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## What does plc stand for in education

A professional learning community, or PLC, is a group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students. The term is also applied to schools or teaching faculties that use small-group collaboration as a form of professional development. Shirley Hord, an expert on school leadership, came up with perhaps the most efficient description of the strategy: “The three words explain the concept: Professionals coming together in a group—a community—to learn.” It should be noted that professional learning communities may be called many different things from school to school or place to place, including professional learning groups, collaborative learning communities, critical friends groups, or communities of practice, to name just a few common terms (terms such as professional learning groups and critical friends groups are typically applied to smaller teams of teachers—usually between four and eight, although group sizes vary—rather than to an entire school that uses small-group collaboration as a form of professional development). In Japan, the practice is called lesson study or lesson research. In addition, professional learning communities can take a wide variety of forms or be organized for different purposes. While some educators define “professional learning community” in a very specific way, others may use the term more loosely, even applying it to meetings or groups that other educators would not consider to be a genuine “professional learning community.” In fact, Richard DuFour, considered one of the foremost experts on the subject, wrote in 2004 that “the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning.” For Dufour and other experts and researchers, the term professional learning community should only be applied to schools in which all teachers and school leaders use specific, recommended strategies. The distinction here is subtle and potentially confusing: When a school is considered a “professional learning community,” educators meet in small groups, but in some cases educators consider the small groups to be “professional learning communities.” Professional learning communities tend serve to two broad purposes: (1) improving the skills and knowledge of educators through collaborative study, expertise exchange, and professional dialogue, and (2) improving the educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment of students through stronger leadership and teaching. Professional learning communities often function as a form of action research—i.e., as a way to continually question, reevaluate, refine, and improve teaching strategies and knowledge. Meetings are goal-driven exchanges facilitated by educators who have been trained to lead professional learning communities. Participation in meetings may be entirely voluntary, and in some schools only a small percentage of the faculty will elect to participate, or it may be a school-wide requirement that all faculty members participate. In professional learning communities, teams are often built around shared roles or responsibilities. For example, the teachers in a particular group may all teach the same ninth-grade students or they may all teach science, and these shared attributes allow participants to focus on specific problems and strategies—How do I teach this particular student better? How do I teach this scientific theory more effectively?—rather than on general educational goals or theories. Teachers, for example, will discuss and reflect on their instructional techniques, lesson designs, and assessment practices, while administrators may address leadership questions, strategies, and issues. While the specific activities and goals of a professional learning community may vary widely from school to school, the following are a few examples of common activities that may take place in meetings: Participants collectively review lesson plans or assessments that have been used in a class, and then offer critical feedback and recommendations for improvement. Discussing student work: Participants look at examples of student work turned in for a class, and then offer recommendations on how lessons or teaching approaches may be modified to improve the quality of student work. Discussing student data: Participants analyze student-performance data from a class to identify trends—such as which students are consistently failing or underperforming—and collaboratively develop proactive teaching and support strategies to help students who may be struggling academically. Discussing professional literature: Participants select a text to read, such as a research study or an article about a specialized instructional technique, and then engage in a structured conversation about the text and how it can help inform or improve their teaching. Reform Professional learning communities are nearly always an intentional school-improvement strategy designed to reduce professional isolation, foster greater faculty collaboration, and spread the expertise and insights of individual teachers throughout a school. Because teachers may work largely independently—i.e., they will create courses and lessons on their own and teach behind the closed doors without much feedback from colleagues—teaching styles, educational philosophies, and learning expectations can vary widely from class to class, as can the effectiveness of lessons and instruction. While professional learning communities may