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Supporting the Principal's Data-Informed Decisions

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The Impact of Professional Learning Communities

By Rhonda Barton and Jennifer Stepanek

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are strong mechanisms that enable educators to join forces to promote ongoing growth and improvement for themselves and their students. PLCs are based on the premise that learning results from the varied perspectives and experiences that members share with one another as they work toward common goals. Recently, the US Department of Education has recognized the value of peer-to-peer professional learning, promoting PLCs as part of key initiatives, such as the Investing in Innovation Fund, Promise Neighborhoods, and the Race to the Top Fund.

Although PLCs have become more prevalent, they face the danger of losing their meaning as the label is freely applied in school, district, and state education settings. This prompts the question, What truly characterizes a PLC? And, more important, How can PLCs improve teacher practice and student learning?

A New Vision of Professional Development

Newmann and Associates (1996) described five essential characteristics of PLCs. They include:

- Shared views and values about the ability of students to learn, the allocation of school resources, and the role of educational staff and parents
- A clear focus on ensuring that students are not simply taught, but that they learn

PLCs are based on the premise that learning results from the varied perspectives and experiences that members share with one another as they work toward common goals.

Just the Facts

- PLCs also encourage collective creativity and supportive conditions by reducing isolation and creating shared responsibility for students (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010).
- For PLCs to be most effective, "[they] must be able to articulate their outcomes in terms of data that indicate changed teaching practices and improved student learning, something they have not yet established as common practice" (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 82).
- Although few in number, the collective results of these studies offer an unequivocal answer to the question about whether the literature supports the assumption that student learning increases when teachers participate in PLCs. The answer is a resounding and encouraging yes. (p. 87)
- "Like students, adult learners who are engaging in problem solving and teamwork for the first time need differentiated supports to ensure that they can work together effectively to meet their students' learning needs" (p. 54).
- Dufour (2011) warned that collaboration alone won't improve a school and may serve to reinforce a negative culture if PLCs devolve into complaint sessions.

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- Reflective conversations about curriculum, instruction, and student development
- A move toward making practice public
- A focus on collaboration.

Hord (1997) elaborated on the definition, stating that PLCs should demonstrate shared leadership, values, personal practice, and vision. PLCs also encourage collective creativity and supportive conditions by reducing isolation and creating shared responsibility for students (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010).

The increased emphasis on accountability in teaching has contributed to the growth of PLCs and to a vision of professional development as more than the individual acquisition of new knowledge and skills. PLCs have helped teachers learn together as they rethink their practice, challenge existing assumptions about instruction, and reexamine their students' learning needs. By embracing this collaborative approach to professional development, teachers are building their ability to work in teams and to problem solve—two areas that the standards movement has identified as critical to prepare students for postsecondary success (Thessin & Starr, 2011).

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A Review of the Research

For PLCs to be most effective, "[they] must be able to articulate their outcomes in terms of data that indicate changed teaching practices and improved student learning, something they have not yet established as common practice" (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 82). Focusing on those desired outcomes, Vescio et al. (2008) analyzed 10 empirical studies of PLCs in the United States and one multisite research study conducted in England. They asked two main questions: How did teaching practice change because of participation in PLCs, and Is there evidence that student learning increased because of PLCs?

The researchers found that all 11 studies produced empirical data suggesting that the establishment of a PLC had shifted the professional culture of the school. These changes were linked to an increase in collaboration through structures such as sharing lessons, using common protocols for instructional decisions, observing in one another's classrooms, and engaging in critical friends groups. The studies also showed that the most successful PLCs had an explicit focus on student learning, increased teacher empowerment and authority in decision making, and promoted continuous teacher learning through joint study of research literature.

Of the 11 studies that Vescio et al. (2008) examined, eight sought to connect PLCs to student learning and all eight indicated improvements in that area. They concluded:

> Although few in number, the collective results of these studies offer an unequivocal answer to the question about whether the literature supports the assumption that student learning increases when teachers participate in PLCs. The answer is a resounding and encouraging yes. (p. 87)

A more recent meta-analysis by Lomos, Hofman, and Bosker (2011) calculated the statistical impact of three of the same studies that Vescio et al. (2008) examined, as well as two additional studies. Their calculations showed that "although relatively small," there still was a positive and significant relationship between PLCs and student achievement (Lomos et al., 2011, p. 137).

