



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: BEST PRACTICES RESEARCH REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

As part of its instructional framework planning process, a Hanover Research (Hanover) member district is revisiting and revising their Professional Learning Community (PLC) practices in the district. District leaders are already examining various literature around PLC strategies, but they would like more resources to support the implementation of their PLC work in the future. The district has specific needs around implementing their next PLC framework which can benefit from a best practices research review. Specifically, district leaders would like to understand the research and best practices around scaling PLC work for a larger district, the cultural change required to shift into a more formal PLC meeting structure, and how to make data-driven decisions through the PLC framework. To support this goal, the district has partnered with Hanover Research (Hanover) to create this report which provides a review of academic literature as well as district best practices on PLCs.

This report is comprised of two sections:

- **Section I: Building a Successful PLC Framework** overviews best practices for creating district conditions and frameworks to support effective PLCs. This includes practices for directing the mission of PLC work, fostering teacher leadership and collaboration, and supporting data usage throughout the district.
- **Section II: Scaling PLC Implementation Across the District** overviews best practices for implementing cohesive PLC strategies across the district. This includes designing PLCs and defining roles, and how to scale these efforts district-wide.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, Hanover Research suggests that districts consider the following recommendations.



Create a Guiding Coalition, comprised of representatives across the district, to lead climate and culture changes in the district and to build the PLC framework and expectations. This leading body should serve to establish a strong common mission for PLCs as well as set parameters and standards to be implemented across the district.



Empower teacher leaders at schools to lead PLC practice and to increase collaboration and encourage teacher buy-in. Teacher leaders can help change the instructional culture from the inside-out by sharing their expertise and facilitating greater collaboration around a common mission. The district can consider outlining a process to identify teacher leaders at their schools.



Establish protocols for monitoring and evaluating PLC implementation fidelity and effectiveness. To monitor implementation fidelity, form a district data team to set up systems for PLC-led data collection. Evaluate PLC effectiveness through teacher perception surveys and summative evaluations that measure the relationship between PLCs and student outcomes. Districts should consider quantitative, survey, and/or qualitative evaluation of their PLC program through collaboration with an outside organization.

KEY FINDINGS



Research on effective PLCs indicates that administrators and teachers must work together to create PLC procedures that work for their school. This means administrators must trust their teachers to work autonomously, and teachers must trust the best intentions of school administration. Research demonstrates that professional learning communities are most effective in schools with collaborative PLC structures, a focus on academic achievement, and high levels of collegial trust. Other key elements of effective PLCs include diversity and collaboration, a strong common mission, and adequate time and support.



Establishing a strong common mission is the first important component for creating a framework and instructional culture conducive to effective PLC work. Defining a clear mission and structure to PLCs across the district ensures that all members have a clear understanding of what collectively they are trying to achieve. To define this shared framework and mission for PLCs, a district may form a **Guiding Coalition** with the purpose of building and monitoring the PLC framework. This Coalition may include principals from schools across the district and representatives from the district office and from other site administrators and teacher leaders. Districts should provide ongoing professional learning for the Coalition to support setting realistic goals, creating an implementation plan, prioritizing standards, and creating learning targets.



Collaboration is fundamental to the success of PLCs and requires that teachers share successes and failures; school administrators can foster a culture of collaboration by improving conditions to support teacher leadership, commitment, and time for collaboration. The PLC must have a culture of openness and trust for teachers to be comfortable with sharing failures for the purpose of learning and improvement. School leadership is crucial to shaping this organizational culture and schools should seek to foster teacher-leadership which not only empowers their educators but creates collaborative space for all teachers to learn from one another.



Effective PLCs focus on improving results using data; therefore, a coherent approach to assessing student performance and to collecting and analyzing data across the district can help to increase the effectiveness of PLCs. A district data team can support and sustain a culture of data use throughout the district. In successful data use initiatives such as a district data team, representatives both within schools and at the district level meet regularly to ask questions and analyze data to understand and solve problems throughout the district. Led by district-level expectations for data collection and use, PLC meetings themselves should include a review of a variety of types of data from multiple sources.



Efforts to scale PLC implementation across the district should include identifying PLC leads. The district should provide parameters of the role, and be consistent in how the role is filled throughout the district. District leaders should also consider the training and resources necessary to support these new leaders. Likewise, the district should define roles for both participants of PLCs and school administrators who support them; the district can set expectations for PLC roles and size, as well as set expectations for school supports, such as having a plan to modify school calendars to allow for meeting times.



PLCs benefit from both informal internal feedback and external evaluations, and in scaling PLCs across the district, district leaders need to regularly monitor outcomes and provide opportunity for feedback loops. Districts and schools can assess PLCs at the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. While planning and implementation typically focus on the process, evaluation focuses on the program outcomes. At the evaluation stage, the school can assess the PLC's effectiveness as a team and progress towards their goals. In addition, schools can encourage feedback from PLCs by surveying teachers' perceptions of collaboration, team and meeting success, and learning experiences.

SECTION I: BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL PLC FRAMEWORK

For over a decade, schools have relied on professional learning communities (PLCs) to provide teachers with embedded professional development.¹ PLCs create opportunities for ongoing peer collaboration and reflection with the goal of improving teaching practice and student learning.² However, not every team of teachers is a PLC, and not all PLCs lead to improvements in teaching and learning.³ This section provides research-based best practices for building a framework to support key elements of effective PLCs.

KEY ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PLCS

In PLCs, small groups of teachers regularly meet with the goal to collaboratively increase learning and support the implementation of new skills.⁴ Teachers in effective PLCs engage in continuous dialogue and examination of both their practice and student performance to develop and enact more effective instructional practices.⁵ PLCs can be district or school-based and comprise teachers from similar grade levels or content areas.⁶ By working collaboratively, teachers learn from their colleagues, share their knowledge and expertise, practice new techniques, and address problems and challenges.

Successful PLCs effectively collaborate on an ongoing basis to improve teacher and student learning.⁷ PLCs require teachers to engage in reflective dialog about their practices and student learning and to critically examine what is working and what is not working.⁸ According to the Best Practices Guidebook for Professional Learning Communities, published in 2017 by the Bluegrass Center for Teacher Quality, effective PLCs should have the seven following attributes outlined in Figure 1.1.

¹ Blitz, C.L. and R. Schulman. "Measurement Instruments for Assessing the Performance of Professional Learning Communities." U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, September 2016. p. 1.
<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED568594.pdf>

² [1] Proveni, C. "Best Practices for Professional Learning Communities." Education World, 2012.
https://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/best-practices-for-professional-learning-communities.shtml [2] Thessin, R.A. and J.P. Starr. "Supporting the Growth of Effective Professional Learning Communities Districtwide." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92:6, March 2011. p. 49. Accessed via EbscoHost.

