

What is a PLC?

By Shirley M. Hord

At conferences where large numbers of educators gather, you frequently hear the refrain, “Oh, yes, we’re a professional learning community. We meet all the time.” Sometimes you’ll hear, “Our principal gave us each a book on professional learning communities. We are supposed to get together and form one.”

The professional learning community, or PLC, has been characterized in endless ways depending on who defines it. Many claim to have established a PLC in their school, but upon further questioning it becomes clear that this is not a true PLC. PLCs are not the norm in the field of education and are often misunderstood, despite having been touted as a significant school improvement strategy for nearly 15 years. This article discusses the five research-based characteristics of a PLC, clarifying just what it means to be a PLC.

Professional Community of Learners

In 1993, T. A. Astuto and colleagues (Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree & Fernandez) described a professional community of learners in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn. The goal of these actions is to enhance the teachers’ and administrators’ effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit. The arrangement has also been called a community of continuous inquiry and improvement. In recent years, the arrangement has become better known as a professional learning community (PLC).



Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision

Vision is a trite term these days, and at various times it refers to mission, purpose, goals, objectives, or a sheet of paper posted near the principal’s office.

— Isaacson & Bamburg, 1992, p. 42

If you are involved with a true PLC, Isaacson and Bamburg’s description of a school’s vision won’t ring true. Values and beliefs guide the behavior of individuals no matter where they work or in what endeavor. Therefore, one basic attribute of the PLC is the shared mission and goals that staff members see as their common purpose. In the PLC, the vision grows as people work together over time. The community constructs a shared vision of the improvements that they will work toward for the increased learning of students. A shared vision is a mental image of what is important to the staff and school community; that image is kept in mind while planning with colleagues and delivering instruction in the classroom.

It is the role of the principal to continuously communicate the vision to all stakeholders. The principal articulates powerful images that encourage everyone’s commitment to the vision. Throughout the school and the community, reminders are posted of what high-quality student achievement and successful student learning look like. Student work is displayed prominently in the school. Descriptions and examples of high-quality achievement and learning are shared in the school newsletter, in the local newspaper, and even briefly on banners, bumper stickers, and the school’s external marquee. The focus is always on students and learning.

Shared and Supportive Leadership

It is clear from school change and educational leadership literature that any change in a school must be accepted, appreciated, and nurtured by the principal. In the case of PLCs, accepting, appreciating, and nurturing change may be a difficult challenge for some principals as one of the defining characteristics of a PLC is that power, authority, and decision making are shared and encouraged.

Lucianne Carmichael (1982), the first resident principal of the Harvard University Principal

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Center and a principal who nurtured a PLC in her own school, discussed the position of authority and power typically held by principals in which the staff view them as all-wise and all-competent. She asserted that principals have internalized this “omnicompetence.” Staff members often reinforce it, making it difficult for principals to admit that they themselves can benefit from professional development opportunities or to recognize the dynamic potential of staff contributions to decision making. Furthermore, when the principal’s position is so thoroughly dominant, it is difficult for staff to propose divergent views or ideas about the school’s effectiveness. Carmichael, and later Kleine-Kracht (1993), suggested that administrators must be learners, too. Kleine-Kracht noted that in learning communities, the traditional pattern that “teachers teach, students learn, and administrators manage is completely altered.”

The PLC structure is one of continuous adult learning, strong collaboration, democratic participation, and consensus about the school environment and culture and how to attain the desired environment and culture. In such a collegial culture educators talk with one another about their practice, share knowledge, observe one another, and root for one another’s success (Barth, 2006). This new relationship forged among administrators and teachers leads to shared, collegial leadership in the school where all staff members grow professionally as they work toward the same goal.

Collective Learning and Its Application

A PLC is demonstrated by the *collective* learning that occurs. Professional staff from all departments and grade levels come together to study collegially and work collaboratively. They engage in collegial inquiry that includes reflection and discussion focused on instruction and student learning. They are continuously learning together. For example, a group may begin investigating student performance data to assess student successes and needs. Through reflection and discussion, the group identifies areas that need attention—areas where they need to learn new content or instructional strategies. The group then explores how they will learn the new content or strategies. The group members may decide they will learn from someone on staff, from a central office specialist, from a colleague at another school, or from an external consultant. After they have put what they learned into practice, the staff goes through another cycle of reflection, discussion, and assessment. In other words, the learning is ongoing.

