leadership Teams. This is where the key challenges and goals, action plans and benchmarks are reviewed, assessed and explored. ILTs are a whole lot more than nominal—they are responsible for ensuring that the school focuses on what matters.

Who should be at the table? School Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT) are composed of school representatives from across the school, with the emphasis on representative. Strong teams include students, parents, nurses and facility workers as active members when agenda items that affect their constituency are being discussed.

What's the Agenda? Like District Leadership Teams, ILTs represent the distributive leadership structure that shares decision-making responsibilities. Using the focus of School Improvement Plans (SIP) to set benchmark-rich action plans, the ILT meets regularly (at least every two weeks) to create pathways to success. They use data to assess progress and challenges and stay closely connected with the entire school community, ensuring that their agendas, notes and inquiry are easily accessed. It is their job to make sure that the community has an open and transparent opportunity to give feedback and to know that their input matters. ILTs that become insular risk the very real possibility of operating in a vacuum. The whole point of distributive leadership is to share decision-making equitably! Using the Data-Based Inquiry Cycle (DBI) as a bedrock function can really help here as well.

Walking the PLC Talk -- SIP and DIP, Aligning Initiatives

The work of PLC Leadership Teams at all levels is based on what questions, challenges and resultant action plans arise from close team-examination of relevant data. That data is representative of all the information available about the components necessary to effective teaching and learning. While standardized assessment is an indicator of broad snapshots of student learning, it's the focused attention to what is going on in the classroom that creates

success. That data comes from curriculum, lesson plans, departmental agendas and notes, homework, attendance, discipline, health, subgroup performance analysis and team agendas.

District Improvement Plans (DIP) should be what drives the work of District Leadership Teams. Creating a comprehensible and pertinent plan that is clear, has “do-able” action steps and benchmarks, and connects to student learning is the same process reflected by the School

Collective capacity is when groups get better—school cultures, district cultures, and government cultures. The big collective capacity, the one that ultimately counts is when they get better conjointly—collective, collaborative capacity.... Collective capacity generates the emotional commitment and the technical expertise that no amount of individual capacity working alone can come to close to matching.

Michael Fullan, All Systems Go, the change imperative for Whole System Reform., Corwin Press, 2010.

Improvement Plan (SIP), which is directly connected to the District Improvement Plan (DIP). When these two guiding documents are ambiguous or in conflict, they become ineffective; they should be about real work and real challenges. Care and caution need to be taken to ensure that initiatives that are adopted by the school and district are directly connected to fostering DIP and SIP success. Using protocols to assess clarity and function of Improvement Plans by ILTs are recommended in their planning stages. The Tuning and Charette protocols are helpful with this process.

When a District is in the early stages of PLC work and is already feeling overwhelmed by disparate initiatives, it can be extremely helpful to use a

protocol to create alignment and focus (Initiative Alignment Protocol). The work from this protocol should inform the SIP and DIP. Initiatives then support goals and action plans rather than drain them. Using the Data-Based Inquiry Cycle (DBI) as a bedrock function can really help.

Sustaining the Work—essential PLC practices of effective districts

Often PLCs start off with great fervor, enthusiasm and good intentions. Teams create norms, begin agendas and start the work. Everything seems to be working well until the first roadblock—and that roadblock is often about past behaviors, culture and hierarchy that has yet to have positive precedent. Being aware of those roadblocks ahead of time and ensuring that a group’s essential question or main guiding questions for their work have been considered ahead of time are good moves. These might include:

- “What does it look like when we are focused on teaching and learning?”
- “What gets us off track?”
- “What is success for us and what does it look like?”
- “What actions make roadblocks?”
- “What does it look like when we stay focused on our action plan?”

Tougher challenges may occur when old behaviors rear their heads again, as in when everyone is being quiet when traditional hierarchies pull weight. Knowing and talking about the challenges of equitable conversation is critical, especially when teams are composed of some people who supervise others. Doing so under the auspices of well thought-out norms of conduct make these safe conversations to have. Keeping the conversation focused on teaching and learning makes all the difference.