³ "About PLCs." Solution Tree. <https://www.allthingsplc.info/about>

⁴ Dimino, J.A., M.J. Taylor, and J. Morris. "Professional Learning Communities Facilitator's Guide." U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, July 2015. p. 1.
https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/pdf/REL_2015105.pdf

⁵ Darling-Hammond, L. et al. "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession." National Staff Development Council, 2009. p. 9.
<https://learningforward.org/report/status-professional-learning-2/phase-professional-learning-learning-profession/>

⁶ "What Are Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)?" Center for Student Achievement Solutions, May 24, 2021.
<https://www.studentachievementsolutions.com/what-are-professional-learning-communities-plcs/>

⁷ "About PLCs," Op. cit.

⁸ Vescio, V., D. Ross, and A. Adams. "A Review of Research on the Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Teaching Practice and Student Learning." *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 2008. p. 81.
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Alyson_Adams/publication/222686637_A_review_of_research_on_the_impact_of_professional_learning_communities_on_teaching_practice_and_student_learning_Teaching_and_Teacher_Education_241_80-91/links/551a95af0cf244e9a4589ca0.pdf

Figure 1.1: Attributes of Effective PLCs



Source: Bluegrass Center for Teacher Quality ⁹

Trust is a key concept in community building and collaborative work; research finds a strong correlation between trust and collaboration, where high levels of trust lead to high levels of collaboration. Districts and schools can foster trust and collaboration by including teachers in the design and implementation of a PLC model. When a PLC process is forced on teachers who have little control in their professional learning, the trust level in the school may begin to deteriorate. Research demonstrates that “**professional learning communities work best in schools with effective PLC structures, a focus on academic achievement, and high levels of collegial trust.**”¹⁰

Administrators and teachers must work together to create PLC procedures that work for their school. This means administrators must trust their teachers to work autonomously, and teachers must trust the best intentions of school administration and reformers. By delegating tasks, the administration can build a more knowledgeable and independent faculty base. This, in turn, will help develop each school to have embedded leadership structures that will foster a more successful instructional culture.¹¹

BUILDING A CONDUCIVE INSTRUCTIONAL CULTURE

In order for PLCs to be successful, district and school leadership must initiate a cultural shift that supports the work to be done within the PLCs.¹² This subsection provides steps for building a successful cultural change to foster PLC work, first for forming a guiding coalition to set the mission for PLC work across the district, for fostering conditions for collaboration and teacher leadership, and for identifying frameworks for data use and management. Each of these steps contribute to effective PLC structures and to increasing teacher-buy in.

MISSION & VISION

To create conditions to encourage highly effective PLCs, district and school leaders must focus on increasing teachers’ collaborative professional learning and self-reflection by defining a clear purpose for the PLCs.¹³ SEDL (formerly, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory) provides a **structured approach to define expectations for what teachers do in a PLC**, which is outlined in Figure 1.2.

⁹ “Best Practices Guidebook Professional Learning Communities.” Bluegrass Center for Teacher Quality, 2017, p. 1. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED602054.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Pirtle, S.S. and E. Tobia. “Implementing Effective Professional Learning Communities.” *SEDL Insights*, 2014. p. 2. http://www.sedl.org/insights/2-3/implementing_effective_professional_learning_communities.pdf

Figure 1.2: What Teachers Should Do in a PLC

- Studying standards, reviewing concepts and skills necessary to master the standards, and determining how the standards are assessed;
- Selecting research-based instructional strategies and assessment techniques;
- Planning lessons and agreeing on the evidence of student learning that PLC members will share;
- Implementing lessons, noting successes and challenges, and collecting the agreed-upon evidence of student learning;
- Analyzing student work by revisiting the standards being addressed and identifying student strengths and areas of need; and
- Adjusting instruction after reflecting on disparate teaching experiences, selecting alternative instructional strategies, and determining how instructional challenges that may arise in the future will be addressed.

Source: SEDL ¹⁴

Defining a clear mission and structure to PLCs across the district ensures that all members have a clear understanding of what collectively they are trying to achieve with PLC work. ¹⁵ To define a shared framework and mission for PLCs, a district may form a **Guiding Coalition** with the purpose to build and monitor the PLC framework. This Coalition may include principals from schools across the district and representatives from the district office and from other site administrators and teacher leaders. ¹⁶ Districts should provide ongoing professional learning for the Coalition to support setting realistic goals, creating an implementation plan, prioritizing standards, and creating learning targets. ¹⁷ Figure 1.3 below outlines basic action steps for planning a PLC framework from the Colorado Department of Education.

Figure 1.3: Action Steps to Define Purpose and Structures

	<p>Step 1: Define and communicate purpose of PLC</p>	<p>Effective PLCs are founded on the shared vision and values of improving learning outcomes for students. All PLC participants should understand that the purpose of the PLC is to determine what changes educators can make to improve student achievement.</p>
	<p>Step 2: Build time into staff schedules to collaborate consistently</p>	<p>Staff need uninterrupted blocks of time to engage in meaningful conversations that delve beyond superficial questions about instruction and toward questions that will advance student learning (e.g., How will we teach the content? How will we know if students have learned the content? How will we respond to students who have not learned?) Staff should also have ongoing, consistent meeting times for PLCs such that they are able to respond to students' needs in a timely manner.</p>

¹⁴ Figure contents quoted verbatim from: Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁵ Kushnir, G. "10 Steps to Creating a PLC Culture." All Things PLC, 2011. <https://www.allthingsplc.info/blog/view/155/10-steps-to-creating-a-plc-culture>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.



Step 3: Provide school-wide guidance on how to effectively facilitate a PLC.

Provide clear expectations regarding the outcome of each meeting. Additionally, school leaders may provide agenda outlines, guiding questions, and/or protocols for teachers to use to effectively implement PLCs.

