

What is Collective Inquiry?

Collective Inquiry: *The process of building shared knowledge by clarifying the questions that a group will explore together.*

Teachers in a PLC work together collaboratively in constant, deep collective inquiry into the critical questions of the teaching and learning process, questions such as: “What is it our students must learn? What is the best way to sequence their learning? What are the most effective strategies to use in teaching this essential content? How will we know when they have learned it? How will we respond when they don’t learn? What will we do when they already know it? What can we learn from each other to enhance our effectiveness?”

The focus of collective inquiry is both a search for best practice for helping all students learn at high levels and an honest assessment of the current reality regarding teaching practices and student learning. The dialogue generated from these questions is intended to result in the academic focus, collective commitments, and productive professional relationships that enhance learning for teachers and students alike.

Collaboration or Coblaboration?

Collaboration: A *systematic* process in which people work together, *interdependently*, to analyze and **impact** professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results.

The fact that teachers collaborate will do nothing to improve a school. The pertinent question is not, “Are we collaborating?” but rather, “What are we collaborating about?” The purpose of collaboration — to help more students achieve at higher levels — can only be accomplished if the professionals engaged in collaboration are *focused on the right things*.

What distinguishes a group from a team? Much of what passes for “collaboration” is more aptly described as “coblaboration” (Perkins, 2003). A collection of teachers does not truly become a team until they must rely on one another and need one another to accomplish a goal that none could achieve individually.

What Are Norms?

Team Norms: In PLCs norms represent protocols and commitments developed by each team to guide members in working together. Norms help team members clarify expectations regarding how they will work together to achieve their shared goals.

A Strategy for Establishing Team Norms

Ask team members to think of a past negative experience they have had serving on a team or committee and to identify a specific behavior that prevented that group from being effective: for example, whining and complaining, arriving late and leaving early, being disengaged during the meetings, and so on.

For each negative norm identified by members of your team, establish a positive commitment statement (a norm) your team should adopt that, if everyone adhered to it, would prevent the past negative experience from recurring.

Examples of Team Norms

- We will maintain a positive tone at our meetings.
- We will not complain about a problem unless we can offer a solution.
- We will begin and end our meetings on time and stay fully engaged throughout each meeting.
- We will contribute equally to the workload of this team.
- We will listen respectfully and consider matters from another's perspective.

What Are SMART Goals?

SMART Goals: Goals that are *Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound* (O'Neill & Conzemius, 2006).

In order to become a **team** — a group of people working **interdependently** to achieve a **common goal** for which members are held **mutually accountable** — you must establish a specific and measurable performance goal. The SMART acronym helps teams in PLCs establish goals linked to gains in student achievement.

Tips for Establishing Team SMART Goals:

1. Ensure your teams' goal is aligned with the broader, overarching school-wide goal(s).
2. Clarify the level of achievement students were able to attain in the previous year (for example, 86% achieved the target proficiency score on the district reading assessment, or 94% earned the grade of C or higher in our course).
3. Set a SMART Goal that challenges your team to improve upon last year's performance.

Team Tools

Teachers can benefit from a Team Notebook to help them remain focused on the critical questions of learning. Notebooks should include:

- Copies of grade-level standards
- Pacing guides, scopes, and sequences
- Current data from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, IRI, running records, and common assessments
- Effective teaching strategies gleaned from data and team discussions
- Minutes from meetings, including work products and grade-level and content-area curriculum maps
- Common formative assessments
- Results from common grade-level assessments (previous and current year)
- Grade-level SMART goals
- Effective lesson plans from staff members
- Team norms

With the information they need at their fingertips, teachers can collaborate on ways to continually improve learning for all.

Does your team keep a Team Notebook as one of its tools for improvement?

What Are Essential Learnings?

Essential Learning: *The critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions each student must acquire as a result of each course, grade level, and unit of instruction. Essential learnings may also be referred to as essential outcomes or power standards.*

In a PLC, each team engages in collective inquiry to ask “What do we want each student to learn? What are the most essential learnings of our course, each subject in our grade level, and each unit of instruction?”