Organizing for Success Case Studies – School Leaders Share Their Experiences

*Cheryl Clarke, Superintendent Monson Schools
Monson, MA*

Aligning Initiatives and Building Collaborative Culture District-Wide

Note: After their first year of entertaining the concept of PLCs, Monson ILT Teacher Leaders and DSAC support members organized a day of data-based inquiry using protocols to support their work. Their agenda is included as a tool in this module.



Each of the three schools in our district has five Instructional Team Leaders. Some are leaders in their content area; others are appointed by grade level. These groups, along with district administrators, are to meet five times throughout the year as a District Team Leadership Council (DTLC). However, for many reasons, including an extremely high turnover rate of key district administrative positions, the DTLC had not met in several years.

This had created a climate where teachers did not meet with their colleagues in other buildings, nor was there any vertical alignment of curriculum across buildings. There was misinformation, some distrust, and a general feeling of confusion as to what was happening in the schools.

As the new Superintendent, I brought back the DTLC meeting structure, and at the second meeting decided to do the, “Making Sense of the Work Underway” protocol with this group. I explained to them that we are in a transition period now. We don’t know the programs and good work that everyone is doing. This is an opportunity to learn from each other. We need to ask ourselves three questions: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? How are we doing it? This protocol would help us answer these questions.

Before the meeting, I emailed the team leaders the following:

*“I would like you to brainstorm **all** of the initiatives that you can think of, writing each one on a sticky note, and bring them with you to the meeting. To help you out, here’s a general definition of what I mean by initiative:*

An initiative is something that you are doing that is focused on improving some aspect of the school/district. Initiatives may include activities that are required by the State; for example, Title I. It could also be a program you’re doing in your class or school. Don’t be afraid to come with many stickies!”

I then followed the attached protocol (Making Sense of the Work Underway). It was a very productive meeting. Lots of collaboration and collegiality!

Making Sense of the Work Under Way Protocol *Monson, MA*

Objective: To articulate the work our school system is currently doing and assess the level of strategy it reflects

Materials: Flip chart paper, sticky notes, and markers

Time needed: 3-4 hours

Roles: Facilitator or timekeeper; if group has more than 10 people, break into groups of 5

1. Brainstorm

- Share the definition of an initiative, and share some examples from the system
- Ask participants to brainstorm all the initiatives they can think of, writing one on each sticky note. When they are done, have them post the sticky notes on several pieces of chart paper posted on the wall. *I grouped the participants by school.*
- Once everyone's stickies are up, ask the group to review all of them and to eliminate duplicates.

2. Sort

- Run through the initiatives to see if there are any with which people are unfamiliar. If so, ask someone who knows about that work to explain the initiative in two sentences. This should be a very quick step focused on making sure everyone has a basic understanding of the initiatives. *To ensure that everyone knew what the initiatives were, I had an administrator from each school stand by the chart paper for their school. We did a carousel walk, where members asked questions about various initiatives that were identified. This was a wonderful opportunity for everyone to learn about what the other schools were doing. There were lots of "a-ha" moments, as it was discovered that there were many commonalities across buildings.*
- Ask participants to group like initiatives together and label the categories they identify. The "grain size" of the categories will vary according to the number and focus of the initiatives. Examples of broad categories might include teaching and learning, human resources, and operations. Categories more fine-grained might include curriculum, instructional materials, professional development, assessment, technology, data, teacher hiring, teacher evaluation, school budgeting, new schools, and closing schools. *We came up with the following categories: Curriculum & Instruction, Family/Community Engagement, Social/Emotional, Interventions, Data & Assessments.*

3. Assess

- Once the categories are firmly established and the stickies are posted in the appropriate categories, ask team members what they notice as they look at the categories and initiatives. *We discussed that we would look for "holes" in what we are doing and/or how we can improve in other areas. This will inform the development of our district's Strategic Plan.*

Browne Middle School, Chelsea, Massachusetts

Authentic Ownership: Who decides?

