

PLC 101

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What is a professional learning community (PLC)?

What is a professional learning community (PLC)? Here's the short answer: It's a focus on learning rather than teaching, where teachers and staff work collaboratively and hold themselves accountable for results. Now here's the long answer.

Let's begin by defining terms. People tend to use the term "professional learning community" to describe every type of education-specific team imaginable. But a true PLC—in the words of PLC guru Richard DuFour¹—is a model whose "core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn."

A PLC starts with an unwavering focus on the academic success of students, then it reverse engineers a way for that success to be achieved. It involves the assessment of school practices that have proved to be successful in boosting student learning, and then it commits to the application of those practices in the real world.

As DuFour explains², there are three crucial questions that drive a PLC:

- "What do we want each student to learn?"
- "How will we know when each student has learned it?"
- "How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?"

In a traditional school, a teacher teaches a subject to the best of his or her ability. If some students have not adequately grasped the material, the teacher either takes time to help underperforming students or moves on to ensure the students who understand the material don't lose momentum. This either results in struggling students being transferred to a less rigorous course, or the teacher lowering overall class expectation.

With a PLC, however, teachers and staff address learning discrepancies together by designing strategies to that ensure that struggling students receive additional time and support, no matter who their teacher is. This systematic, school-wide response provides students with help as soon as they experience difficulty, and requires that students devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered necessary concepts. Progress is monitored regularly to ensure success.

The key to this type of response is a highly collaborative environment. No teacher can expect to solve all student issues in isolation. But what does it mean to be truly collaborative? Some schools focus on camaraderie, some develop consensus on operational procedures, while others organize themselves into committees. While these components can all prove helpful, none on their own constitute the powerful collaboration necessary to form a PLC and truly improve classroom practice.

In a PLC, teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.

These teams discuss the best ways to assess student mastery, set standards, agree on criteria, and apply those criteria consistently. After examining results, the team analyzes performance, identifies strengths and weaknesses, and gains new insights.

PLCs are the antithesis of working in isolation. For a PLC environment to survive, the school must ensure that everyone has time to meet during the workday and throughout the school year. Teams must focus their efforts on crucial questions related to student learning and develop protocols to clarify expectations regarding roles, responsibilities, and relationships among team members.

A PLC also succeeds by what it doesn't do. A PLC doesn't pretend that merely teaching to state standards or district curriculum guides automatically guarantees students' success. Teachers don't focus simply on what they are expected to teach but rather on how they will know when each student has learned. PLCs also don't make excuses for failing to collaborate. They realize that those determined to building a collaborative culture will always find a way, until every teacher is participating in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing goals for improvement, working together to achieve those goals, and providing evidence of progress. Because in the end, it's all about results.

A PLC welcomes data and turns that data into relevant information for staff. It becomes a catalyst for improved teacher practice. To shift focus on continual improvement and results, educators must embrace data as a useful indicator of progress. They must stop disregarding or excusing unfavorable data and honestly confront the sometimes-brutal facts. They must stop using averages to analyze student performance and begin to focus on the success of each student.

Educators who focus on results don't limit improvement goals to factors outside the classroom nor do they assess their own effectiveness on the basis of how busy they are. They stop hoarding ideas and strategies and work together to meet the needs of all students.

Initiating and sustaining such a profound concept as a PLC takes hard work. But when educators work to implement these principles, their collective ability to help all students learn rises.

So what is a PLC? It is indeed a focus on learning rather than teaching, a place where teachers and staff work collaboratively and hold themselves accountable for results. Put simply, it's commitment and persistence. For without those crucial components, a PLC is nothing more than a lofty concept that will fall short of achieving its ultimate goal: to help every student achieve his or her vast potential.

^{1,2} DuFour, R. (2004). What is a professional learning community? *Educational Leadership: Schools as Learning Communities*, 61(8), 6–11.