take a wide variety of forms from school to school, they tend to share a variety of common features. Teachers will likely meet regularly—every other week or every month, for example—and work together to improve and diversify their instructional techniques. For example, they may agree to identify and monitor student learning needs in their classes, conduct observations of their colleagues while they teach and give them constructive feedback, collaboratively develop and refine lessons and instructional techniques, and improve the support strategies they use to help students. Time for meetings is often scheduled during the school day, and participation in a professional learning community may be an expected teaching responsibility, not an optional activity that competes with out-of-school personal time. Groups generally work toward common goals and expectations that are agreed upon in advance. Groups may even create mission and vision statements or a set of shared beliefs and values. Meeting procedures are commonly guided by norms, or a set of conduct expectations that group members collaboratively develop and agree on. A norm might address meeting logistics (e.g., start meetings on time, stick to the agenda, and end on time) or interactions (listen attentively to colleagues and make sure feedback is respectful and constructive). Meetings are often coordinated and run by teachers who have been trained in group-facilitation strategies, often by an outside organization or training professional. Meetings typically follow predetermined agendas that are developed by facilitators in response to group requests or identified teacher or student needs. Facilitators typically use protocols—a set of parameters and guidelines developed by educators—to structure group conversations and help keep the discussions focused and productive. Facilitators will make sure that conversations remain respectful, constructive, objective, and goal-oriented, and they may step in and guide the conversation in a more productive direction if it becomes digressive or negative. Facilitators will also ensure that conversations remain objective and factual, rather than subjective and speculative. For example, group members may be asked to cite student-performance data, specific examples, research findings, or other concrete evidence to support their points, and facilitators may point out assumptions or generalizations. Advocates of professional learning communities argue that the practice can foster and promote a wide variety of positive professional interactions and practices among teachers in a school. For example, Teachers may assume more leadership responsibility or feel a greater sense of ownership over a school-improvement process. Teachers may feel more professionally confident and better equipped to address the learning needs of their students, and they may become more willing to engage in the kind of self-reflection that leads to professional growth and improvement. The faculty culture may improve, and professional relationships can become stronger and more trusting because the faculty is interacting and communicating more productively. Teachers may participate in professional collaborations more frequently, such as co-developing and co-teaching interdisciplinary courses. More instructional innovation may take hold in classrooms and academic programs, and teachers may begin incorporating effective instructional techniques being used by colleagues. Teachers may begin using more evidence-based approaches to designing lessons and delivering instruction. Debate While the professional learning community concept is not typically an object of criticism or debate, skeptics may question whether these groups can actually have a positive impact on student learning, or whether the extent of that impact justifies the time or expense required to make them successful. Since it often extremely difficult, from a research perspective, to attribute gains in student performance to any one influence in a school (because so many potential factors can influence performance, including familial or socioeconomic dynamics outside of a school’s control), the benefits of professional learning communities may be difficult to measure objectively and reliably. It is more likely, however, that professional learning communities will be criticized or debated when they are poorly implemented or facilitated, if they become disorganized and unfocused, if they are perceived as a burdensome or time-consuming obligation, or when teachers have negative experiences within their groups. Like any school-improvement strategy or program, the quality of the design and execution will typically determine the results achieved. If meetings are poorly facilitated and conversations lapse into complaints about policies or personalities, or if educators fail to turn group learning into actual changes in instructional techniques, professional learning communities are less likely to be successful. In addition, administrators and teachers may encounter a number of potential challenges when implementing professional learning communities. For example, A lack of support from the superintendent, principal, or other school leaders could lead to an inadequate investment of time, attention, and resources. Inadequate training for group facilitators could produce ineffective facilitation, disorganized meetings, and an erosion of confidence in the process. A lack of clear, explicit goals for group work can lead to unfocused