

Professional Learning Communities Can Build School Culture from the Ground Up

Andrew Miller

Turnaround schools have a unique situation and potential. Because of their mandate to overhaul a school and depart from business as usual, turnaround schools have the ability to create an appropriate culture from the ground up. Professional learning communities (PLCs) can be an ideal way to build that culture. A PLC refers to a group of educators purposefully collaborating to focus on learning for all students and holding themselves accountable to the results, explains [Richard DuFour](#). DuFour worries that PLCs are at a "critical juncture" where both effective and ineffective implementation has occurred.

A PLC, done well, can be a great tool to build and sustain an effective culture for all members of the school, especially if the staff drives it. However, I have often seen PLCs that aren't really PLCs. This happens when the administration imposes it from the top down. There's a lack of buy-in among staff members, who see it as just "another thing to do." The following tips can help a turnaround school take advantage of the opportunity to build an effective PLC from scratch.

Have Everyone Create the Norms of the PLC

When first starting your PLC, norms and operating procedures need to be established. It is imperative that these come organically from the entire staff. These should be a set of four to six norms that are continually referred to throughout the year. They should also be short and pithy. As new staff members are integrated, these should be refined and revisited. It will help foster authentic communication, organization, and trust.

Separate Meetings on School Logistics from Professional Development Time

When it comes down to the week-to-week, there needs to be a separation between professional development and staff meetings about school logistics. These logistical or nuts-and-bolts conversations might be about signing out textbooks, a new disciplinary procedure or protocol in communications with students or parents, announcements from student groups, and even technical support accessing the learning management system. All are necessary discussions, but they need to be separated from PLC conversations. For example, professional development about the integration of technology into the classroom is different from training in the technology tool that will be used. Schools should consider using technology to disseminate logistical information. Can you use an online forum to change problem wording on a schoolwide document? Can you use e-mail effectively to disseminate critical information? Can you record [jings](#) or webinars to train teachers in your school's technology? The answer to all these is yes! Differentiate between the two uses of valuable staff time so that you can guarantee that the professional development time is sacred and reserved for critical reflection and growth as a professional.

Create Opportunities for Staff to Evaluate and Be Evaluated

All too often, there is one evaluator of a teacher. However, we all know the collective wisdom that is in the room: everyone in the school community and on teaching staff has strengths and weaknesses. Present evaluation protocols and criteria clearly and openly. Have staff members and administrators practice using them in a variety of classroom

visits. Build in reflection time and goal setting. When evaluation becomes ongoing and done through a lens of trust and community, it becomes less stressful.

Keep a Focus on Mission, Vision, and Identity

Often, turnaround schools get an influx of funds, and the temptation is to spend it on a variety of resources and training programs. If you have multiple curricula, tools, and structures, it can often be just as burdensome to the new teacher as to the new PLC. A school might try to be a standards-based STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), PBL (problem-based learning), or RTI (response to intervention) school that uses a variety of technologies and hybrid learning. Once you start doing everything, it becomes daunting and teachers can easily burn out. Educators recognize the common experience of doing too much and trying to meet the needs of everyone. Whether a school calls itself a problem-based learning STEM school, a hybrid career tech academy, or a standards-based RTI school, keep your focus.

Find the few things that really align to your mission, vision, and identity. It will keep professional development relevant and focused and increase morale for the entire PLC. If you feel that you can't lose a piece, find how it might fit under the umbrella of a larger component. Just like in a good PLC, use these selected tips and strategies to build a culture-shifting PLC from the ground up so that it will be sustainable. Do it the right way—or don't do it at all.

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