Source: Colorado Department of Education¹⁸



District Spotlight: Changing Instructional Culture in Quitman Public Schools

Quitman Public Schools (QPS) is a relatively small district located in Quitman Arizona. The school began their commitment to PLC work three years ago in 2020 and has transformed their district from “working independently to working interdependently” through a collective commitment to collaborative actions.¹⁹

In the beginning: 1) the district was without a true mission 2) not all staff believed all students could learn at high levels 3) teachers were working independently 4) the importance of a strong collaboration between building principals in a district our size 5) many teachers were teaching the way they had been taught 6) there was great potential for success at QPS across academics and athletics.²⁰

QPS stakeholders spent two years developing a mission that would guide all activity in the district. The mission statement was eloquent and hung beautifully in every hallway and classroom, in addition to being the background of the district’s webpage and social media homepages. However, as QPS moved deeper into becoming a professional learning community, district leaders quickly found that the mission statement was often little more than words on the wall.²¹

Led by the newly formed Guiding Coalition, QPS teams soon developed collective commitments through an “all-on-the-wall” activity based on the mission statement. In groups, teachers highlighted important aspects of the mission statement, then they determined what action behaviors connected to the statement. On the wall, QPS staff put behaviors together, and from that list, the district created collective commitments. These commitments are meant to be the foundation of the work throughout the district. When teachers meet weekly as a PLC, they begin their meetings by reviewing and reflecting upon the collective commitments. Staff meetings and professional development also always begin with a review of these collective commitments.²²

COLLABORATION

Collaboration is fundamental to the success of PLCs and requires that teachers share successes and failures; school administrators can foster a culture of collaboration by improving conditions to support teacher leadership, commitment, and time for collaboration.²³ Unlike traditional models where teachers act in isolation from one another, in PLCs teachers share their practices and goals to improve their teaching and student learning. As a report on implementing PLCs by SEDL notes, “many well-intentioned school and district

¹⁸ Figure contents quoted nearly verbatim from: “Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Strategy Guide.” Colorado Department of Education. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/uip/strategyguide-plc>

¹⁹ “Evidence of Effectiveness: Quitman School District (2023).” All Things PLC. 2023. <https://www.allthingsplc.info/evidence/details/id,1697>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Components of a Successful PLC.” K-12 Blueprint, 2014. p. 1.

<https://www.k12blueprint.com/sites/default/files/Components-of-a-Successful-PLC.pdf>

administrators initiate the implementation of PLCs while overlooking the shifts necessary to help teachers move from a culture of isolation to a culture that promotes a true collaborative learning organization.”²⁴

Collaboration allows teachers to share their expertise and needs and to learn from other teachers’ successful instructional practices. A culture that supports collaboration can increase teachers’ sense of self-efficacy and confidence, influencing them to “believe in their ability to influence student learning and make a difference in student outcomes and achievement.”²⁵

PLCs will fail if teachers do not collaborate with one another on determining goals, learning new practices, and implementing skills. **However, schools cannot force collaboration; they must create conditions that support collaboration. Schools can help create a culture that supports collaboration by ensuring teachers “feel attached and committed to the work” by:**²⁶

- Articulating a clear, specific and compelling vision;
- Matching tasks and roles to staff members who are personally invested in them;
- Expanding leadership roles; and
- Making coordination easy.

Similarly, the conditions that support collaboration require a culture of trust and openness within the PLC. For PLCs to lead to improvement, teachers must be willing to share any challenges or problems with implementing new approaches.²⁷ The PLC must have a culture of openness and trust for teachers to be comfortable with sharing failures for the purpose of learning and improvement.²⁸ School leaders should “develop the conditions where teachers can be vulnerable with one another and open to engaging in the kinds of professional conversations that get them to reflect deeply about their teaching.”²⁹ PLCs with collaborative, trusting environments also make teachers more comfortable to engage in disagreements, discussions, and debates with their colleagues. To help create a trusting environment when implementing PLCs, school leaders and PLC members should emphasize the importance of trust and focus on “providing nonjudgmental structures and supports to strengthen the collaborative work of teachers and to monitor progress made toward the effective implementation of PLCs.”³⁰ The figure below outlines a few strategies for promoting a culture of trust within PLCs.

Figure 1.4: Tips to Promoting Trust and Safety in PLCs



Source: Learning Sciences³¹

²⁴ Pirtle and Tobia, Op. cit., p. 4.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁶ Bullet points quoted verbatim with modification from: Provini, Op. cit.

²⁷ Hammer, P.C. *Creating the Context and Employing Best Practices for Teacher Professional Development: A Brief Review of Recent Research*. West Virginia Department of Education, 2013. p. 10. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=best+practices+professional+development&id=ED565464>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Pirtle and Tobia, Op. cit., p. 4.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Figure contents quoted verbatim from: “How to Build PLCs That Empower Teachers and Raise Student Achievement.” Learning Sciences International, February 28, 2022. <https://www.learningsciences.com/blog/professional-learning-communities-plcs-teachers-ownership-student-achievement/>

TEACHER LEADERSHIP & BUY-IN

School leadership is crucial to shaping organizational culture and leader and teacher-leader buy-in is necessary to initiate change in the instructional community.³² Likewise, developing teacher leadership can be a helpful strategy for expanding the instructional capacity of the school and extending the impact of high-performing teachers on students.³³ Leading professional learning communities (PLCs) is one proven way to leverage teacher leaders to build the instructional capacity of their colleagues and to increase a collegial, collaborative climate. When designed effectively, professional learning communities can develop the skills of teacher leaders and enable them to share effective practices with other staff.³⁴

District leadership should develop criteria and processes for identifying effective teacher leaders to lead PLCs throughout the district. To identify teachers who have effective instructional and leadership skills, school leaders may use the observation component of their evaluation systems. To assess the leadership competencies and dispositions of potential teacher leaders, supervisors will need to observe them as they work with their peers, participate in staff meetings, and take on preliminary leadership responsibilities.³⁵

Districts may consider developing career pathways that provide graduated responsibilities for teacher leaders. These pathways give teachers the opportunity to take on limited leadership responsibilities and their supervisors the opportunity to observe, support, and develop them to take on greater responsibilities.³⁶



District Spotlight: Teacher-Leadership at District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).

20 excellent teachers at DCPS have the opportunity to apply for a Teacher Leadership Innovation (TLI) Teacher Leader position. These teacher leaders spend half their day teaching and half coaching and leading other teachers. Most of these teacher leaders serve as a content lead for what are called “LEAP Seminars.” Through these seminars, TLI Teacher Leaders guide a group of teachers in developing content knowledge, planning, and analyzing student data. For smaller LEAs, teachers could lead content seminars during professional learning days or times while continuing to teach in their classrooms.³⁷

Before beginning PLCs, school leaders may need to provide training to teachers on the components and process of professional learning through a PLC. For instance, a principal could choose experienced teacher leaders to receive training on PLCs, who could then help with running the PLCs and distribute their knowledge to other teachers. Before participating in PLC meetings, teachers should know how to collaborate with peers, how PLC meetings should be structured, how to develop their skills and gain information and assistance in a collaborative environment, and how to manage and resolve conflict.³⁸ Teachers should understand the value of collaborative learning and believe that their work will improve their teaching quality

³² Brown, B., R. Horn, and G. King. “The Effective Implementation of Professional Learning Communities.” Alabama State University, 2018. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1194725.pdf>

³³ “Strategy Brief: Cultivating Teacher Instructional Leadership Through Professional Learning Communities.” Data-Driven Human Capital Strategies, August 2021. <https://www.iu13.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Cultivating-Teacher-Instructional-Leadership-brief.pdf>

³⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ [1] Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. “A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward,” 2017. <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf> [2] “Leading from the front of the classroom: A roadmap to teacher leadership that works.” The Aspen Institute, 2014. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED553639.pdf>

³⁷ Spotlight quoted verbatim from: “Strategy Brief: Cultivating Teacher Instructional Leadership Through Professional Learning Communities,” Op. cit., p. 7.