conversations, misspent time, and general confusion about the purpose of the groups. A dysfunctional school or faculty culture could contribute to tensions, conflicts, factions, and other issues that undermine the potential benefits of professional learning communities. A lack of observable, measurable faculty progress or student-achievement gains can erode support, motivation, and enthusiasm for the process. Highly divergent educational philosophies, belief systems, or learning styles can lead to disagreements that undermine the collegiality and sense of shared purpose typically required to make professional learning communities successful. In the dynamic landscape of education, the concept of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) has emerged as a revolutionary approach to fostering collaborative and effective educational environments. These communities are not just beneficial but essential for the continuous growth of educators and the enhancement of student performance. Understanding the structure, functioning, and impact of PLCs can provide valuable insights into their role in transforming education. Let’s delve into what PLCs are, their foundational characteristics, the pivotal role they play in education, and how to establish such communities within educational institutions. What is a Professional Learning Community? At its core, a professional learning community is a collective of education professionals who unite with the shared ambition of refining their instructional strategies to bolster student learning outcomes. This collaborative model transcends the traditional isolation of educators within their classrooms, promoting a culture of mutual support and shared knowledge. The genesis of the professional learning community concept can be traced back to the pioneering work of thought leaders like Shirley Hord and Richard DuFour in the early 1990s. They posited that the success of schools hinges on the cooperative efforts of teachers who are dedicated to continual, collaborative professional development. Key Characteristics of a PLC by Dylan Gillis ( dylangillis) A professional learning community is distinguishable by several hallmark traits: Collaborative Culture The lifeworld of PLCs is the spirit of teamwork and partnership among educators. This encompasses the exchange of inventive ideas, effective strategies, and valuable resources, all aimed at elevating student learning experiences. Student-Centric Focus Central to the philosophy of PLCs is the unwavering commitment to enhancing student learning. Every decision and action taken within the PLC framework is rooted in the pursuit of what will most benefit the student body. Commitment to Continuous Learning PLCs shun the notion of stagnant, one-off training sessions. Instead, they champion the idea of perpetual learning, with educators zealously seeking to expand their professional acumen and adapt to the evolving demands of teaching. Data-Driven Decision Making In PLCs, data is not just collected but actively employed to steer decisions and gauge progress toward defined goals. Educators utilize various data points, such as student assessment results and behavioral patterns, to pinpoint areas needing improvement and to monitor student advancement. Supportive and Reflective Environment A professional learning community serves as a nurturing haven where educators can offer mutual encouragement, engage in constructive critique, and embark on a journey of self-improvement and professional growth. The Role of PLCs in Education The influence of PLCs on the educational system is profound, providing numerous advantages for teachers and students alike: Elevating Instructional Practices Through the collective intelligence of a PLC, educators can refine their teaching methods. This collaborative learning leads to more impactful instruction and, consequently, enhanced student performance. Advancing Student Achievement The overarching objective of a PLC is to elevate student learning outcomes. By pooling their expertise and leveraging data-driven insights, teachers can identify and address areas where students may be struggling, ensuring that every child has the opportunity for success. Supporting New Educators PLCs offer a robust network of support for educators who are new to the profession. These novices can draw from the wellspring of knowledge and experience of seasoned teachers, receiving guidance, mentorship, and constructive feedback. Enhancing Teacher Retention With the support and continuous learning opportunities provided by PLCs, teacher retention rates can improve. This is particularly significant in an industry where burnout and turnover are prevalent challenges. Championing Continuous Improvement The essence of PLCs is the relentless pursuit of advancement. Educators within these communities are dedicated to self-betterment and innovation, ensuring that their pedagogical approaches remain at the forefront of educational excellence. How to Create a Professional Learning Community by Mourizal Zativa ( mourimto) For those interested in fostering a professional learning community within their school or district, the following steps can serve as a guide to initiate and sustain a successful PLC: 1. Build a Strong Team Assembling a Diverse Group The foundation of a robust PLC is a diverse team of committed educators, including teachers, administrators, and support staff. Each member brings unique perspectives and skills that enrich the collaborative process. Establishing a Shared Vision A shared vision is vital for aligning the team’s efforts. This vision should encapsulate the team’s collective aspirations for student learning and professional growth. Fostering a Culture of Trust Trust is a critical component of a PLC. It is essential for team members to feel safe sharing their thoughts and practices openly, without fear of judgment or reprisal. 