

# A Big Picture Look at Professional Learning Communities

## What is a PLC?

"A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators."

—adapted from *Learning by Doing*

## 3 Big Ideas of a PLC

### *Focus on Learning*

The fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. This focus on learning translates into four critical questions that drive the daily work of the school. In PLCs, educators demonstrate their commitment to helping all students learn by working collaboratively to address the following critical questions:

- 1) What do we want students to learn? What should each student know and be able to do as a result of each unit, grade level, and/or course?
- 2) How will we know if they have learned? Are we monitoring each student's learning on a timely basis?
- 3) What will we do if they don't learn? What systematic process is in place to provide additional time and support for students who are experiencing difficulty?
- 4) What will we do if they already know it?

### *Build a COLLABORATIVE CULTURE*

- No school can help all students achieve at high levels if teachers work in isolation.
- Schools improve when teachers are given the time and support to work together to clarify essential student learning, develop common assessments for learning, analyze evidence of student learning, and use that evidence to learn from one another.

### *Focus on Results*

- PLCs measure their effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions.
- All programs, policies, and practices are continually assessed on the basis of their impact on student learning.
- All staff members receive relevant and timely information on their effectiveness in achieving intended results.

## 6 Essential Characteristics of a PLC

### *Shared mission, vision, values, goals*

Educators in a PLC benefit from clarity regarding their shared purpose, a common understanding of the school they are trying to create, collective communities to help move the school in the desired direction, and specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound (SMART) goals to mark their progress.

### *Collaborative teams focused on learning*

In a PLC, educators work together interdependently in collaborative teams to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable. The structure of the school is aligned to ensure teams are provided the time and support essential to adult learning.

"Collaboration is a systematic process in which we work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results."

—adapted from *Learning by Doing*

### *Collective inquiry*

Teams in a PLC relentlessly question the status quo, seek new methods of teaching and learning, test the methods, and then reflect on the results. Building shared knowledge of both current reality and best practice is an essential part of each team's decision-making process.

### *Action orientation and experimentation*

Members of a PLC constantly turn their learning and insights into action. They recognize the importance of engagement and experience in learning and in testing new ideas. They learn by doing.

### *Commitment to Continuous improvement*

Not content with the status quo, members of a PLC constantly seek better ways to achieve mutual goals and accomplish their fundamental purpose of learning for all.

All teams engage in an ongoing cycle of:

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implementing the strategies and ideas
- Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

### *Results orientation*

Educators in a PLC assess their efforts on the basis of tangible results. They are hungry for evidence of student learning and use that evidence to inform and improve their practice.

The success of the PLC concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the commitment and persistence of the educators within it.

—Richard DuFour

Adapted from the work of Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker.