

Components of a Successful PLC

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A professional learning community (PLC) is a delicate recipe of ingredients that never cooks the same way twice. What makes a true PLC is how educators respond to the specific needs of their particular school. An idea or tactic embraced by one school may not work for staff at another school.

The PLC concept is often misconstrued as simply holding more staff meetings. But it's much more than that. It's a process that's focused on three major components: learning, collaboration, and results.

First Component

The first component of learning versus merely teaching is crucial, especially for school principals. With a PLC, principals continue to observe instruction and discuss vital issues, such as instructional data and student efficacy. But the focus is on the results instead of on instruction. Year-end test results will never be a surprise if principals spend less time reviewing what teachers plan to do and more time on what they actually do.

A PLC should be an environment in which the faculty learns from each other and works together as a unit. The staff studies a topic together and determines collectively how to apply their new learning. At all levels of the school organization, professionals in the school work collaboratively and continually to learn together and apply their learning for the benefit of all students. Teachers also collectively attend conferences and professional meetings as part of staff development.

With the encouragement of the principal, teachers use their own newly acquired knowledge to develop additional units of study for students. In subsequent meeting sessions, the staff shares and compares notes, working in tandem with each other to provide a coherent program, coordinated at all grade levels. The resulting development of a high-quality curriculum and the development of the school as a learning community of professionals can be attributed in large measure to the school's administrative leadership.

Second Component

Collaboration is the second component of a PLC. Staff members must learn from one another and attend outside professional-development offerings, assuming that no one staff member is smarter than the collective staff. A PLC meeting is more than teachers getting together to share data. It is a group of individuals who meet to achieve common goals for their grade level and for the school. Building and maintaining a collaborative culture is one of the most difficult aspects of a PLC. Yet the school-wide collaboration that comes with it is truly magical, with staff becoming champions of the school's mission. Sharing their classroom practice provides the opportunity for members to give and receive feedback, contributing to their learning and development.

Decision-making structures and meetings are primary means of communication. The minutes of each formalized meeting should be printed and distributed to all teachers. Therefore, even if teachers do not attend a particular meeting, they have access to what happened there. In addition, the principal should make announcements each morning over the public-address system, some intended for teachers and others for students. The administrators can also communicate through notes put into teachers' boxes.

Teachers visit each other's classrooms to learn from each other and to provide useful feedback. Such open and trusting practice contributes to individual and community improvement. In an environment of this kind, teachers can share both their successes and their failures and may be more comfortable in debate, disagreement, and discussion.

When implementing a new curriculum, collaboration among the faculty increases dramatically for several reasons. First, if no one is familiar with the curriculum, everyone needs to learn and master the new material. Second, if the curriculum is organized sequentially, teachers must link their work with what is being taught at other grade levels. Third, teachers must work together on the design of instructional units.

The principal can help develop various structures designed to enable faculty to share, such as optional monthly "concern" meetings that provide opportunities for open discussions of issues or concern to the teachers. Decision-making bodies that meet on a regular basis should also be established, as well as activities that foster cooperation and collaboration among the faculty.

Shared decision-making begins at the campus level and is instituted by the instructional leadership team, and can spread through the training of staff from across the district in the knowledge and skills deemed necessary for serving on such a team in each school.

Third Component

This dedication to results is the final component of a successful PLC. Instead of merely sharing data, educators and administrators actively respond to data. This requires ongoing assessment of programs and initiatives in the school, and common formative assessments are vital. Teachers meet weekly to share status reports of their common assessments. During these sharing sessions, the focus is not necessarily on the teacher whose performance indicators are low but on creating an atmosphere where the success of others can be shared and replicated. Principals in PLC schools have the courage to deal with hard numbers regarding student performance and respond to this data.

A ladder of decision making can be used as a means for determining the focus of staff development for the school year. Grade-level meetings and priorities can be determined. Subsequently, the entire faculty can convene to discuss and decide on the staff development program, with the staff's voice carried "upward" on the ladder by the established system. The process culminates in a school-wide meeting to make the final decision.

In a PLC, principals encourage collective learning, making it clear that expectations are high. Such learning is enabled through arranging time, schedules, and structures to accommodate it. He or she manages and effectively utilizes resources, and monitors and encourages efforts. The principal maximizes the resources brought by grants, large and small, for the benefit of the students. Furthermore, he or she gives teachers the freedom and responsibility to make decisions.

A school's vision evolves from the values of the staff. This vision is used as a guidepost in making decisions about teaching and learning in the school—a vision that focuses on children and children's success. The school staff joins together as a professional community of learners, engaging in reflection, assessment, study, and learning.

Seven Habits of Highly Effective Professional Learning Communities

1. In a school where the staff operates as a PLC, the aspirations of the teachers, needs of the students, and goals of the school are realized.
2. There must be some factor or purpose around which the staff rallies its interest and energy to join in community, and that factor must ultimately benefit students.
3. The factors that make it possible for students to grow and develop are the same factors that enable professional staff to grow and develop.
4. A climate of democratic participation by all constituents in the school (administrators, teachers, other staff, students, and parents) generates energy and enthusiasm to reach goals.
5. In addition to a focus on goals and productivity, the community of professionals in the school demonstrates care and concern about the students and each other.
6. Organizational learning, in contrast to individual learning, is richer and provides focus for the members of the PLC.
7. The school's administration must provide the schedules and structures for initiating and maintaining organizational learning and its application by the professionals in the school.