It is important to note that the PLC is not just about teachers collaborating; it involves collaborating *to learn together* about a topic the community deems important. As they collaborate, staff members build shared knowledge bases, which contributes to enhanced possibilities for the community’s vision.

Supportive Conditions

There are two types of supportive conditions necessary for PLCs to function productively: (1) logistical conditions such as physical and structural factors and resources, and (2) the capacities and relationships developed among staff members so they may work well and productively together.

Physical and Structural Factors

Establishing time to meet is one of the most important factors in creating a PLC. Boyd (1992) enumerated a list of physical factors needed in a context conducive to change and improvement: availability of needed resources; schedules and structures that reduce isolation; and policies that provide greater autonomy, foster collaboration, provide effective communication, and provide for staff development. Louis and Kruse (1995) offer a similar list: time to meet and talk; physical proximity of the staff to one another; teaching roles that are interdependent; communication structures; school autonomy; and teacher empowerment.

Related to the challenges of time and space, it may be necessary for large school staffs (those that exceed 30–35 members) to form smaller groups to meet for learning together.

Relational Factors and Human Capacities

Bringing together individuals who do not respect or trust each other is problematic. In a recent article in *Educational Leadership*, Roland Barth (2006, p. 8) wrote, “The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else. . . . The relationships among the educators in a school define all relationships within the school’s culture.”

A PLC requires not just congenial relationships among the adults in a school but collegial relationships and trust. Barth (2006, p. 11) differentiates between congenial and collegial relationships this way: “A conversation about the Red Sox or Yankees can be noteworthy and lively—an example of congenial behavior.” Barth’s indicators of collegiality include the following: educators talking with one another about practice, sharing their craft knowledge, observing one another while they are engaged in practice, and rooting for one another’s success. While congenial relationships are important,

it is the collegial relationships that are essential to a PLC and more difficult to establish.

Trust provides the basis for giving and accepting feedback in order to work toward improvement. Building trust requires substantial time and appropriate activities that enable the individual to experience the trustworthiness of colleagues and to extend or become trustworthy to complete the cycle.

Principals can contribute to the collegial attitudes and relationships demanded of school staff by nurturing the human capacities demanded of PLC work. They do this by helping staff relate to one another, providing social activities for staff members to get to know each other on a personal level (such as ice cream socials, volleyball games after school in the school gym, or potluck suppers), and creating a caring environment. An example of this last item is the principal who “subbed” for a teacher so she could take an ailing parent to the doctor.

Shared Personal Practice

The review of a teacher’s practice and instructional behaviors by colleagues should be the norm. This is not an evaluative process but rather part of peers-helping-peers. Teachers visit one another’s classrooms on a regular basis to observe, take notes, and discuss their observations with the teacher they have visited. In this way, teachers facilitate the work of changing practice with one another. They support the implementation of new practices through peer coaching and feedback. This process is grounded in individual and community improvement but can only be done meaningfully if there is mutual respect and trust among the members of the staff. This dimension of PLCs is likely to be the last to be developed because of the history of isolation most teachers have experienced.

Visiting, observing, coaching, and giving feedback are learned skills that will require professional development. A first step in implementing peers-helping-peers could involve the whole school learning together some new strategy, such as questioning. All staff would learn the questioning strategies together, practice them in their classrooms, and then pair up and visit one another to give feedback. Administrators play a supportive role by providing subs or time for teachers to observe others.

Teachers find help, support, and trust as a result of the development of warm relationships with one another. When these positive relationships develop, Wignall (1992) suggests that “teachers . . . are comfortable sharing both their successes and their failures. They praise and recognize one another’s triumphs, and offer empathy and support for

each other’s troubles” (p. 18).

Barth (2006, p. 12) recalled that as a principal he had tried to encourage teachers to observe one another and give feedback, but he had no success. Finally, one teacher asked in a faculty meeting, “Well, Roland, when was the last time we saw another principal observing you?” So Barth invited another principal to observe him in a faculty meeting and to give him feedback. In turn, Barth visited that colleague, observing and providing feedback. Barth’s actions were just the impetus his staff needed. As he noted, “You can lead where you will go.”

Conclusion

From our discussion in this article, it should be clear that PLCs are more than just collaborative working arrangements or faculty groups that meet regularly. A PLC is a way of working where staff engage in purposeful, collegial learning. This learning is intentional and its purpose is to improve staff effectiveness so students will be more successful learners.

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