**K-12
BLUEPRINT**

A planning resource for personalizing learning

How PLC Impact Student Success

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Today's educational leaders face complex challenges. Transformation of public schools is essential if educators are going to meet the academic needs of all learners. Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been at the forefront of reform efforts as a viable means of transforming schools to improve student achievement.

The PLC model gives schools a framework to form high-performing, collaborative teams of teachers that are all united toward the improvement of student learning.

For a PLC to take root, schools need to have a solid mission, collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve shared goals, a results-oriented focus, and a commitment to continuous improvement. According to DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004), schools doing this work[1] have 'clarity of purpose and a collaborative culture, are able to turn collective inquiry into a best practice and examine current reality, are action oriented and committed to continuous improvement, and have a strong principal who empowers teachers to be leaders."

In a PLC school, teachers work together by writing common assessments, planning curriculum, identifying at-risk students, and problem solving to intervene for each student. During collaborative team meetings, teachers share their concerns, reflect on their teaching strategies, and make decisions based on data.

The three crucial questions that drive the PLC model[2] are as follows:

1. What do we want students to learn?

Curriculum is sculpted through collaborative planning and the pacing of instruction. Teachers arrive at problem-solving tactics for at-risk students and identify suitable instructional practices.

2. How will we know if students have learned it?

Teachers and administrators debrief with one another, participate in walkthrough observations in all classrooms, collect data, and model effective practices to continue learning and to improve instruction.

3. What do we do if students do not learn it?

Through frequent common assessments, grade-level expectations, and progress monitoring, teachers and administrators identify at-risk students and write goals and devise action steps to achieve those goals. Progress is monitored for each student, and the results of all assessments determine the type and intensity of interventions to meet student goals. Systematic interventions contribute significantly to student learning. Intervention time must be provided during the school day to be effective for all students. All grade levels have interventions at the same time, so flexible grouping is possible across grade levels. During interventions, all staff members in the building are involved and work as a team to meet the needs of all children.

By The Numbers

PLCs empower the faculty and administration to work collectively to provide quality instruction and improve student learning. Nationwide, the impact of the PLC model on teaching and learning has been impressive. Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) data showed a 24.1 percent gain in advanced and proficient scores for communication arts between 2001 and 2005. There was also a 12.2% increase between 2002 and 2007 in the number of first-grade students scoring at grade level on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) end-of-year test[3].

After failing to meet a 7th grade mathematics state benchmark, Ohio's Reynoldsburg City School District came up with an action plan. During the 2006–2007 school year, teachers were to create, implement, and analyze Quarterly Common Assessments and the data as part of their department meetings. Student results from the quarterly assessments provided timely feedback.

Teachers utilized the results from the assessments to monitor which instructional strategies were more effective based on the data and academic gains. Areas of weakness on the common assessments were reviewed and discussed. General weaknesses were analyzed to determine if the clarity of the question was the cause, or whether it was an area in which a different instructional approach was needed. Individual teachers reviewed their data and assessed what more they could have done to improve students' performance in mathematics.

Out of the math meetings came about three types of math intervention programs. One program featured a hands-on mathematics approach where select students were targeted by prior student achievement data, with the teacher individualizing math instruction to meet the needs of each child in her class. This class was run as a learning community where every student was expected to participate in the learning process, as each student brought a special talent to the class.

Another program consisted of two intervention teachers who targeted a small group of slightly under-performing students and provided them with a daily second class of mathematics." Specialized instruction, which combined one-on-one support, whole-group instruction, and a review of building-wide content deficiency areas, was provided in hopes that the students would be successful during the next state testing.

The last intervention was a change in Reynoldsburg's enrichment program that was designed to accelerate student achievement for those already exceeding state minimum mathematics standards.

The reorganization of classes at Reynoldsburg City School District was supported and driven by data. The notion of accelerating the top and bottom student groups while strengthening the middle group was a critical piece in improving the math department.

Overall, teachers of Reynoldsburg's math intervention program have utilized "teach to mastery" instructional strategies. Math teachers work collaboratively and use data from common assessments to drive instructional practices. Due to the efforts of these dedicated teachers, Ohio's Battelle Memorial Institute, a private, nonprofit applied science and technology development company, recognized Reynoldsburg Junior High School for their progress in raising math achievement. In the 7th grade, math scores increased over 20 points (36% increase) from 58% (Spring 2006) to 78% (Spring 2007).[4]

But this sort of achievement not only requires an investment of energy, but one of time as well. According to Michael Fullan[5], it takes approximately three years for an elementary school and six years for a high school to achieve successful change: "Put in terms of the change process, there has been strong adoption and implementation, but not strong institutionalization."

Skilled leaders are needed for this kind of change to endure time. Once the transformation to the PLC model is complete, student achievement is positively impacted.

Homework

The following are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussions about PLCs:

1. What are the common characteristics of a PLC, and how do we already employ them at our school?

2. What are ways that collaborative teaching can improve student learning at our school?

3. How can we use the four critical PLC questions to improve instruction at our school?

4. How is assessment significant in determining the goals of collaborative teaching and student learning?

5. What roles do teachers and the principal play in sustaining a PLC?

[1] DuFour, R., Dufour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

[2] DuFour, R. (2004) What Is a Professional Learning Community? Schools as Learning Communities, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

[3] Rentfro, E. R. (2007). Professional Learning Communities Impact Student Success. National Association of School Principals.

[4] Olverson, T.L., Ritchey S. Teacher Collaboration in Raising Student Achievement. http://www.allthingsplc.info/files/uploads/teachercollaboration.pdf

[5] Fullan, M. (2000) The Three Stories of Education Reform. http://mathacts.mspnet.org/index.cfm/9540