³⁸ Jolly, A. “A Facilitator’s Guide to Professional Learning Teams.” The SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2004. p. 2-7. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED485208.pdf>

and student learning. Additionally, schools can encourage teachers to participate in PLCs by providing incentives, such as:³⁹

- Conferences and workshop attendance as teams or groups;
- Celebrations, appreciation, and high team visibility;
- Involvement in decision making about PLCs;
- Adjusted teacher workloads;
- Memberships in professional organizations and education journal subscriptions; and
- Spotlights of team and student success.

DATA

Effective PLCs focus on improving results using data; therefore, a coherent approach to assessing student performance and to collecting and analyzing data across the district can help to increase the effectiveness of PLCs.⁴⁰ A strong data culture provides PLCs with additional ways of understanding and responding to student learning needs.⁴¹ While many teachers understand the importance of using data, the district should provide guidelines for interpretation and for action based on data analysis.⁴²

PCG Education describes how a **district data team** can support and sustain a culture of data use throughout the district.⁴³ School-based data teams alone, while important, are not fully able to influence the culture of data use throughout a district in a meaningful and sustained way. In successful data use initiatives, teams of educators, both within schools and at the district level, meet regularly to ask questions and analyze data in order to understand and solve problems throughout the district.⁴⁴ The five key functions of a data district team include: vision and policy management, data management, inquiry analysis and action, professional development, and monitoring and communication and are outlined below in Figure 1.5⁴⁵

³⁹ Bullet points quoted verbatim with modification from: Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Strategy Guide," Op. cit.

⁴¹ Jessie, L.G. "The Elements of a Professional Learning Community." *Leadership Compass*, 5:2, 2007. p. 2.
https://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Leadership_Compass/2007/LC2007v5n2a4.pdf

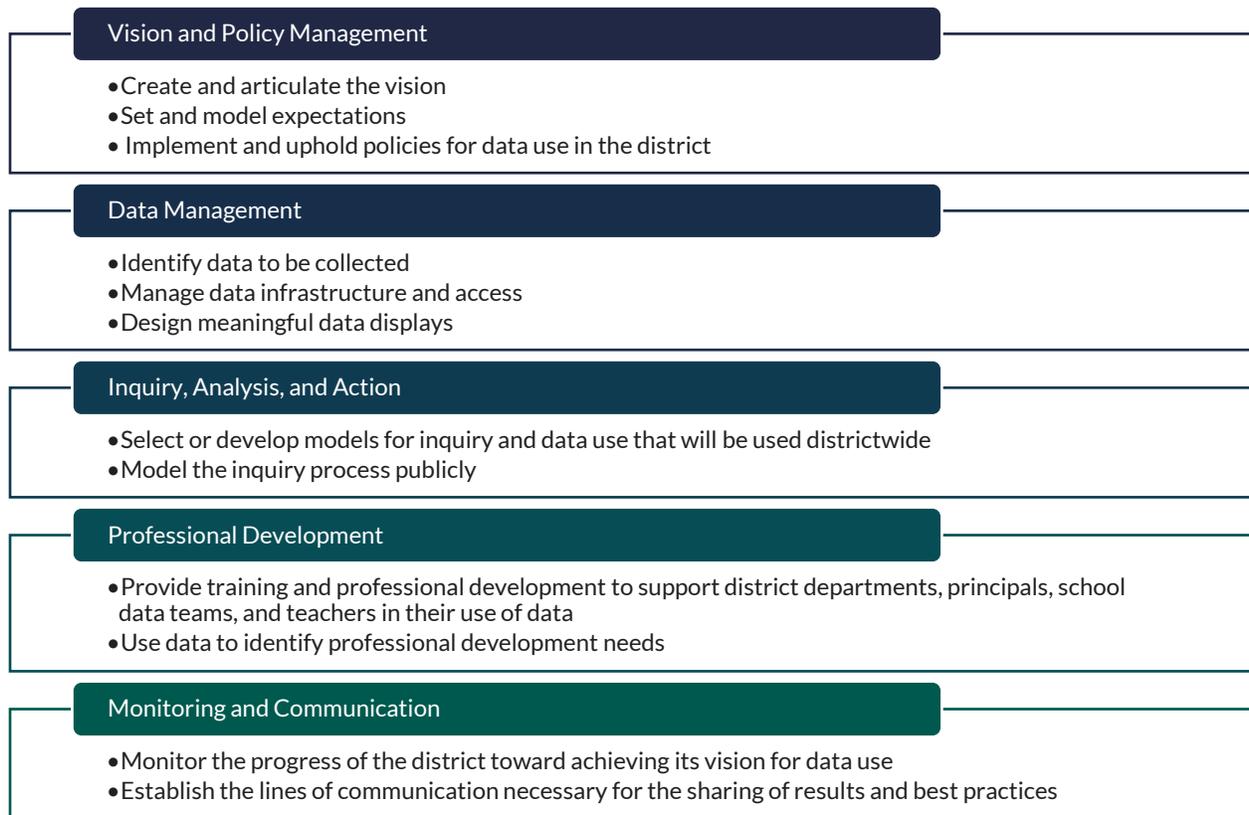
⁴² "How PLCs Can Get Better at Using Student Data." ASCD, November 2021. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/how-plcs-can-get-better-at-using-student-data>

⁴³ Robb, G., S. Smith, and M. Tornow. "District Data Teams: A Leadership Structure for Improving Student Achievement." PCG Education, January 2012. https://www.publicconsultinggroup.com/media/1623/edu_district_data_teams_white_paper.pdf

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Figure 1.5: Five Key Functions of a District Data Team



Source: PCG Education⁴⁶

District Data Team Additional Resources

- PCG Education’s full guide for creating and sustaining a successful district data team can be accessed [here](#).
- For more ideas on how to implement a district data team, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education also provides a [District Data Team Toolkit](#).

Led by district-level expectations for data collection and use, PLC meetings themselves should include review of a variety of types of data from multiple sources. For example, data sources could include state test results, classroom assessments, student projects or portfolios, samples of student work, surveys of teachers, parents, or students, attendance and discipline records, assignments, student grades, and student demographic information.⁴⁷

Discussing formative, benchmark, and state assessment data helps teachers to determine both the needs and goals of the PLC and the purpose of each meeting.⁴⁸ Significantly, teachers should disaggregate data by student subgroups to identify the “most pressing instructional needs for various groups of students.”⁴⁹ When

⁴⁶ Figure reproduced verbatim from: Ibid., p. 2.