2. Set Clear, Measurable Goals Prioritizing Student Learning Goals should be explicitly designed to improve student learning outcomes. They must be concrete, measurable, and directly tied to student achievement. Aligning Goals with School Objectives The goals of the PLC should complement and reinforce the broader objectives of the school or district, ensuring coherence in educational initiatives. Establishing Benchmarks for Success To measure progress effectively, it is important to establish benchmarks that can indicate whether the PLC is on track to meet its goals. 3. Utilize Data to Guide Decisions Collecting Relevant Data A wide range of data should be collected to provide a comprehensive view of student learning and areas needing attention, including standardized test scores, classroom assessments, and student feedback. Analyzing Data Collaboratively Data analysis should be a team effort. By examining data together, educators can develop a shared understanding of the challenges and successes within their educational context. Implementing Data-Informed Interventions Based on the insights gained from data analysis, the PLC can design and implement targeted interventions to address specific learning gaps and enhance instructional effectiveness. 4. Foster Collaboration and Resource Sharing Establishing Regular Meeting Times Consistent, scheduled meetings are essential for maintaining the momentum of a PLC. These meetings provide a structured time for collaboration and reflection. Creating a Repository of Resources A shared repository of instructional materials, lesson plans, and professional development resources can be a valuable asset for all PLC members. Encouraging Peer Observations Peer observations can be a powerful tool for professional growth. Educators can visit each other’s classrooms to observe, learn, and provide constructive feedback. 5. Reflect, Adjust, and Evolve Engaging in Continuous Reflection Regular reflection on teaching practices and student outcomes helps educators identify areas for improvement and celebrate successes. Embracing a Growth Mindset A growth mindset is crucial for the evolution of a PLC. Members should view challenges as opportunities for learning and development. Adapting to Emerging Needs As the educational landscape changes, the PLC must be agile and willing to adjust its strategies and goals to meet the evolving needs of students and educators. Real-World Examples of PLCs in Action by Sincerely Media ( sincerelymedia) PLCs have taken root in educational settings worldwide, with numerous success stories demonstrating their transformative potential. Here are a few instances where PLCs have made a significant impact: 1. Adlai E. Stevenson High School A Decade of Excellence Since embracing PLCs in 2005, this Illinois high school has witnessed a surge in student achievement, with a remarkable 97% of students meeting or exceeding state benchmarks. Cultivating a Culture of Success The sustained success of Stevenson High School’s PLCs can be attributed to a culture that values continuous learning, teacher empowerment, and student-centered decision-making. 2. Shelby County Schools District-Wide Implementation In Tennessee, Shelby County Schools have adopted PLCs across the board, leading to noticeable improvements in student achievement and reductions in teacher attrition rates. Building Professional Capacity The district’s commitment to PLCs has bolstered professional capacity, fostering a collaborative environment where educators share best practices and support one another’s growth. 3. Tipton County Schools Turning the Tide on Challenges PLCs in Tipton County, Tennessee, have been credited with driving a significant upswing in student performance while simultaneously decreasing disciplinary incidents. Strengthening Community Ties The success of PLCs in Tipton County also highlights the importance of engaging the broader community, including parents and local stakeholders, in the educational process. Conclusion Professional learning communities represent a pivotal element of an effective education system. By nurturing collaboration and continuous professional development among educators, PLCs can lead to elevated teaching practices and superior student outcomes. By embracing the defining characteristics of PLCs and following the outlined steps, educational institutions can cultivate thriving professional learning communities that make a lasting difference in the lives of both teachers and students. Whether you’re starting a professional learning community at your school or considering joining a professional learning community, you’re in the right place! This guide will serve as a great introduction to best practices, benefits, and more for professional learning communities. A Professional Learning Community, or PLC, is a process of determining new pathways for student success through the collaboration of teachers and other stakeholders. In the traditional approach to implementing changes in districts or schools, a top-down, authoritarian decision determines every aspect of the process, from