Beginning their second year of PLC implementation, the Browne Middle School administrative team and coaches conducted a series of meetings to assess the effectiveness of the PLC initiative within teams. The group agreed that teams were struggling to take ownership of the PLC initiative and viewed it as “another thing to do”. The original purpose of using the *Consultancy Protocol* was to find solutions to the problem of staff ownership of PLCs. What the team discovered was that before they identified solutions, they needed a driving question that would guide the planning and discussion. The *Consultancy Protocol* helped them to avoid the trap of rushing to a solution before understanding the problem.

In order to move forward as a school, the team used the *Consultancy Protocol* to craft and pose the following essential question: *How do we provide support for teams and team leads so that they feel authentic ownership and agency over the work they are doing?*

The Browne team then used the *Success Analysis Protocol for Leadership Teams* to identify areas where staff were already demonstrating ownership of PLCs. The rationale was that rather than looking at the essential question from a *deficit perspective* (what teams are not doing) the Browne team would address the question through an *asset perspective*—building upon the strengths of teams. In preparation for the protocol, the Brown team collected interview data to determine what teams valued in PLCs and some of the challenges. This data was reviewed at the beginning of the *Success Analysis Protocol*.

What the team discovered was that staff did enjoy the different features of PLCs (LASW, curriculum planning, and child study) but they were overwhelmed with the review of ANET data. ANET is a formative assessment process that guides teachers in making instructional adjustments to improve student learning and achievement. The ANET coach was present during the protocol and she agreed that adjustments could be made to make the data analysis and teacher planning cycle more manageable. The result of the protocol was that teachers appreciated the PLC schedule that outlined the non-negotiable activities that should occur during PLCs but they also wanted autonomy in how and when these activities occurred. The Browne ILT agreed that next year’s PLC activity schedule would be developed in conjunction with teams.

What the Browne team learned was that they need to “Find the sweet spot between providing structured guidance and allowing teams to exercise agency and autonomy.” When this balance is lost, PLC teams tend to stumble. The other learning is that school leadership teams need to model the kind of thinking that they expect from staff. The Browne team discovered the value of using the *Consultancy Protocol* to help them to understand the problem of PLC implementation rather than rush to solutions.

Success Analysis Protocol For Leadership Teams, *Chelsea, MA*

PLC Leadership Teams across Chelsea meet regularly to define what works well, so that they can both celebrate and share best practices with the ILTs. They created this protocol, modified from the **Success Protocol**.

Best Practice Protocol

The facilitator's role is to help the group to keep focused on how this practice is different from other team practices. The analysis of what makes this practice so successful is the purpose of the protocol.

"Best Practice" is defined as a process that proved to be highly effective in achieving the intended outcome.

Our Guiding Question for Admin Team *How can we provide support for teams and team leaders so that they feel authentic ownership and agency over the work they are doing? We brought the protocol to each team and collected their responses.*

1. Discuss as a team and then write a short description of the one "Best Practice" of your team this year. Note what it is about the practice that made it so successful. Be sure to answer the question, "What made this experience different from other team experiences?" Identify a person to report on the team's success and the analysis of what made it successful. (20 minutes)
2. The Reporter shares their team's "Best Practice" and why it was so successful. (3 minutes)
3. The other team asks clarifying questions about the details of the "best practice". (3 minutes)
4. The group does an analysis of what they heard about the presenter's success and offers additional insights about how this practice is different than other team practices. Probing questions are appropriate and the presenter's participation in the conversation is encouraged. (3-5 minutes)
5. The presenter responds to the group's analysis of what made this experience so successful. (1 minute)
6. The other team's Reporter shares their "Best Practice" and what made it so successful. Repeat steps 3-5. (10-12 minutes)
7. Debrief the protocol as a whole group. Possible questions: What worked well? How might we apply what we learned to other team work? How might students use this process to reflect on their work? What adaptations to this protocol might improve the process? (5 minutes)

Module 5: District PLCs - Next Steps

Starting with a goal and a plan in how to get there is the foundation for sustainability, and just as in school-based PLCs, it all begins with trust. We'll utilize many of the **Next Steps outlined in Module 2 of this website: Structures of PLCs- (Leadership Teams)** as many of the defined steps which are relevant to school PLC translates directly to those needed for district PLCs.

