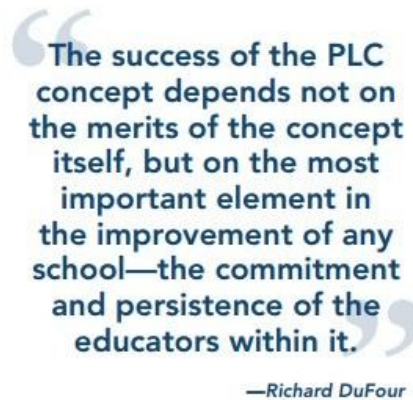


Reinvigorating and Revisiting Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)



Whether we call them PLCs, teams, or networks, a **learning community** is a continuous improvement process where educators collaborate regularly to **focus on learning and results** for each and every student. There is compelling evidence that PLCs have a positive impact on student learning; in some cases, however, the term PLCs has become a meaningless label. So how do we refresh the work of PLCs? Let's revisit the basics: learning, results, and collaborative culture.

LEARNING & RESULTS:

PLCs focus on four essential questions:

- 1. What do we want our students to learn?**
- 2. How do we know if they have learned it?**
- 3. How will we respond when they don't learn?**
- 4. How will we extend and enrich learning?**

COLLABORATIVE CULTURE:

What if our teams need a boost? Here are a few activities for a fresh start:

1. Have administrators/teams assess their current reality in creating a collaborative culture using "Critical Issues for Team Consideration."
2. Have administrators/staff members write down 3 successes of their PLCs, 2 challenges, and 1 suggestion for improving their collaboration this year. First, each team member will share the successes they identified, then the challenges, and finally, the suggestions. Invite them to collectively commit to and act upon 1 or 2 of the best suggestions.
3. Have teams reflect on these 4 questions:
 - 1. How are we doing now?**
 - 2. How do we know?**
 - 3. How would we prefer to see our results?**
 - 4. What are we willing to do differently to get different results?**

Reference:

Dufour, R., Dufour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2010). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work* (2nd ed.). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

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3 Principles for Authentic PLCs

By [Learning Forward](#) on May 15, 2014 11:02 AM

Joellen Killion

Research supports the value of educator collaboration. A [recent report from the Rennie Center](#) confirms that when teachers collaborate, students benefit. Too often, however, professional learning within communities of peers is merely a label.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are hijacked in multiple ways, usually under the pretense of facilitating or supporting the collaboration. Administrators who dictate the content of collaboration are some of the biggest offenders.

Teachers who fail to engage responsibly as professionals with colleagues in collaboration are also offenders. When educators at any level arrive late, break commitments, seek to maintain the status quo, or remain within their comfort zone, they are subverting the core principles of professional learning communities.

Within authentic professional learning communities, members determine their content and process for their continuous improvement. While they may benefit from skillful facilitators who offer processes and protocols, the community commits to learning as a means to improve practice and results. A key distinction exists between a community of professionals who engage in learning for continuous improvement and a gathering of professionals who conduct routine work together.

A learning community that fails to make learning its central focus violates a fundamental principle of a PLC -- **the primary purpose of the community is to learn**. The PLC intends to strengthen, refine, or expand its members' practice and the effects of their practice.

A professional learning community that has no decision-making authority is in violation of a second fundamental principle -- **the community is responsible for successes and failures**. Members embrace both responsibility and accountability for success of all of the community's members. Administrators must allow the community to exercise authority for their own learning. PLC members must assume the accountability that comes with authority. Both administrators and members can be in violation -- when administrators hijack the agenda or time or when community members fail to assume responsibility for each other's success and failure.

The third fundamental principle of a professional learning community is the **professionalism of members at all levels** -- engaging fully, keeping commitments, practicing civility, using dialogue to deepen understanding, challenging assumptions, communicating effectively.

The term *PLC* too frequently is an inappropriate label for any convening of education professionals. Grade-level team or department meetings, faculty meetings, convocations, training, data presentations, curriculum writing, assessment scoring, or lesson planning are often mistakenly called PLCs. Each of these types of meetings has value, yet each often misses most of the principles of professional learning communities. To what degree, for example, do members of a faculty design the content and processes of their faculty meetings to advance professional learning and collective responsibility for educators' continuous improvement and student success?

Authentic professional learning communities support professional responsibility for peer and student success. More opportunity for educator collaboration is not only about creating the structures for collaboration, such as team norms or time within the school day, it also requires a commitment to and fierce preservation of the fundamental principles of professional learning communities that make them professional, learning-focused, and a true community.

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Critical Issues for Team Consideration

Team Name:

Team Members:

Use the following rating scale to indicate the extent to which each statement is true of your team.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not True of Our Team	Our Team Is Addressing This						True of Our Team		
1. _____	We have identified team norms and protocols to guide us in working together.								
2. _____	We have analyzed student achievement data and established SMART goals to improve upon this level of achievement we are working interdependently to attain. (SMART Goals are Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results oriented, and Time bound. SMART Goals are discussed at length in chapter 6.)								
3. _____	Each member of our team is clear on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions (that is, the essential learning) that students will acquire as a result of (1) our course or grade level and (2) each unit within the course or grade level.								
4. _____	We have aligned the essential learning with state and district standards and the high-stakes assessments required of our students.								
5. _____	We have identified course content and topics we can eliminate to devote more time to the essential curriculum.								
6. _____	We have agreed on how to best sequence the content of the course and have established pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learning.								
7. _____	We have identified the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need in order to master the essential learning of each unit of instruction.								
8. _____	We have identified strategies and created instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.								
9. _____	We have developed strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking in those areas.								
10. _____	We have developed frequent common formative assessments that help us determine each student's mastery of essential learning.								

11. ____ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our common assessments.
12. ____ We use the results of our common assessments to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.
13. ____ We use the results of our common assessments to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learning, and we work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.
14. ____ We have agreed on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learning of our course, and we continually practice applying those criteria to ensure we are consistent.
15. ____ We have taught students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and provided them with examples.
16. ____ We have developed or utilized common summative assessments that help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of our program.
17. ____ We have established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our summative assessments.
18. ____ We formally evaluate our adherence to team norms and the effectiveness of our team at least twice each year.