instruction to intervention. In a PLC, the approach is collaborative, involving teachers working alongside other teachers and administrators. Sometimes even families and students are also part of the process to determine how they can best work together to help students succeed. While Professional Learning Communities can vary from school to school, they always share a few key characteristics, found in the name itself: professionals who build a community for the sake of learning. While this may seem simplistic, looking at each of these words individually can help with the holistic view. First, the PLC must be made up of professionals. On one level, this means educational experts who know their craft. On a deeper level, this means teachers and administrators who understand that the most important goal is creating a common vision to increase student achievement and that getting to this goal will involve a mindset around healthy dialogue and occasional disagreement, resulting in what is best for the students and the school community. Second, the PLC must focus on learning as a key value. Significantly, they see learning not just for students but for staff as well. Moreover, they see true learning as an ongoing process that involves collaboration, dialogue, and reflection. Third, and perhaps most importantly, PLCs see themselves as a community of people working together for a common good. Simply put, PLCs are not teachers against administrators or department against department, but one staff coming together in a variety of ways to build a healthy culture that drives student growth and staff alignment. The purpose of a Professional Learning Community is to increase student achievement through data-driven analysis and strategy. However, there are also several complementary purposes that support the foundational goal of student achievement. Effective PLCs emphasize care for teachers as an equally important goal. When teachers are cared for through professional development and supported in their need to collaborate and support one another, they are better able to support student learning needs and goals. Additionally, PLCs create a healthy school culture where staff is aligned and understands their school’s mission because they work collaboratively to achieve this vision. That passion for the school’s mission, always created around student growth and learning, often trickles down to students as they, too, grow passionate about learning and the school’s mission. Establish a shared vision and common goal for the PLC. What do they want to accomplish with this time? The end result of a PLC will always, in some way, focus on an increase in student learning and mastery. Common goals for professional learning communities are vast. They can include broad objectives, like creating a new school mission, or student growth-focused goals, like developing a new curriculum to address where students need support, then developing a response to intervention. The size and scope of the PLC doesn’t matter as long as the plan is clear at the start. Without a clear vision and end goal, the community cannot accomplish anything of significance and will flounder. This involves choosing participants wisely and ensuring those chosen are ready to embrace the challenge of the learning community’s task. Once the goal for the community time is established, the participants must agree to work together on a regular basis through shared ideas and respectful dialogue until the goal of the community is accomplished. These needs will vary depending on the community’s end goal. However, it always requires the buy-in of administrators, as this type of development requires extra time and may require money. Administrators often find, though, that this proves to be a wise investment in the long run. Equipping teachers and staff to continually grow in their subject and craft allows professional learning communities to thrive, which only strengthens a school and its students. Focus your PLC on being data-driven. Communities that rely on intuition and personal opinions rarely succeed in completing their objectives. The professional learning communities that implement a variety of student data and research to drive their choices, on the other hand, regularly find a clear path forward. They are able to be truly strategic with their decision-making processes and are able to confidently recommend effective solutions to the problems they are working to address in their communities. This is also important when it comes to support for the PLC. When PLCs can present hard data as a metric for success, they receive more support from administration and teachers. As mentioned previously, participants in a learning community must act and speak collaboratively, understanding that only through discussing different opinions will they find successful solutions. It is essential that a learning community takes time to reflect both after meetings and after a decision is implemented. Is the decision achieving the desired results? Why or why not? How can the decision be adapted to achieve even greater results? These are the types of questions that a learning community must ask if they are to see lasting results. Depending on the scope and objective of the PLC, this may be a quick stand-up each afternoon to discuss a student’s goals or a once-a-month meeting to move a new curriculum plan forward. Consistency is more important than frequency. It is almost impossible to move objectives forward without a