Step 1: Build Trust.

If collaborative and distributive leadership is a new concept for your district, then the first step is to be on the same page about why. There are several tools that may help foster that positive discussion.

1. Create District Teams that are truly representative of those who are responsible for ensuring that learning happens. Make sure teams meet as often as possible.
2. District Teams use the same structures as Teacher Teams to focus discussion and share their notes. Members function as members of the team and not as the “driver” of the engine. [Norms of conduct](#) and a shared commitment to regular meetings, ideally 2-4 times a month, are essential.

Step 2: Create a Unified and Dynamic Vision

Every school district has a vision. Many of these while well-meant appear as a nominal function on the District webpage. PLC districts have a culture of action that is driven by having created that vision through shared process. Engaging the whole team in creating a shared [picture](#) of what the district could ideally look like is one of the most powerful activities a PLC can engage in.

1. Using a protocol like “[Back to the Future](#)” allows all participants to define what the ideal school would be: “What do powerful learning experiences look like?” “What would we look like as highly functioning Professional Learning Community?” “What would our school look like, feel like, what would we see as we walked through the building and classrooms?” If this is our vision—how do we get there?
2. Use this collaborative picture to create a dynamic [vision and mission](#) statement which is “owned” by all members of the community. The vision and mission serve as the cornerstone to which all decisions are made (“How does this align with what we say we want to be?”) and is key to goals-based action planning.

Step 3: Assess Current District Culture

Once the District Leadership Team has a unified vision and mission, one big question that will come up very early in the creation of PLC is in identifying what is in place to support that—and what needs to be. Educators and administrators will have PLC experiences which have or have not been successful, sharing those are helpful first steps, particularly where there were real or perceived challenges.

1. Specific tools to support these conversations about where a PLC is on a spectrum of highly functioning are best used in structured discussions that involve all members of the District Team. These Surveys ask hard questions which are often perceptions and lead to looking at how decisions get made—and by whom.

2. The [District Culture Survey](#) and [District Culture Questionnaire](#) can serve both as data which gives feedback from all members of the school community as well as triggers for deeper conversations about where structural and cultural change needs to happen.
3. Structures agendas with norms allowing for all voices to be heard are of importance in beginning this work.
4. Use the survey feedback and data are shared with the whole DLT without assumptions. One way to do this is to simply create a document from the feedback and bullet responses and numbers, and using a protocol with the DLT which allows members to look at what the data tells them to identify strengths and weaknesses. Identify an Action Plan that leads towards desired School Culture goals.

Step 4: Create the Structures that Sustains the Work

Being mega-clear about the nuts and bolts of what your team needs to function as a PLC is worth every question and every committed answer in terms of time. Think of it as you would in terms of setting up the norms and culture of a classroom, building a foundation that will support forward movement as well as inevitable bumps in the road.

1. Roles, facilitation, note-taking, time-keeping and follow-up are shared among members. Agendas, notes and opportunities for feedback are shared with the team regularly; electronic communication which allows for on-line conversation (google docs) can be really helpful in ensuring all voices are heard.
2. Superintendents, as contracted district leaders, need to be upfront and clear about non-negotiables. That doesn't mean that the DLT can't wrestle with finding ways to support them, but knowing that the final decision has to be made by one person rather than a team, or that an outcome must be met, is all part of trust and transparency. The same goes for being able to voice administrator concerns over feeling easy with speaking honestly and thoughtfully while sitting at the same table with an evaluator (just as it does at the school level). Regular and shared honoring of norms is a foundational must.
3. Create subcommittees of 2-4 members where needed, expert researchers who can bring what they have found and recommend back to the team, without sacrificing the whole agenda to one topic.
4. The District Leadership Team works with School Leadership Teams in identifying and organizing professional development that is relevant to PLC- identified instructional needs, so that conflicts don't arise and teacher-time is used for best purpose.
5. Use agendas based on data-informed action plans used to create SIP and DIP with plenty of benchmarks.
6. Revisiting that the Futures Protocol Vision frequently and identify benchmarks. Keep the focus on possibility and success.
7. Keep checking in on norms—they matter.