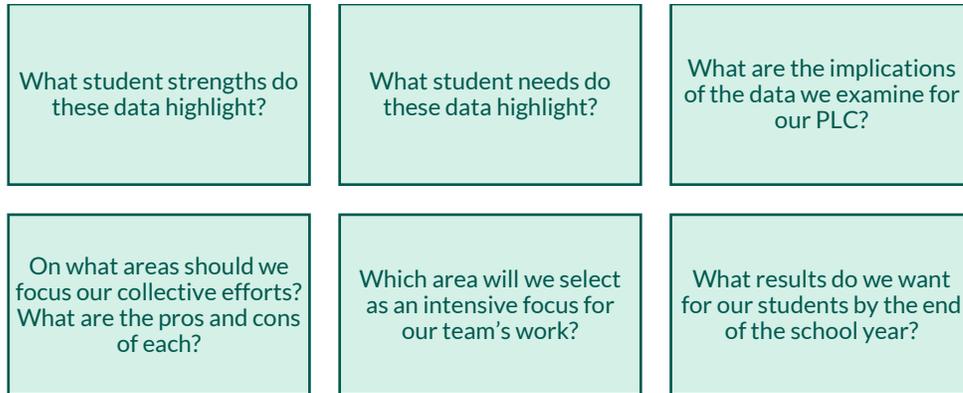
⁴⁷ Jolly, Op. cit., p. 5-8.

⁴⁸ Pirtle and Tobia, Op. cit., p. 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

reviewing and analyzing student data to determine a team goal and meeting focus, teachers should consider a series of questions, illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 1.6: Questions for Reviewing Student Data



Source: The SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Figure contents quoted verbatim with modification from: Jolly, Op. cit., p. 5-11.

SECTION II: SCALING PLC IMPLEMENTATION ACROSS THE DISTRICT

When implementing PLCs across the district, district leaders should seek to establish norms and expectations for PLC work, while trusting teacher leaders and PLC members to accomplish the work they set out to do.⁵¹ District leaders can aid the effectiveness of PLCs by providing guidance on the structure of PLCs, defining roles and responsibilities, providing ongoing professional development, and establishing a method for evaluating PLCs across the district. This section reviews best practices for each of these steps. Additionally, the figure below introduces broad action steps for implementing effective PLC practices across the district.

Figure 2.1: District-Wide Implementation Steps

	<p>Establish norms and promote a spirit of collaboration, inquiry, and reflection within PLCs.</p>	<p>Effective PLCs work collaboratively, with a specific focus on student learning. Members of effective PLCs are driven by inquiry and willing to engage in honest discussions about their practice and students' progress. Furthermore, PLC members must be open to reflection and willing to make changes to their approach in the interest of improving student outcomes.</p>
	<p>Ensure PLCs look at student work and/or student data</p>	<p>To be truly focused on student outcomes, PLCs should frequently look at student results. Sometimes, this may take the form of looking at individual pieces of student work, while at other times, this may mean reviewing spreadsheets of student assessment results. Additionally, PLCs should assess their own effectiveness based on these results, making changes to their practice based on student progress (or lack thereof).</p>
	<p>Monitor the effectiveness of each PLC.</p>	<p>Ask PLCs to provide meeting minutes, planning documents (e.g., instructional plans), data analysis, or other evidence of their work to determine whether each group is focused on school priorities and meeting expectations. Additionally, consider having a member of the leadership team work with each PLC in person on a regular basis to ensure that teams are progressing toward their goals and have the support they need.</p>

Source: Colorado Department of Education⁵²

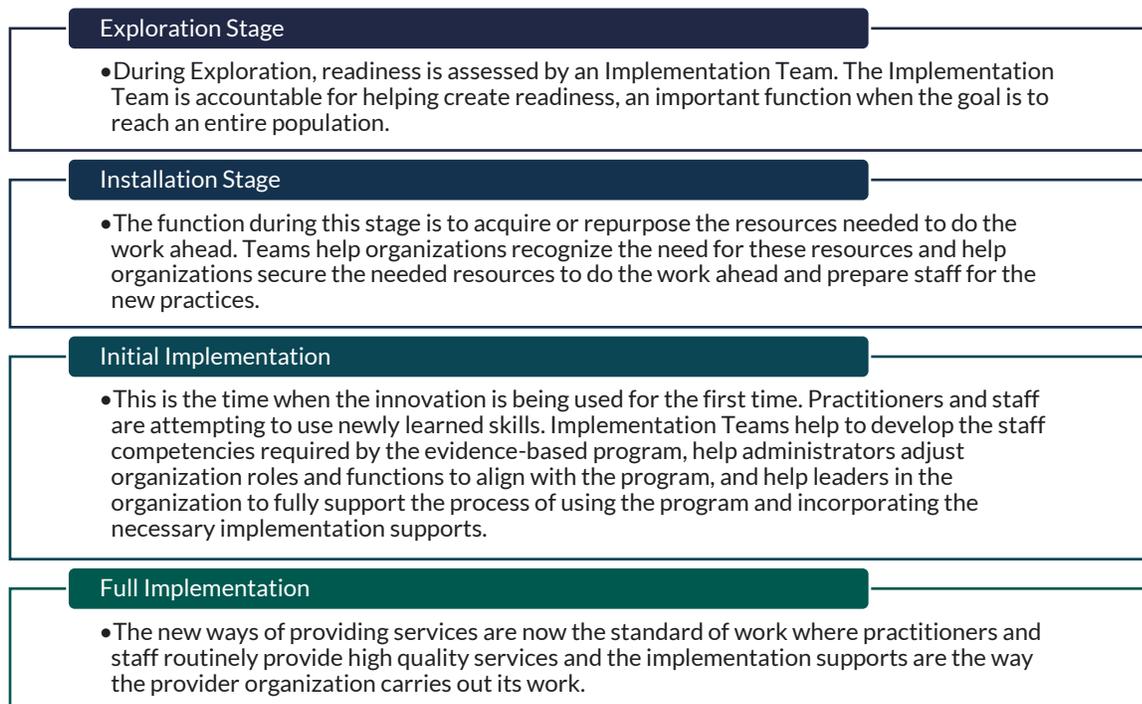
The Minnesota Department of Education also provides Roadmap for PLC implementation across the district. The Roadmap outlines action steps for implementation in a number of different areas to provide a coherent framework for PLCs across the district, including leadership, collaborative culture, standards and instruction, and data. Within each implementation area, the Roadmap outlines four stages of implementation, outlined in Figure 2.2.

⁵¹ Kullar, J. "Leading the PLC Journey at the District Office." All Things PLC, 2019.