Ultimately, the problem of too much content and too little time forces teachers to either rush through content or to exercise judgment regarding which standards are the most significant and essential. In a PLC, this issue is not left up to each teacher to resolve individually, nor does it deteriorate into a debate between teachers regarding their opinions on what students must learn. Instead, collaborative teams of teachers work together to build shared knowledge regarding essential curriculum. They do what people do in *learning* communities: They learn together.

Ultimately, the essential learnings you and your colleagues identify must be aligned with district and state or provincial standards documents. You must, however, do more than simply adopt all of the standards and district curriculum as your essential learnings. Work with your teammates to clarify what is truly essential. Answering this critical question is a professional responsibility of *every* faculty member, a responsibility that cannot be delegated to the state, district, or textbook publisher.

Establishing Essential Learnings

Collaborative teams of teachers in PLCs always attempt to answer critical questions by first engaging in collective inquiry. They build shared knowledge by learning together. This collective examination of the same pool of information significantly increases the likelihood that members of the team will arrive at similar conclusions.

Have you and your teammates built shared knowledge on the most essential learnings for your course or grade level? If so, you are moving in the right direction on the PLC journey. If not, we recommend you begin the process by building shared knowledge on the resources that should guide your team's decision, such as:

- State, provincial, and national standards
- Recommended standards from professional organizations (such as the National Council of Teachers of Math)
- District curriculum guides
- “Wish lists” of essential learnings identified by teachers at the next grade level
- District reading and writing rubrics
- The district's standards-based report card
- Released items from high-stakes assessments
- Data from district, state, and national summative assessments
- Textbooks
- Teacher-made units of instruction from previous years
- Recommendations and standards for workplace skills and institutions of higher education

Getting Crystal Clear on "Learn What?"

A *professional* teacher is constantly working with colleagues to come to a deeper understanding of the first critical question: What do we want each student to learn?

The insights of Doug Reeves (2002) are particularly helpful in guiding teams as they address this first critical question. He offers a three-part test for teams to consider as they assess the significance of a particular standard:

1. **Does it have endurance?** Do we really expect our students to retain the knowledge and skills over time as opposed to merely learning it for a test?
2. **Does it have leverage?** Will proficiency in this standard assist the student in other areas of the curriculum and other academic disciplines?
3. **Does it develop student readiness for the next level of learning?** Is it essential for success in the next unit, course, or grade level?

Every credible school improvement model calls upon teachers to clarify what all students must know and be able to do. As teachers engage in this dialogue regarding what their students must know and be able to do as a result of this unit they are about to teach, they become more clear, more consistent, and more confident in their ability to help all students learn.

Are you and your teammates crystal clear on the answer to "Learn what?" Make a team list of the 8-10 essential learnings per semester for each course or subject area, and work interdependently with your colleagues to ensure all students learn what is most essential.

Common Pacing

It is impossible to provide students with equal access to the same essential learning unless teachers have an understanding of and commitment to common pacing. Significant disparities in time devoted to teaching a concept result in significant disparities in students' opportunity to learn.

In PLCs members of a collaborative team work together to determine the most logical sequence in which to present the content, how much time they will spend on the initial instruction of each essential learning, and when they will stop instruction to collectively ask, "How do we know each student is learning what we're teaching?" Common pacing does not mean all teachers must teach the same concept on the same day or in the same way. It does mean that teachers have agreed to devote a certain amount of instructional time to specific content within each unit before they administer a common assessment.

Tips for Common Pacing

- Develop common pacing guides for each unit within each course and grade level subject.
- Determine the most logical sequence to introduce the essential learnings.
- Devote more time to higher-order skills and concepts. Pacing should reflect the complexity of the concept.
- Work with the teams above and below your grade level to ensure vertical articulation and to identify any gaps or overlaps in the curriculum.
- Share your team's list of essential learnings and your common pacing guide with everyone who needs to know (administrators, teams in courses at grade levels above and below yours, resource teachers, related arts teachers, parents, and students) so that all those involved in helping students learn can operate from the same knowledge base.

