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Professional Learning Communities

Elements that Define a PLC?

It can become complicated when educators seek to operationalize PLC definitions at the school level. A PLC is more than simply a collection of teachers working together or a social network of educators who share stories, materials, and advice (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Protheroe, 2008). In fact, the PLC concept often is misused to describe committees, grade-level teams, and/or weekly planning meetings in which the participants undertake data-based decision making (DuFour, 2004; Jessie, 2007).

While these groups may share some similarities of purpose with PLCs, the philosophy and characteristics of a PLC differentiate and define it. Let's take a look at both of those features.

Philosophy of a PLC

The PLC concept is relatively new, having grown out of the work in the mid-1990s to reculture schools by examining the effects of school organization on teachers' work and their commitment to school improvement (Rosenholz, 1989). Teacher workplace studies focused on how teacher working conditions—particularly how teachers learn from one another in school settings—influenced their job satisfaction and responsibility for student learning (Little, 1989; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1994). Professional community emerged as a concept that not only improved teacher well-being, but also could make a difference in terms of student achievement (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, n.d.; Little, 2003; Louis, 2006; Louis, Marks, & Bryk, 1998).

Concurrently, educators were embracing the notion of schools as learning organizations for adults and students; the focus was on learning rather than teaching (see, for example, Newcomb, 2003; Senge, 1995). School leaders began to accept learning rather than teaching as the fundamental purpose of schools (Eaker & Gonzalez, 2006). Because professional communities offered teachers opportunities to develop and share their expertise, their focus was readily expanded to include an emphasis on professional learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Today, PLCs have at their core a belief in teacher leadership and involvement in school improvement efforts. This corresponds well with the generally accepted belief that improving classroom instruction is a significant factor in raising student achievement (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, n.d.). Many PLCs operate with the understanding that one important key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour, DuFour et al., 2006; Haar, 2003; Phillips, 2003). In fact, in its standards the National Staff Development Council recognizes PLCs as a strategy for school improvement—specifically, as a means of supporting high-quality and ongoing professional development. Similarly, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (n.d.) identifies PLCs as a central element for effective professional development in any comprehensive reform initiative. As such, PLCs are grounded in two assumptions related to school improvement:

- Knowledge is situated in the day-to-day experiences of teachers and is best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experiences (Haar, 2003; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2006).
- Actively engaging teachers in PLCs will increase their professional knowledge and enhance student learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2006).

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Characteristics of a PLC

A PLC is not a model, per se; rather, it is an approach or process. Most PLC definitions assume a set of characteristics that reflect the nature of a true PLC. An understanding of these characteristics provides educators with a shared lens through which to examine their own PLCs. They also can provide an infrastructure for shaping practice and assessing progress. A brief description of some of the most commonly cited characteristics follow:

- **Shared values and vision** (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour, 2004; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). Teachers and administrators share a vision focused on student learning and a commitment to improvement (Reichstetter, 2006). The vision is used as a context for decision making about instructional practice and collaborative learning efforts. The vision statement should result in a collective responsibility for and an unwavering focus on student learning (Leo & Cowen, 2000; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Stoll et al., 2006).
- **Collaborative culture** (Bolam et al., 2005; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). PLCs are based on the premise that through collaboration, professionals achieve more than they could alone (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Teachers benefit from the resources that each brings to the PLC (Newman, 1994). Collaboration provides a mechanism for sharing responsibility for student learning and a means to work together toward a common purpose (Reichstetter, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006). Collaboration (e.g., opportunities for teachers to engage in ongoing collegial opportunities where they talk about teaching, receive frequent feedback on teaching, design classes together, teach each other, etc.) has been found in successful schools and is missing in unsuccessful schools (Little, 1989, 2003).
- **Focus on examining outcomes to improve student learning** (DuFour, 2004; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Louis, 2006). PLCs promote results-oriented thinking that is focused on continuous improvement and student learning (Reichstetter, 2006). The focus goes beyond a team getting together to look at data. In PLCs, teachers respond to data that require mutual accountability and changing classroom practices. Data help motivate teachers to see what is happening and what they need to do collectively (White & McIntosh, 2007).
- **Supportive and shared leadership** (Feger & Arruda, 2008; Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006). PLCs often are viewed as a foundation for developing teacher leaders (Caine & Caine, 2000). Administrators are committed to sharing decision making with teachers and providing opportunities for them to serve as leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; McREL, 2003). Leadership is shared and distributed among formal and informal leaders (Phillips, 2003; Reichstetter, 2006). The purposes and goals of a PLC grow from among the participants, based on their values, beliefs, and individual and shared experiences (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). Teacher leadership capacity sustains PLCs. Sharing power and authority with teachers through decision making and shared leadership increases leadership capacity and builds a belief in the school's collective ability to affect student teaching (Olivier & Hipp, 2006).
- **Shared personal practice** (Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). A major focus of PLCs is on professional learning in which teachers work and learn together as they continually evaluate the effectiveness of their practices and the needs, interests, and skills of their students (McREL, 2003). Teachers share experiences, observe each other, and discuss teaching. Shared practice and collective inquiry help sustain improvement by strengthening connections among teachers, stimulating discussion about professional practice, and helping teachers build on one another's expertise (McREL, 2003). Through continuous inquiry and reflective dialogue teachers discover solutions and address student needs (Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006).

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