Positive student impacts were also reported in a study of professional learning teams (PLTs) in the Wake County (NC) Public School System (Jackl & Lougée, 2012). PLTs were introduced in Wake County schools in 2003 and by fall 2011, 87% of the district's teachers were involved in these smaller

groups that comprised a larger PLC. In terms of impact, 81% of teachers surveyed said they believed that their students learned more as a result of teachers' participation in PLTs.

According to Jackl and Lougée (2012), schools that used PLTs the most had fewer students held back than schools with lower PLT implementation. Classroom grades, performance on state achievement tests, and graduation rates also showed improvement. The authors concluded, "The data suggest that PLT work is having a positive impact on teachers' instruction, and this has remained relatively consistent despite the economic downturn, budget strains, larger class sizes, staff reductions, and other challenges that have occurred in the past five years" (p. 35).

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A group of university faculty members Linder, Post, and Calabrese (2012) helped to implement and guide three PLCs in a year-long study of how those communities can be established successfully and how schools of education can support PLC practices. They found that PLC members most valued the following aspects of their experience: "being able to study a selected topic in depth; having the assistance of a university faculty member; and selecting, implementing, sharing, and discussing results of activities with each other" (p. 18). The researchers found that in their role as guides, it was important to keep the groups focused but to resist exerting too much control. They concluded that the teachers needed to chart their own path for professional development. They also recommended that administrators encourage and support PLCs, both validating their work and celebrating their accomplishments along the way.

District and School Support for PLCs

Stamford (CT) Public Schools demonstrated the important role that districts play in professional learning communities by ensuring that teachers collaborate effectively and that PLCs live up to their potential (Thessin & Starr, 2011). Before introducing PLCs in the district's 20 schools in the 2007–08 school year, Stamford's assistant superintendents met with school leaders to establish protected time each week for all teachers to meet. They also made clear that the time was to be devoted to discussing how to improve and support student achievement. In addition, the district formed a steering committee of teachers and administrators to lead the implementation of PLCs; trained central office staff and building leaders in PLC practices; and provided a framework to show how the schools' PLCs fit into a districtwide improvement process. Finally, as the PLCs matured, the district offered support and training tailored to address each school's challenges.

Noting that teacher collaboration doesn't magically happen, Thessin and Starr (2011) concluded, "Like students, adult learners who are engaging in problem solving and teamwork for the first time need differentiated supports to ensure that they can work together effectively to meet their students' learning needs" (p. 54).

Principals exert considerable influence over the successful implementation and continued functioning of PLCs. Building time into the schedule for PLCs is one of the most important steps a principal can take. Among the strategies that schools have used for teacher collaboration are:

- **Planned abandonment.** This might include eliminating teacher duty periods; redistributing teacher inservice days into shorter, more regular meetings; or using faculty meeting time (with routine administrative duties handled through e-mail or memos).
- **Extended lunch.** In schools with a common lunch for all students, time for staff meetings can be created by extending the lunch period every week or every other week and having parent volunteers or substitutes provide student supervision.

- **Flex time.** Teachers may arrive at school at different times (and adjust their departure time accordingly) to create time before or after school for team meetings.
- **Substitute teachers.** Teams of teachers can be released during the workday, and a regular team of substitutes used to help ensure continuity in classrooms.
- **Early dismissal/late arrival for students.** Regularly lengthen some school days to allow more time on other days for teams to meet. Use time during some school days for service learning or school-to-work internships.
- **Special studies.** Create a block of time for all the students of one team of teachers to meet with specialists in the building. (Sather & Barton, 2006, p. 6)

Principals should lay the foundation for PLC members' collegial conversations by initiating and facilitating early discussions and modeling effective communication and decision making. Spanneut (2010) suggested that principals can kickstart PLCs by helping members probe their own beliefs about the organizational factors that affect instruction. Potential topics include school culture, the mission of the school, and leadership roles. Principals might then model how research can be used to explore those topics and to pose questions that are particularly relevant to their schools. According to Spanneut (2010), principals also should take the initial lead in providing research and resources from regional, state, and national educational organizations. By helping to foster communication, decision-making skills, and the ability to become more effective consumers of research, principals not only provide leadership for teachers but help those teachers become leaders themselves.