high level of commitment. PLCs can waste too much time recapping previous meetings or moving deadlines back to allow absent members to catch up on necessary tasks. The facilitator should have experience leading group discussions and reflections. They should also be confident in driving discussions forward and remain focused on data and results, nipping any off-topic conversations in the bud. Without real-time data and analytics, it is difficult to learn from what has been done. More importantly, it is almost impossible to analyze if decisions made by the committee are working. No one involved in a professional learning community wants to make a decision that falls flat. Real-time student data helps learning communities evaluate decisions and pivot as necessary so they can make real, lasting changes in students’ best interests. Otus is a comprehensive and collaborative platform for K-12 schools that centralizes assessment, data warehousing, progress monitoring, and more. With Otus, teachers have access to organized, real-time student data. So instead of spending time aggregating data, they can focus time and energy on the PLC process. Along with organized student growth data, many other Otus features support PLCs. In Otus, you can: Build engaging lessons. Create formative assessments aligned to learning intentions and standards. Share anything created in Otus with colleagues (assessments, lessons, resources, and more). Create student groups from assessment data. Assign interventions or enrichment resources to those student groups. View a comprehensive student profile with student reports, information, and more. These features and more allow for collaboration and transparency in your PLC. Interested in learning more about how Otus can support your PLCs? Request a demo here. The purpose of a PLC is to increase student learning and growth. PLCs are data-based and action-oriented through strategic intervention, so they are highly effective for identifying the core roadblocks preventing student learning and the steps the student needs to take to move forward. Again, the most effective PLCs are the ones that are not only focused on student achievement but teachers as learners. They support a teacher’s growth and development and provide additional time to ensure a teacher is highly qualified. Moreover, PLCs provide teachers with a safe, healthy community to process instructional choices and use data to drive strategic solutions that work. A school’s culture is not only determined by administrators; students and teachers also play a role. You cannot have a healthy school culture if one of these groups is struggling. When both students and teachers are doing well, that successful energy contributes to a positive school culture. Thriving students and teachers mean a thriving school culture. It is imperative that administrators implementing a professional learning community help teachers understand the why behind the PLC. The biggest implication is that an effective PLC will change the instructional approach of a teacher. Many teachers, especially those unfamiliar with PLCs or those not given adequate support, may feel threatened, intimidated, or underappreciated in this process. A clumsy PLC will make a teacher feel forced into the change, which will only backfire in the long run. An effective PLC leader will help teachers feel supported, encouraged, and appreciated. Then, teachers will feel motivated and inspired to change instructional approaches based on data-driven recommendations and collaborative insights. Teachers who are not given the support needed to carry a professional learning community forward will feel overwhelmed and overworked. It is essential for administrators to provide teachers in their PLC additional time and professional development support to ensure they have what they need to succeed. Finally, administrators must understand their staff’s history with PLCs and other educational initiatives. Too many teachers have been introduced to many ineffective “new strategies.” This can lead to skepticism, a lack of buy-in, or even downright resentment toward the PLC. It is an administrator’s priority to help teachers understand the benefits of a PLC. Too often teachers, are given too many objectives without enough support. Professional learning communities, when done well, are fantastic solutions to meeting objectives with increased support. Teachers should know that PLCs offer an outlet for creative brainstorming and problem solving for any classroom problem or challenge they face. This includes: Academic Intervention Plans At-Risk Identification Behavior Modification Plans Classroom Observations Common Assessments Graduation Pathway Plans RTI Plans . . . and so much more! Professional learning communities can exist for grade levels, subject materials, or even just one student in need of extra support. Additionally, teachers should know they don’t need to wait for administrators to get the ball rolling on PLCs. Often, successful PLCs are started by teachers ready to take the initiative to find creative solutions to problems they are facing in their classrooms. Supported teachers support other teachers and their students! Professional Learning Communities offer support for teachers, increase support and achievement for students, and promote a healthy, thriving culture for schools. The best part? They are flexible and easy to adapt based on the school or students’ needs.

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