

Is Your PLC Ready to Succeed?

Assess your PLC's effectiveness against these five key areas.

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The focus on state and national standards, high-stakes testing, and student growth has prompted schools to apply the old adage that two heads are better than one. School administrators and a few teacher leaders can't do it all, so schools continue to establish professional learning communities to capture the knowledge, skills, and experience from many teachers to improve student learning and to enhance teacher and organizational effectiveness.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) offer educators time to talk about teaching, leading, and learning. These conversations can reduce teacher isolation, create a school culture of collaborative inquiry, and foster a collective responsibility for student success. Effective PLCs also provide plausible interventions for underachievers and struggling learners and positively affect systemic change for all students. Finally, PLCs expand leadership capacity and opportunities for professional growth.

Even with the known benefits, the effectiveness of teacher teams is often contingent on clear expectations and support from school leaders, a strong commitment to shared improvement goals, the team members' knowledge and skills related to effectively functioning as a collaborative group and, of course, time to meet, learn, and do. All this goes by the wayside if teams don't acquire new, relevant professional knowledge and skills, take decisive actions, and reflect about, recognize, and celebrate progress.

The mark of success for PLCs is when student achievement increases and when team members become more effective individually and collectively. So, is your team ready to succeed? You can check your readiness by examining five key areas of effective team functioning: expect, inspect, select, act, and reflect.

Key 1: Expect

Successful PLCs have clear expectations and support from school leaders and expect that they will be part of a satisfying, high-functioning team that accomplishes goals. They believe in the concept that together, everyone achieves more. The expectations, whether they are grade-level, content-area, or multidisciplinary team, are clear.

Successful PLCs expect and advocate for support from school leaders and know that they will have time to meet, learn, and do. They expect that the school leaders will provide tangible resources, monitor and recognize progress, and be there when needed. They expect that effective professional learning is ongoing.

Effective PLCs function effectively and efficiently to accomplish tasks and goals without wasting their time. They have norms about behaviors related to time, participation, roles and responsibilities, confidentiality, and respectful atmosphere and climate. They select, publicize, enforce, and evaluate the norms.

PLCs use essential group processes for generating ideas, clarifying, analyzing, advocating, prioritizing, decision making, problem solving, and accomplishing goals together.

Many of us have been on teams that don't seem to get things done or that have members who are not committed to collaboration, but few members want to address the problem for fear that things will get worse. The "elephant sits in the room" with no mention of the problem and no end in sight. A few members meet in the parking lot after school to vent, but that doesn't produce positive results and the potential to succeed doesn't improve.

Effective PLCs regularly use a self-assessment process and tools to reflect about their progress and processes and they make needed and desired changes immediately.

Key 2: Inspect

High-functioning, successful PLCs efficiently and effectively inspect student work and analyze and interpret achievement data.

For example, after examining student literacy skills and collecting standardized and school achievement data, student work artifacts, classroom observations, and student survey data about student's competence and confidence levels related to their literacy skills, the PLC uses effective questions and protocols to efficiently analyze and interpret data patterns and trends.

Successful PLCs know how to apply processes and tools to identify factors (teachers, students, curriculum, parents, organization) that may be contributing to current results.

Effective PLCs identify students' strengths, the greatest areas of need, and the contributing factors that they can address. Through collaborative examination of student work, they may determine that the students demonstrate weaknesses in identifying and understanding main ideas, significant details, and sequential and causal relationships. They hypothesize that teachers have a limited repertoire for explicitly teaching these skills and that students don't have the confidence and competence to read for meaning.

This systematic inspection process is essential for PLCs to accomplish meaningful improvement goals together.

Key 3: Select

PLCs need a shared vision of improvement (goals) to "sink or swim together." Successful PLCs use the results from their collaborative examination of students' needs to identify short-term goals. When they accomplish the goal or resolve the problem with high intention, sincere effort, and skillful execution, they develop team efficacy because they succeeded together.

Selecting short-term goals (two weeks to one month) allows PLCs to take smaller risks together at first and increase the number of opportunities for success. They select long-term goals as they become more confident in their skill and capacity.

Successful PLCs select goals and plans of action that include objectives, indicators of success, measurements, strategies/methods, resources, and timelines. Many tools are useful for this task, such as SMART and IDEAL goals, but it is important for PLCs to go outside the group's experience to acquire relevant professional knowledge and skills about tools and processes. They must become knowledgeable about research-based best practices and correlate them to current practices before they complete the strategies/methods section of their plan. They must apply new knowledge to improve student learning.



Effective PLCs inspect a wide range of student data to determine next steps to promote student success.

Key 4: Act

PLCs may have clear norms and high expectations, but some become afflicted with “analysis paralysis.” These teams do an elegant job of identifying the problem and contributing factors, and creating an array of data charts and tables, but they don’t take decisive actions.

Successful PLCs are committed to ACT: Action Changes Things. However, it must be the right actions for the intended goal. Many improvement efforts are ineffective because teachers do not have the knowledge, skills, dispositions, or resources necessary to implement an improvement plan.

For example, teachers may need professional learning opportunities or extended planning time to create and implement a new standards-based curriculum or to use new strategies to explicitly teach literacy skills across the curriculum.

When PLC members are ready, they take decisive actions, implementing their plan with integrity, honesty, responsibility, and involvement. They don’t simply comply with team expectations they commit to a plan. They implement the plan with vigor and enthusiasm, monitor their implementation, and observe indicators of success. They use data and intuition to assess their progress and don’t judge their progress in the early implementation stage.

Key 5: Reflect

Successful PLCs don’t place blame; they find remedies. They reflect about, recognize, and celebrate progress related to the improvement goals and they reflect about the team as a collaborative group. They use protocols to think deeply and carefully about incremental progress toward the improvement goals and make just-in-time adjustments.

Protocols provide opportunities to focus on improvement targets, core problems, and continuous improvement. They are step-by-step guidelines used to help PLCs structure professional conversations to ensure that collaboration and planning time are used efficiently and productively. Moreover, protocols encourage active listening, ensure equitable participation, and create a culture of safety, respect, trust, and mutual appreciation.

The process specified in the protocols often replaces unproductive excuses, comments, or complaints with purposeful, substantive, and meaningful feedback and improvement ideas. PLC members use protocols to regularly review student artifacts and results and to determine incremental progress.

Finally, successful PLCs reflect about how their group functions, regularly discussing their practices and performance in relation to the norms and characteristics of high-functioning collaborative groups. The team recognizes team and individual strengths and identifies priority areas of improvement. They also determine what individuals and the team are learning during their work together.

Are You Ready?

Professional learning teams play a vital role in education today. Research suggests that PLCs can increase student learning and reduce achievement gaps. They also can create a culture of collaborative inquiry and improvement, expand leadership capacity, and increase teacher effectiveness and satisfaction. PLCs can realize their potential if they apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to succeed together. Is your PLC ready to succeed?

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