A Cautionary Note

Dufour (2011) warned that collaboration alone won't improve a school and may serve to reinforce a negative culture if PLCs devolve into complaint sessions. He emphasized that teams must focus on "the right work":

> As members of collaborative teams, educators in a PLC work collectively to develop a guaranteed and viable curriculum to ensure that students have access to the same essential knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned.…As members look at actual evidence of student proficiency in the knowledge and skills the team has deemed essential, on an assessment the team has agreed is valid, they are able to learn from one another and continually enhance their ability to meet the needs of their students. (p. 61)

The important point is that collaborating—through PLCs or other team structures—is not an end in itself. Collaboration must zero in on what positively impacts student achievement. When teachers engage with their colleagues around what really matters in teaching and learning, rather than treating their classrooms as a private domain, both student and teacher benefit. Instructional decisions, informed by the data and experience of many team members rather than a sole practitioner's, stand a greater chance of meeting the diverse needs of all students. PRR

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A Spotlight on One District's Example

Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, KY, is going after big gains in student performance with a "Make Time for What Matters Most" campaign. The district has used federal funds from the Smaller Learning Communities program and the Investing in Innovation initiative to pursue several aligned strategies in 11 low-performing high schools. "Making time" means schools have targeted using time more effectively to drive academic acceleration. The schools also increased the amount of time devoted to collaborative teacher learning.

After systematic comparison of different master class schedules, the district chose to implement a 3 x 5 trimester schedule to maximize the effectiveness of instructional time. Three, 12-week trimesters offer five, 70-minute periods a day. In addition to providing more time for student learning, teachers have 70 minutes each day for professional collaboration or individual preparation.

Jefferson County is using PLCs to develop common approaches to proficiency-based grading in key courses. They are focused on "what matters most": ensuring that all graduates are ready for college and careers. The aim of the initiative is to guarantee proficiency for every student through a combination of quality teaching, common assessments, early warning systems, and robust interventions for those who fall behind.

"Teachers feel we don't have time to waste—we've got new standards, we've had to revamp the curriculum, and we need to make sure that every kid gets it," said Linda Brown, Jefferson County Priority School Manager. "The advantage is that they need each other. The PLCs are an essential element of doing this work."

To support the work of the PLCs, school administrators have scheduled common planning periods for teachers of the same core subject-area course. Most meetings take place during the school day, but the teachers' contracts also provide for one hour of after-school meetings per week. This means that the district did not require additional funding to accomplish this level of collaboration.

Providing time, however, is not enough to ensure strong implementation. One district-level design team used rapid prototyping to create tools and procedures to support effective teacher collaboration. In most cases, the tools and procedures they developed represented a refinement of existing ones or an effort to extend promising practices from one school across the district.

For example, the team reshaped a common lesson plan template to provide teachers more guidance for facilitating students' use of higher order thinking skills—an area they identified as a major gap in instructional practice. The use of a common structured lesson plan template supported teachers' development of sound and detailed plans.

The design team has tweaked another promising practice—collegial learning walks—to help teachers improve their instruction through peer observation of classes. In doing so, teachers looked for students' use of higher-order thinking skills to inform their own practice.

The rapid prototyping included a study/design/implementation cycle that required significant resources to launch. Once the routines and habits of continuous improvement were established, however, district leaders were able to continue to support effective implementation of desired practices without using additional funds.

PLCs Connecting Online

PLCs were originally envisioned as groups that worked together in the same location. With current advances in technology, groups can now form and collaborate across vast distances.