What is a Common Formative Assessment?

Common formative assessment: An assessment created collaboratively by a team of teachers responsible for the same grade level or course and administered to all the students in that course or grade level. Common formative assessments are used frequently throughout the year to identify (1) individual students who need additional time and support for learning, (2) the teaching strategies most effective in helping students acquire the intended knowledge and skills, (3) areas in which students generally are having difficulty achieving the intended standard, and (4) improvement goals for individual teachers and the team.

Frequent monitoring of student learning is an essential element of effective teaching, and good teachers use a variety of strategies to check for student understanding each day. However, while the ongoing assessment of students by individual teachers is a necessary condition for improved student learning, it is not sufficient. Teachers and students alike benefit from the use of team-developed common formative assessments. In fact, these assessments represent one of the most powerful strategies available to teachers for answering the second critical question of a PLC: “How will we know when each student has learned?”

Developing Common Formative Assessments?

Remember that a test is not *formative* unless (1) it is used to identify students who need additional time and support for learning, (2) students are provided with that time and support during the school day, and (3) students are given another opportunity to demonstrate their learning after the intervention.

Tips for Developing Common Formative Assessments

- Decide upon a specific minimum number of common assessments to be used in your course or each subject area during this semester.
- Demonstrate how each item on the assessment is aligned to an essential learning of your course or grade level.
- Specify the proficiency standard for each essential learning being assessed; for example, students must score at least 80 out of 100 possible points on each skill being assessed or at least 3 out of 5 possible points on our team's rubric.
- Clarify the conditions for administering and scoring the test consistently in each classroom.
- Assess a few essential learnings frequently rather than assess many learnings infrequently.

What is Balanced Assessment?

Balanced assessment: *An assessment strategy that recognizes no single assessment yields the comprehensive results necessary to inform and improve practice and foster school and system accountability. Therefore, balanced assessments utilize multiple measures of student achievement including formative assessments **for** learning and summative assessment **of** learning. Balanced assessment also refers to using different types of formative assessments based upon the knowledge and/or skills students are called upon to demonstrate. Rather than relying exclusively on one kind of assessment, schools and teams develop multiple ways for students to demonstrate proficiency.*

Over time, your team should create a variety of common assessments to administer to all the students in your course or grade level following the initial period of instruction in essential learnings according to your common pacing guide.

Develop the kind of assessments that members believe will result in valid and authentic measures of the learning of their students. Your common assessments could take the form of multiple choice, true or false, fill-in-the-blank, and short-answer tests, as well as performance-based options in which your team will use the same rubric to assess student performances such as portfolios, writing prompts, projects, independent reading inventories, and oral presentations.

Using Common Rubrics

When using rubrics to assess student performance, members of your team must do the following:

- Agree on the criteria you will use to assess the quality of student work.
- Practice applying the criteria to real examples of student work until you are consistent in your scoring.

You must also, over time, be able to demonstrate that student success on your team-developed assessments is strongly correlated to student success on other indicators that the school is monitoring, such as state or provincial tests, national assessments, and grades.

Common Assessment Information

After administering your team's common assessment according to the timetable established in your common pacing guide, you will score your students' assessments in the manner agreed upon by your team. At that point, you will have data regarding your students' performance on the common assessment, but you and your teammates will need more than data before you can engage in the rich dialogue that occurs every time high-performing teams in a PLC administer a common assessment.

Data vs. information: *Data represent facts or figures that, standing alone, will not inform practice or lead to informed decisions. To transform data into information requires putting data in context, and this typically requires a basis of comparison.*

Tips to Turn Data into Information

- Administer group assessments according to the pacing guide (on the same day is preferred) to promote consistent testing conditions. Individual assessments (such as reading inventories) can be completed during an agreed-upon window of time established by your team.
- After common assessments have been administered, individual teachers should submit the scores for each student in their classes to the designated person responsible for compiling the results (such as the team leader, principal, or department chair). The designated person is then responsible for compiling the data and for promptly providing each member of the team with information illustrating how that teacher's students performed on each skill compared to the total group of students who took the same assessment.

