



Memorandum

From the office of the Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum,
Instruction & Assessment

TO: Jeff Arnett, Superintendent
FROM: Molly May, Assistant Superintendent – CIA
DATE: 12/19/2024
SUBJECT: Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

Introduction

In preparing this memo, I reviewed a 2014 document titled “The PLC Journey,” which detailed the start of Eanes ISD’s adoption of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in 2010. It included a proposal to rework the school schedule to allow for early release every Wednesday, dedicating time to PLCs. While this plan was never implemented, various approaches to allocating time for PLC collaboration have been introduced, altered, discontinued and reintroduced over the past 14 years.

Providing sufficient time for teachers to balance state mandated requirements, district and campus expectations, and the needs of parents and students, remains a persistent challenge. The existing PLC period, offered only to secondary core teachers, is one strategy to address this issue.

It is essential to emphasize that PLCs are a process and structure, not merely a time period. Staff can engage in PLC work through various methods and settings; however, dedicated time remains critical.

Background

Texas Education Code 21.404 states, “each classroom teacher is entitled to at least 450 minutes within each two-week period for instructional preparation, including parent-teacher conferences, evaluating students’ work and planning. A planning and preparation period under this section may not be less than 45 minutes within the instructional day. During a planning and preparation period, a classroom teacher may not be required to participate in any other activity.” PLC work has been defined as “other activity” through Texas Education Agency (TEA) guidance.

In Eanes ISD across all campuses, the standard conference period is 50 minutes, giving staff 500 minutes of planning biweekly. Staff also receive a 30-minute lunch. Of the 500 minutes, 50 minutes are typically allocated for ARD, 504 and SST meetings. However, many staff members use more than one conference period each week to attend these meetings. Secondary core teachers are provided an additional 50-minute PLC period per day.

Current PLC Structures

Elementary

Grade-level teams engage in the formal PLC process once weekly during their conference period, while students are at specials. This reduces their available planning time to 400 minutes biweekly, not accounting for additional meeting responsibilities.

Middle school:

Core subject teachers have both a daily planning period and a daily PLC period, totaling 1,000 minutes biweekly. They are required to participate in the formal PLC process at least once per week, though many teams meet more frequently, balancing PLC work with essential planning activities.

To maintain equity, elective teachers are typically exempt from having an advisory period, granting them an additional 250 minutes weekly for planning or PLC work. Many elective teachers, as singletons, may not participate in formal PLC processes weekly.

High School

Core subject teachers also have both a daily planning period and a daily PLC period, totaling 1,000 minutes biweekly. They are required to engage in the formal PLC process at least once weekly, with many meeting more frequently for PLC or planning activities.

At the high school level, the lunch period is 50 minutes. Core teachers are required to perform duty for 20 minutes once weekly, supervising spaces like the library, Commons or Chap Court. Elective teachers are not assigned these duties to provide a small amount of equity. While the additional 20 minutes, four or five days per week, is not legally mandated, and the middle school teachers are not afforded this time, many high school teachers have open classrooms during lunch where students can finish testing if they have extended time, receive tutoring or have club meetings with their sponsor.

Special Education

Secondary collaborative special education teachers use their PLC periods to work with general education counterparts. Due to their roles spanning multiple content areas and grade levels, they may be required to participate in many PLCs in a given week. Behavior support teachers often lack a PLC period due to the demands of their role. However, they do engage in PLCs one time per week using time before or after school. When possible, life skills teachers have daily PLC periods to address the complex needs of their students, including collaboration with related services staff around academics, behavior and medical needs.

Campus Support Specialists (CSS): ESL, GT, RTI, Dyslexia Services (K-12)

The ESL, GT, RTI, and Dyslexia service providers meet once a month as a district PLC with sub coverage at the secondary level. The CSS staff also have designated PLC time in the afternoon during two district Professional Development days in October and February. CSS staff meet with their campus Student Support Teams three times a year as a PLC to review campus-wide benchmark data and determine intervention needs and support plans for all students.

Secondary ESL, Math, and Dyslexia Specialists are provided a PLC period similar to core teachers to meet with core subject area teachers during their weekly PLC time and ensure support is in place for students receiving intervention.

Elementary Specials

Elementary specials teachers participate in district PLCs before the school year, during professional development days and once during elementary conferences.

World Languages

World language teachers, not considered core subjects, lack dedicated PLC periods but meet as a district PLC approximately monthly with substitute coverage. However, as mentioned in the high school section above, world language teachers do not have an advisory class at the middle school and are required to have a weekly 20 minute duty period at the high school.

Regional PLC Comparisons (High School)

The statement has been made that neighboring school districts do not provide dedicated PLC periods. Comparisons are challenging due to differences in schedules, such as block scheduling and the expectations of what is deemed PLC work. For instance, WHS core teachers teach five of eight classes, with lunch considered a class period. Other schools, including our own middle schools, do not consider lunch a period. By contrast, Dripping Springs HS teachers teach three of four classes daily on a block schedule, providing a 90-minute conference and 30-minute lunch. Of that 900 minutes biweekly, 90 minutes is required for PLCs. In Hays CISD,

only teachers in STAAR EOC tested subjects receive a PLC period. Therefore, while we recognize other districts may offer a PLC period, we have been unable to find one with the structure and formality of Eanes ISD.

Additional data collected compares the distribution of instructional time across high schools in Westlake and neighboring districts, including Leander ISD, Lake Travis ISD, Austin ISD, Dripping Springs ISD, Round Rock ISD and Hays CISD. Westlake dedicates 100 minutes daily to PLCs and conference periods for core teachers—exceeding the regional norm of 90 minutes. Westlake currently allocates less time to direct teaching (250 minutes) compared to most districts, which average 270–288 minutes. Core teachers at Westlake spend on average 56.18% of the school day with students in direct instruction, which is below the regional range of 65.9%.

If the 50-minute PLC period were eliminated, teaching time at Westlake would increase to 300 minutes daily, surpassing the regional average of 270–288 minutes. This adjustment would also increase the percentage of time spent with students from 56.18% to 66.18%, aligning more closely with other districts such as Austin ISD (65.78%) and Hays CISD (66.67%).

Implications of eliminating PLC periods

As the Board has heard from various secondary core teachers, they are not in favor of this change. All the benefits of additional collaboration time including aligning instruction, sharing best instructional practices, developing common assessments and reviewing student data will be decreased. Additionally, teaching an extra class per day will add approximately 26 to 30 more essays to read, tests to score and students to get to know and care for.

If PLC periods are eliminated, the Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment (CIA) Department must explore creative solutions, as PLC time is too valuable to just lose. In the beginning of the memo, I alluded to alternatives. Other options could include:

- Early release days
- Late start days
- Additional professional development days, potentially extending the school year past Memorial Day
- Increased use of substitute teachers for release time.

Each option presents challenges and requires flexibility from staff and the community. The CIA Department is actively exploring solutions to preserve PLC collaboration time, though no recommendations are finalized.