<https://www.allthingsplc.info/blog/view/391/leading-the-plc-journey-at-the-district-office>

⁵² Figure contents quoted verbatim from: "Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Strategy Guide," Op. cit.

Figure 2.2: Implementation Stages



Source: Minnesota Department of Education⁵³

This outline can help districts implement new expectations, protocols, and models for PLCs across the district. The full Roadmap with implementation steps for each area can be [found here](#).⁵⁴

ESTABLISHING STRUCTURE FOR PLCs

The first step in scaling PLCs across the district should include identifying PLC leads. The district should provide parameters of the role and be consistent in how the role is filled throughout the district. District leaders should also consider the training and resources necessary to support these new leaders.⁵⁵ The figure below demonstrates an implementation plan for identifying PLC leads at schools in the district.

⁵³ Figure contents quoted verbatim from: “Professional Learning Community (PLC) Roadmap.” Minnesota Department of Education, 2017. p. 2.
https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=MDE071649&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary

⁵⁴ “Professional Learning Community (PLC) Roadmap,” Op. cit.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

Figure 2.3: Process for Identifying PLC Leads



Source: Minnesota Department of Education⁵⁶



District Spotlight: PLC Leadership Roles in White River School District

In the White River School District, in Buckley, Washington, considerable thought has been given to the role of the team leader. The text below replicates the position description for a team leader that was collaboratively developed and is currently utilized across the district.

“Position Description: Team Leader

- A high-performing collaborative team of teachers is the heart and soul of a school that functions as a professional learning community, and a highly effective team is invariably led by an effective team leader. The success of the White River School District in achieving its mission of ensuring high levels of learning for all students depends to a great degree on the leadership capacity of the team leaders in each school. Thus, the selection of team leaders in White River is a thoughtful, informed, and deliberate decision of critical importance.
- The educators who serve in this very important role are expected to coordinate and lead the work of their team. They will work closely with the Learning Improvement Coordinator within their building and report directly to the building principal. Additionally, team leaders serve as contributing members of the principal’s administrative team. Team leaders are expected to articulate and communicate to the administration faculty questions, needs, and concerns, while at the same time communicating and explaining the rationale and specifics of the administration’s plans and initiatives to the faculty. In short, the team leader serves as the key communication link between the administration and the faculty.
- Team leaders are expected to enhance the capacity of their team to work interdependently to achieve common goals for which team members hold themselves mutually accountable. In fulfilling the role of leading their team, team leaders are responsible for such functions as leading the team in preparing and utilizing team norms, planning agendas, chairing meetings, serving as a direct communications link between the administration and the faculty, leading the work of teams in analyzing and improving student learning data, seeking out and experimenting with best practices, leading the collaborative development and attainment of learning improvement goals, and identifying and communicating professional development needs. Team leaders must work continually to enhance the effectiveness of their team by ensuring that the team focuses on the

⁵⁶ Figure contents quoted verbatim from: Ibid.

critical questions and practices associated with improving student learning in a manner that is reflective of the highest quality.

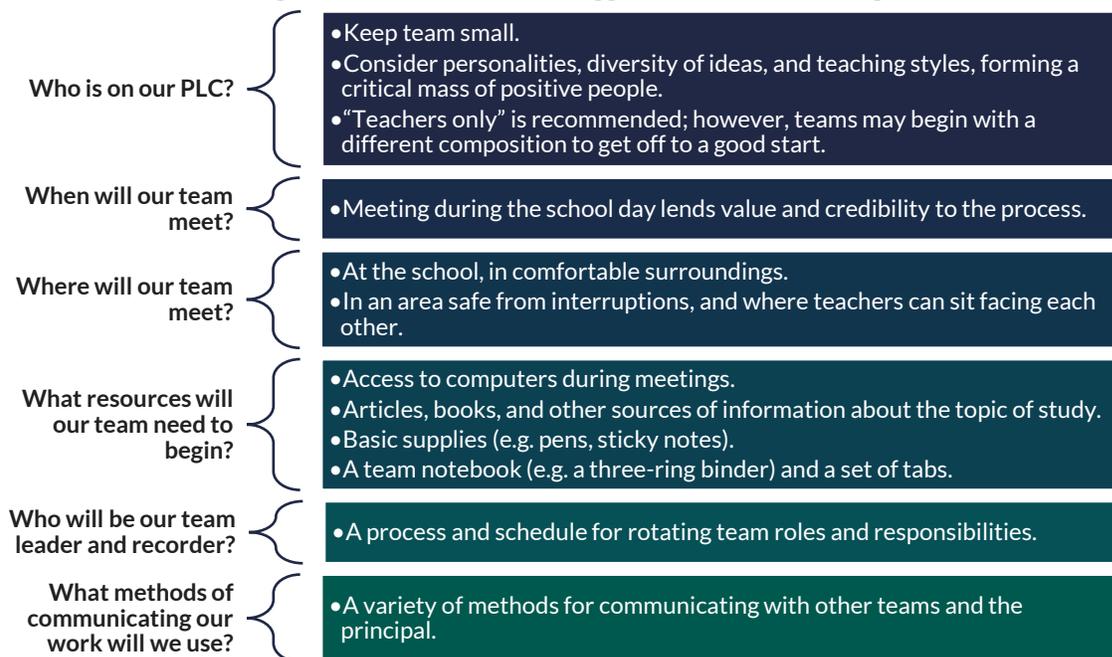
- Educators who serve as team leaders must have a demonstrated record of effectiveness in their own teaching, and they must have earned the recognition and respect of their peers. Team leaders must have excellent planning and organizational skills as well as the ability to work well with others. To enhance the leadership capacity and effectiveness of others, team leaders must model a desire and willingness to continually learn, constantly seeking ways to first improve themselves so that they can more effectively lead their team.

In short, the White River School District is seeking outstanding individuals to lead building-level collaborative teams of teachers in order to more effectively impact student learning levels, student by student, skill by skill, relentlessly and continually!”⁵⁷

DESIGNING PLC PRACTICE

When implementing PLCs, school leaders must consider the PLC’s structure and logistics, such as the participants, meeting frequency, and location. While there are “no cut-and-dried rules for forming PLCs,” experts and practitioners recommend setting guidelines for the number of participants and meeting logistics to increase the effectiveness of the PLC.⁵⁸ School leaders can use these guidelines to set expectations for PLCs across the district. Figure 2.2 on the following page presents guidelines for schools determining the structure of their PLCs.

Figure 2.4: Guidelines and Suggestions for Structuring PLCs



Source: The SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro ⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Text quoted verbatim from: “Team Leaders in a Professional Learning Community.” All Things PLC, 2009.