Analyzing Information

Results orientation: *A focus on outcomes rather than on inputs or intentions. In PLCs, members are committed to achieving desired results and are hungry for evidence that their efforts are producing the intended outcomes.*

Information from common assessments makes it possible to identify program strengths — areas in which all or almost all students achieved the team's target. Pat yourselves on the back for a job well done, and recognize individual students for achievement and improvement.

Then identify at least one area of your program that could be improved. Individuals should identify problem areas in their teaching and then call upon teammates for help in addressing those areas. This process enhances the effectiveness of both the team and its individual members.

Developing and administering common formative assessments to all students in the same course or grade level is certainly more efficient than each teacher creating his or her own assessments. Team-developed common formative assessments:

- Are more efficient because teachers can divide the work among members.
- Are more equitable for students, assessing them on the same content with the same level of rigor.
- Represent the most effective strategy for determining whether the essential curriculum is being taught and, more importantly, learned.
- Help every teacher identify strengths and weaknesses in his or her teaching.
- Build a team's capacity to improve its program.
- Facilitate a systematic, collective response to students who are experiencing difficulty.

Using Results to Motivate

In order to promote continuous improvement, feedback must not only be timely, it must also be effective. Feedback can encourage effort and improvement, but it can and often is used in ways that create a sense of hopelessness. Whenever an activity is viewed as a competition, there will be winners and losers. When feedback to students takes the form of grades, they are likely to see assessment as a competition or a way to compare their achievements with others. There will always be a best and a worst. Instead, the goal of feedback is to provide every student with the information and support necessary to fuel continuous improvement.

Tips for Motivating Students

- Teach students the criteria you will use to judge the quality of their work, and provide examples.
- Engage students in assessing their own work according to the criteria for quality work.
- Whenever possible, provide each student with feedback on his or her progress and strategies for improving, rather than assign a grade.
- Use the student's own previous performance as a benchmark for improvement, rather than the performance of other students in the class, district, or state.
- Use feedback on results to inform, not punish.
- Provide feedback to students and their parents in an easily interpreted, user-friendly format.
- Use a balance of summative assessment and a variety of formative assessment to give students multiple ways to demonstrate proficiency.
- Celebrate small wins.

How Will We Respond?

1. What do we want each student to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?
4. How will we respond when a student already knows it?

Imagine four students assigned to four different teachers of the same course or grade level in a traditional school. Although each student experiences difficulty in learning, the teachers in the four isolated classrooms respond in very different ways.

The first teacher concludes that the student lacks the necessary ability and recommends the student be transferred into a program with less rigorous content. The second teacher assumes the student lacks motivation and fails or retains the student to teach him or her to be more responsible. The third promoted the struggling student in the belief that retention would be a blow to his or her self-esteem or in the hope that the student will be more successful with another year of development. The fourth teacher works with the student before and after school and during lunch until the student becomes proficient.

Professional learning communities do not leave the third critical question, “How will we respond when a student does not learn?” up to each teacher to decide. Instead, they develop a systematic school-wide plan that ensures every student receives additional time and support for learning as soon as he or she experiences difficulty — regardless of who the teacher might be. The intervention occurs during the school day, and students are directed rather than invited to utilize the support.

Creating Systematic Interventions

Systematic intervention: A school-wide plan that ensures every student in every course or grade level will receive additional time and support for learning as soon as he or she experiences difficulty in acquiring essential knowledge and skills. In a PLC, the intervention occurs during the school day, and students are required rather than invited to devote the extra time and secure the extra support for learning. Because student learning is monitored continuously, this intervention occurs as soon as a student begins to struggle.

Have you and your teammates created systematic interventions for your course or grade level? If so, you are moving in the right direction on the PLC journey. If not, we recommend you begin by examining your current interventions by asking:

- Are our students assured EXTRA TIME AND SUPPORT for learning?
- Is our response TIMELY? How quickly are we able to identify the kids who need extra time and support? Is our focus prompt intervention rather than sluggish remediation?
- Is our response DIRECTIVE rather than invitational? Are kids invited to put in extra time or does our system ensure they put in extra time?
- Is our response SYSTEMATIC? Do kids receive this intervention according to a school-wide plan rather than at the discretion of individual teachers?