Platforms such as Moodle and WebEx can be used to conduct virtual meetings for teachers in different locations. These platforms can be especially helpful for small schools in rural locations. Many teachers work in isolation not by choice, but because they are the only biology teacher in their school or even their district. An online learning community is a way for teachers to discuss problems of practice, share observations about their students, and develop lessons or instructional strategies when those opportunities are limited in their physical location.

Even teachers who are not geographically isolated, however, can benefit from a virtual community. Group members can participate at their convenience, rather than having to attend sessions at specific times. This can help schools overcome the challenge of finding common time for teachers to meet. Therefore, virtual communities can also be more cost-effective than other forms of collaborative learning.

Although the advantages of online communities are significant, there are potential disadvantages as well. It is easier to opt-out of online communities than it is to avoid local, face-to-face commitments. Therefore, community members will need compelling reasons to make time for participating. Ideally, those reasons will come from the community members themselves because the group was formed in response to their common interests or needs.

Even when the majority of a group's work will take place online, it is helpful to provide at least one opportunity for community members to meet face-to-face. This allows participants to develop personal relationships and build trust with one another and the facilitators. An in-person event can be held at the start of the project to kick off the group's work, at the culmination of the project, or at a significant milestone.

A blend of asynchronous and synchronous activities can also be effective. Synchronous participation means that members of the community will interact in real time. This could be a video conference, a live chat, or a webinar. Asynchronous participation means that the members are not required to interact at a specific time. This could be contributing to a wiki, uploading documents or videos, or posting comments.

The community members may have varying expertise and comfort levels with using technology. Some participants may need extra guidance in how to use the tools. Before beginning a new group, think about how to ease-in members who are less comfortable using technology without making them feel singled out or intimidated.

Collaborative leadership requires groups within a school to work together to plan and implement school improvements. NASSP's *Breaking Ranks* Framework supports the work of PLCs and other learning communities with a process to: ■ gather and analyze data ■ explore possible solutions ■ assess readiness and build capacity ■ create and communicate the improvement plan ■ implement the plan ■ monitor and adjust.

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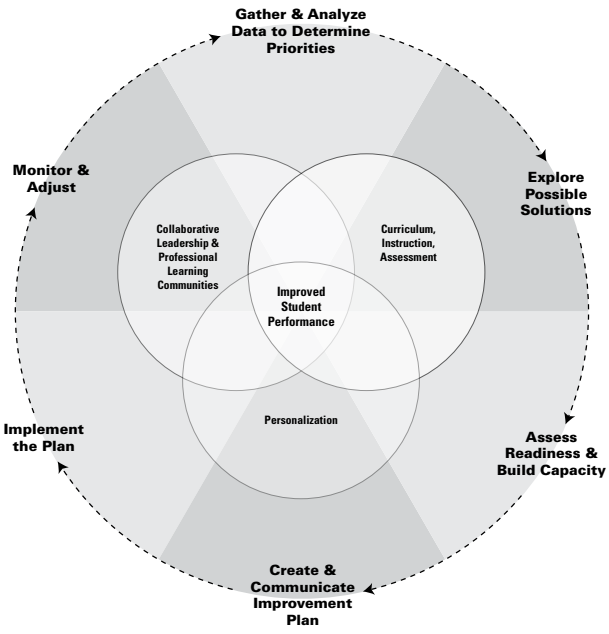
***Breaking Ranks* Process Circle**



About the Authors

Rhonda Barton (Rhonda.Barton@educationnorthwest.org) is the director of the communications services program at Education Northwest, a Portland, OR-based nonprofit that works to create strong schools and strong communities through research, development, technical assistance, and evaluation. She is the author of a number of Principal Research Reviews and peer-reviewed publications.

Jennifer Stepanek (Jennifer.Stepanek@educationnorthwest.org) is a program advisor at Education Northwest and has written about teacher collaboration in *Leading Lesson Study* and the *Teaching by Design in Elementary Mathematics* series.

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