<https://www.allthingsplc.info/blog/view/54/team-leaders-in-a-professional-learning-community>

⁵⁸ Dimino, Taylor, and Morris, Op. cit., p. 2.

⁵⁹ Figure contents synthesized with modification from: Jolly, Op. cit., Section 3.

PLCs should be comprised of teachers and should not include administrators or others who hold an evaluative role.⁶⁰ PLCs can include teachers from either the same grade level or multiple grade levels, and the same content area or across content areas.⁶¹ For instance, PLCs in middle schools are often structured by subject area due to departmentalization.⁶² However, studies show that the structure of the group, no matter how formed, is less important than how the group functions as a team and their collective commitment to continuous improvement and student outcomes.⁶³ The characteristics of an effective PLC team is illustrated in Figure 2.5.

Figure 2.5: Nine Practices of Successful PLCs

<p>Discourse Effective Teams have a culture of discourse at their center.</p>	<p>Purpose & Accountability Effective teams have a clearly defined purpose that guides their work and specific, measurable goals that they hold one another and the team accountable for attaining.</p>	<p>Norms Effective teams are committed to norms that guide how the team operates.</p>
<p>Communication Effective teams communicate effectively within the team and with those outside the team.</p>	<p>Progress Effective teams improve the ability of their members to function as a team in the future.</p>	<p>Focus Effective teams are disciplined in maintaining their focus.</p>
<p>Collaboration Effective teams use systems of consensus to arrive at group decisions. They collaborate to ask the “hard” questions about teaching and learning too often bypassed in a passive, collegial setting.</p>	<p>Trust Effective teams develop a culture of trust which allows members to look at their practice openly rather than defensively.</p>	<p>Agendas Effective teams use specific records that drive the group’s daily and ongoing work, structure the discourse and allow time to be used equitably and efficiently.</p>

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education⁶⁴

The number of participants in a PLC is flexible, there should be enough teachers to have a variety of diverse perspectives but a small enough group to ensure that every teacher’s opinion is included and each member’s work can be discussed.⁶⁵ Experts typically recommend between three and six teachers, depending on the size and needs of the school.⁶⁶

The frequency and duration of PLC meetings depend on the group’s needs and goals. A less frequent meeting schedule could meet once a month, with a commitment to read and work between meetings. A less frequent meeting schedule would provide teachers with time to try out and reflect on new strategies between meetings.⁶⁷ Another suggestion is to meet every two weeks. With this schedule, participants could use “the

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Dimino, Taylor, and Morris, Op. cit., p. 2.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “Team Structure in PLC.” All Things PLC. <https://www.allthingsplc.info/blog/view/15/team-structure-in-plc>

⁶⁴ Figure reproduced verbatim from: “Module 3: Building Effective PLC Teams.” Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/download-module-3-0/download>

⁶⁵ “Professional Learning Communities - What Is a PLC?” The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. <http://www.centerforcsri.org/plc/program.html>

⁶⁶ Jolly, Op. cit., p. 3-2.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

first session of each month to review readings and do content-based activities and the second session to discuss reports of classroom activities and the student work that resulted.”⁶⁸ Many PLCs also meet weekly.⁶⁹

School and district leaders are responsible for ensuring that teachers have the time and resources to participate in PLCs.⁷⁰ Figure 2.6 below highlights some methods for creating time for PLC participation.

Figure 2.6: Methods for Creating Time for PLC Participation

BANK TIME
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create regularly scheduled early dismissal/late start days. ▪ Adjust arrival and dismissal times so that school begins 30 minutes earlier on Monday through Friday and dismisses two hours early on Friday for PLCs to meet each Friday.
BUY TIME
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use paraprofessionals or substitute teachers to release teachers for team meeting time. ▪ Schedule a team of substitute teachers for a day a week to release teachers on a rotating basis for PLC meetings.
USE COMMON TIME
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use common planning time to enable teachers working with the same students, grade level, or subjects to meet in PLCs. ▪ Organize electives or special subjects into blocks of time to create common time for PLC meetings.
USE RESOURCE PERSONNEL FOR STUDENT LEARNING ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enlist administrators to teach classes or allow teaching assistants or paraprofessionals to monitor classes. ▪ Pair teachers so one teaches while the other meets with their PLC.
FREE TEACHERS FROM NON-INSTRUCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Remove non-instructional administrative, clerical, and school management tasks from teachers’ duties and instead focus that time on PLCs. ▪ Use non-homeroom teachers to occasionally perform homeroom duties so teachers can meet for an extended time before school and throughout homeroom.

Source: The SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro⁷¹

DEFINING ROLES

One other first step to scaling PLCs across the district is to define roles and responsibilities for PLCs. This subsection discusses the roles teachers hold within PLCs as well as the role of administrators and school principals in supporting PLCs.

WITHIN A PLC

Figure 2.7: Facilitator Responsibilities

- **Introduce teachers to the Professional Learning Team process.**

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ “Professional Learning Communities Guide.” Tucson Unified School District, 2016. p. 35. <http://tusd1.schooldesk.net/Portals/TUSD1/District/docs/PD/PLCGuide.pdf>

⁷⁰ Pirtle and Tobia, Op. cit., p. 3.

⁷¹ Figure contents quoted verbatim with modification from: Jolly, Op. cit., pp. 3-9 - 3-10.

PLCs should determine a **facilitator** who guides the PLC and models collaboration and continual learning.⁷³ While the facilitator role can be permanent or rotate between members, facilitators should be experienced teachers who are leaders in their school and “relate well to adult learners.”⁷⁴ The facilitator helps set the agenda, monitors participation and adherence to group norms, facilitates activities, and keeps meetings on-track. Figure 2.7 highlights additional responsibilities of the team facilitator.⁷⁵

PLCs should also have a team **recorder**. The recorder takes notes during the meetings, chronicles group decisions, and records plans for the next meeting. At the end of the meeting, the recorder sends the notes and meeting log to the team members and principal. The log should include the team’s name, the team goal(s), the names of members in attendance, and the date and length of the meeting.⁷⁶ The recorder role can remain the responsibility of one member or can rotate among members.⁷⁷

- **Collect data and information about the initiative during the year.**
- **Provide ongoing guidance for the learning team process and oversee the implementation of the process at the school.**
- **Monitor and assist the learning teams regularly and provide feedback.**
- **Assist with spotlighting the work of the teams among the administration and the community.**
- **Provide teams with resources for research and professional development.**

Source: The SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro⁷²

Within PLC meetings, participants should rotate discussion and activity leadership and determine leadership roles before the meeting. For instance, if one teacher tried a new teaching strategy, that teacher could lead the next meeting by presenting on the strategy, reviewing results of student work, reflecting on how it went, and leading a discussion. All group members should have the opportunity to lead a meeting at least once during the school year.⁷⁸

ADMINISTRATORS

While not fully participating PLC members, administrators and principals play an important role in supporting PLCs. According to a *Phi Delta Kappan* article on supporting effective PLCs, districts play four main roles in implementing PLCs. These roles include:⁷⁹

- **Ownership and support:** Districts must involve teachers and administrators in developing and leading the PLC process;
- **Professional development:** Districts must teach administrators and teachers how to work together effectively in PLCs;
- **Improvement process:** Districts must show how PLCs fit into the district’s improvement process so that each PLC’s work fits into an overall plan; and
- **Differentiated support:** Districts must support schools according to their unique needs in order to help them move to the next step in their PLC growth.