What is a Professional Teacher?

Teachers represent the heartbeat of a school, and the changes essential to school improvement must be manifested by individual teachers at the classroom level. You must continue to “practice” your profession through the constant exploration of the art and science of teaching for your entire career. *Professional* teachers:

- ***Emphasize learning rather than teaching.*** Professional teachers ask, “What are the best instructional strategies to help all of my students learn what is intended?”
- ***Emphasize active student engagement with significant content.*** Professional teachers ask, “How can I engage students in real and meaningful ways over the sustained period of time that is necessary for students to reach high levels of learning?”
- ***Focus on student performance and production.*** Professional teachers ask, “How can the performances and products be made more authentic? What standards should students be expected to meet? Have my teammates and I agreed on the criteria we use in evaluating the quality of student work, and do we apply the criteria consistently?”
- ***Routinely collaborate with colleagues.*** Professional teachers ask, “How can I learn from my colleagues and contribute to their learning as we work interdependently to achieve our common goals?”
- ***Become students of teaching and consumers of research.*** Professional teachers ask, “What new advances in curriculum, instruction, and assessment can I implement to improve learning for all students?”
- ***Function as leaders:*** Professional teachers ask, “How can I be a leader in my school’s journey to improve student learning?”

Creating Opportunity for Many Winners

Schools have always had ways to recognize individual students. It is not unusual for a school to have honor rolls, valedictorians, captains of athletic teams, or National Honor Societies. And in most schools, the overwhelming majority of students realize from the very day they enter the school that they have no chance of ever receiving that recognition.

It will be difficult to create a culture of success in a school that limits recognition of success to an elite few. When schools develop systems to honor not only the highest academic achievement, but also improvement, character, service, and persistence, virtually all students can come to believe that school can be a place where they have the chance to be recognized and celebrated.

Celebrations are a powerful form of communication that can clarify what is valued and important, can motivate individuals, and can contribute to a culture of continuous improvement. Recognize and celebrate individual students when they do the following:

- Reach a designated standard of achievement.
- Demonstrate significant improvement.
- Demonstrate the qualities you are attempting to promote, such as empathy and perseverance.
- Complete a challenging project.
- Engage in community service.

Celebration:

A Key to Sustaining PLCs

The single best strategy to sustain the process to implement PLC concepts is to plan for and celebrate small wins along the way. Recognizing and celebrating the effort and achievements of both students and adults is also a powerful tool for communicating what is valued in the school.

Tips for Celebrating

- Explicitly state the purpose of celebration.
- Make celebration everyone's responsibility.
- Establish a clear link between the recognition and the behavior or commitment you are attempting to encourage or reinforce.
- Find creative, visible ways to recognize each student who meets specific academic goals.
- Recognize student curricular and noncurricular achievements in daily school announcements, in class and school newsletters, and at awards assemblies.
- Share professional learning and achievements at weekly team meetings and monthly staff meetings.
- Recognize improvement as well as achievement.
- Create opportunities to have many winners.

Why Teach?

If you believe it is important to help children
and young men and women
acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions
essential to productive and satisfying lives,
then consider being a teacher.

If you are committed to your own lifelong learning,
to an ongoing study of the art and science of your craft,
then consider being a teacher.

If you truly enjoy kids, if you are able to see the best
in each of them,
if you are willing to persist
when confronted by their recalcitrance or indifference,
then consider being a teacher.

If you feel joy in seeing students learn to believe in themselves
because you helped them achieve what they felt was
beyond their grasp,
then consider being a teacher.

If, like Henry Adams, you understand that, as a teacher,
you can affect eternity because it is impossible to tell
where your influence stops,
then consider being a teacher

If you recognize that giving yourself to others and
developing others
Can be one of the most significant and fulfilling ways
In which to live your life,
Then consider being a teacher.

From the National Staff Development Council.