8. Make time to reflect: stop and assess progress, successes and challenges in all areas of the LT work at regular benchmarking intervals. Honor norms of transparency!

Step 5: Embrace the Need to Problem Solve

It can be very easy to slip into old ways, especially when time and money are short, members are tired and it seems easiest to have the same old same old. Being a team is not easy! Things to think about when reflecting on norms are:

1. Whose agenda is it? What does the agenda reflect in terms of values? How does the agenda support the District Vision? Use a LASW protocol to look at agendas over a period of time and how they reflect the growing culture and focus of the DLT and what changes need to be made.
2. One huge challenge District Leadership Teams encounter is in how to deal with Stuff. Be wary of deciding that Stuff falls outside of the PLC structure. Create a rubric for what gets defined as “stuff” (field trips, bus routes, personnel) and how much of that really comes from bigger questions that reflect on district or school culture. Who really needs to be at the table for an item discussion? Can it happen electronically? Is this subcommittee material? Should it go first through School Leadership Teams? Don't let Stuff hijack your agenda.

Step 6:

Celebrate successes, especially in the realm of working through “old” ways of doing things as you move to a more collaborative and shared decision-making process. Get off campus at least once a year in a Retreat setting to reflect, celebrate and plan. Take turns planning the Retreat as a small sub-committee. Re-visit that Futures Protocol (what did it look like back in September?) Include some fun, ice breakers and walk and talks. Come away with a renewed sense of mission and hope.

Creating a high performing District Leadership that reflects the culture of collaborative professional work in your district is revolutionary. It's hard work, but studies are increasingly showing that the effort is enormously well worth it as it focuses on creating meaningful learning experiences for all students in your care.

Tools

1. **Agendas:** These are just a few examples of what some schools and districts have created to ensure that meaningful work is accomplished and recorded (and shared). Groups can look at current agendas and compare with these—what works? What doesn't? Whose agenda is this—and whose values does it have? Beware of that time-eating laundry list! [Sample 1](#); [Sample 2](#); [Sample 3](#); [Sample 4](#).
2. **[Norms](#)** - If your group hasn't done this yet—use this protocol for identifying “norms” of conduct. Requires stickies, chart paper or white board and time to talk. All groups need shared norms they create and honor together. These are the hallmark of highly professionally productive collaborative work.
3. **[Tuning Protocol](#)** - Teachers often bring examples of work –in- progress, often the materials relating to an exhibition or project, cumulative assessment or student performance. The facilitator guides the group through a series of deepening levels of understanding—which culminate in warm and cool feedback; or student or teacher work they have a question about in terms of “tuning” it to better achieve their goal; to develop more effective curriculum plans, assignments, or assessments; To develop common standards or assessments for students' work. To reflect on and gather ideas for envision of classroom practice.
4. **[Charette Protocol](#)** - To get feedback on a process or piece of work when the teacher, student, or group is experiencing difficulty, or when additional minds could help move it forward if the presenters feel “stuck”.
5. **Initiative Alignment Protocol**
6. **[Future Protocol](#)** - An engaging tool for “visioning”: what a school can be. This protocol is adaptable to any good driving question (“What our school or district look like as a PLC?”) and creates the groundwork for creatively approaching Vision (what we want to be) and Mission (how to get there). A modified version for school teams is also available in Step 2 Resources.

Articles

U.S. Department of Education

- [Collaboration through Professional Learning Communities: Sanger Unified School District](#), An overview of how Sanger Unified School District implemented PLC work.
- [How do Principals Really Improve Schools](#), Rick DuFour and Mike Mattos. An article from *Educational Leadership* on how principals can lead efforts to collectively monitor student achievement through PLCs.