Principals play a key role by setting a clear vision for PLCs within the school. In an article by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), researchers examined principals’ roles in supporting

⁷² Bullet points quoted verbatim with modification from: Ibid., p. 10-10.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Dimino, Taylor, and Morris, Op. cit., p. 2.

⁷⁵ [1] Hammer, Op. cit., p. 9.

⁷⁶ Jolly, Op. cit., p. 7-16.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 7-3.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Bullet points quoted verbatim with modification from: Thessin and Starr, Op. cit., p. 51.

PLCs at four elementary schools. The researchers note that “In the schools where principals articulated a clear vision that conveyed district intentions, PLC collaboration was strongest, as evidenced in both observations and teachers’ reported practices.”⁸⁰ Principals should publicly communicate a vision of PLCs as a tool for using student data and teacher collaboration to improve teaching and learning.⁸¹

Principals are also responsible for setting a school culture that values collaboration and PLCs. Principals should set high expectations for teaching quality and student learning and encourage a mindset of continual improvement. Additionally, principals can actively support PLCs by sharing PLC goals and celebrating PLC successes during faculty meetings. Lessons learned in PLCs can benefit the entire school staff.⁸²

Experts also recommend creating a district-wide PLC steering committee to provide central office support and direction, as well as a central link between PLCs. The steering committee should include district and school-level administrators and teachers in the PLCs.⁸³

BEST PRACTICES FOR EVALUATING PLCS

PLCs benefit from both informal, internal feedback and external evaluations, and in scaling PLCs across the district, district leaders need to regularly monitor outcomes.⁸⁴ While the evaluations can come from district administrators, the school principal, or the PLC itself, the school principal is responsible for providing PLC teams with regular feedback about their work and progress toward their goals.⁸⁵ Regularly reviewing their effectiveness as a team and analyzing team outcomes provides PLCs with valuable information that they can use to identify both strengths and areas for improvement.⁸⁶

Districts and schools can assess PLCs at the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. While planning and implementation typically focus on the process, evaluation focuses on the program outcomes.⁸⁷ At the evaluation stage, the school can assess the PLC’s effectiveness as a team and progress towards their goals.⁸⁸ Districts can conduct formative and summative evaluations of PLCs. Formative evaluations assess the PLC’s effectiveness as a team and outcomes of team actions. Summative evaluations determine whether the PLC accomplished its main goal, related to improving student learning. Typically, schools or PLCs conduct summative evaluations at the end of an extended period of time, such as a school year. **Schools often determine overall PLC success by student learning, and PLCs often use results from state assessments or teacher-developed assessments to determine progress towards the PLC goal.**⁸⁹ For instance, if the PLC’s goal focused on improving elementary student literacy outcomes, the school could look at changes in student achievement scores from the reading and writing section of state assessment of the students whose teachers participating in the PLC.

When choosing an instrument to evaluate PLCs, studies recommend considering the evaluation objective, evaluation questions, the methodology best suited to the questions, and the context and constraints of the PLC.⁹⁰ Likewise, schools should also consider the goal of the evaluation, identifying the outcomes the school

⁸⁰ Buttram, J.L. and E.N. Farley-Ripple. “Four Steps to Nurture PLCs.” NAESP, June 2014. <https://www.naesp.org/resource/four-steps-to-nurture-plcs/>

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Thessin and Starr, Op. cit., p. 51.

⁸⁴ Killion, J. “Collaborative Professional Learning in School and Beyond.” New Jersey Department of Education. p. 266. <http://home.upperschools.org/pdf/PD%20Toolkit.pdf>

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Blitz and Schulman, Op. cit., p. 2.

⁸⁸ Killion, Op. cit., p. 266.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 268.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

wants to measure, and choosing a tool that measures the identified outcomes.⁹¹ Figure 2.8 below highlights key tasks and indicators for PLC evaluations, which schools can use to determine measurement tools.

Figure 2.8: Evaluating PLCs

KEY TASKS	KEY INDICATORS
Collect and analyze artifacts produced by the PLC team and determine the extent to which they inform instruction and assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Number, quality, and standard use of artifacts created by PLC team. ▪ Sharing of insights and best practices with other members of the community.
Assess contributions of PLCs to school culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Focus on and commitment to continuous improvement through collective learning and inquiry, institutionalization of PLCs in schools, adequate institutional support of PLCs.
Evaluate contributions of PLCs to professional development of staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teachers' improved knowledge mastery, greater perceived self-efficacy as teachers. ▪ Engagement in self-reflective assessment. ▪ Comfort using data to guide instructional practices.

Source: U.S. Department of Education⁹²

Schools can evaluate PLCs by surveying teachers' perceptions of collaboration, team and meeting success, and learning experiences. For example, the Professional Learning Team Survey, which includes both Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions, assesses teachers' perceptions of team dynamics, team meetings, and team success in identifying student needs and new teaching approaches.⁹³ For some items, the survey has teachers rate the extent to which they practice certain activities before the start of the PLC and again after the first year.⁹⁴ Figure 2.9 below highlights sample items from the Professional Learning Team Survey.

Figure 2.9: Professional Learning Team Survey Sample Items

Below is a list of activities that support teacher growth and development. Choose and circle a rating based on your assessment of the extent to which the practice occurred (1) before beginning the PLC and (2) at the conclusion of the first year of PLC team meetings.

Rating Scale: 1 (not very effectively practiced) to 5 (very effectively practiced)

	BEFORE	AFTER
Teachers share, read, and discuss articles, books, and other professional resources.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Teachers help each other implement new ideas and practices in the classroom.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Teachers visit one another's classrooms to examine teaching strategies.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Teachers develop strategies to address different types of learners.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Teachers design lessons, assessments, and/or units together.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

Source: The SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro⁹⁵

⁹¹ Ibid., p. C-1.

⁹² Figure contents quoted verbatim with modification from: Ibid., p. C-2.

⁹³ Ibid., p. D-22.

⁹⁴ Jolly, Op. cit., p. 9-5.

⁹⁵ Figure contents quoted verbatim with modification from: Ibid., 9-15

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