

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Strategy Guide 2.0

Strategy Vision and Description

In this guide, we define a Professional Learning Community (PLC) as “...an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour, 2006).

Research has shown that the following components support the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities. It is important to note that while there is evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of each component (see research following each component), these components are most effective when implemented together. For instance, if a school or district decides to provide time for PLCs but does not ensure that PLCs are focused on student learning, implementing PLCs will likely yield limited results because this is only one part of the work of PLCs. The following components are derived from various articles and research that articulate what Professional Learning Communities should include:

1. **Purpose and Vision of PLCs**
2. **Supporting Structures for PLCs**
3. **PLC Meeting Focus and Supporting Processes**

Evidence Base

ESSA defines levels of research based on the quality of the study (Levels 1-4). CDE requires that schools and districts identify the research base for strategies that they select for their Unified Improvement Plans, and for applications for school improvement funds in the EASI application.

The research on **Professional Learning Communities** that is cited here meets the threshold for **ESSA Level 1-3**.

Necessary Preconditions

The following systems, structures, or practices should be established at the site before implementing this strategy, as they serve as a foundation for the practices described in this guide.

- Foundational Strategy: [Coaching](#)

Once PLCs have been established, the following strategies can help support and increase the effectiveness of the PLCs:

- [Data-Informed Instruction](#)

Contextual Fit

Possible Root Causes include inadequate, inconsistent or ineffective...

- Teacher collaboration
- Adult culture and beliefs

- Professional Development and Coaching
- Program implementation

Is this strategy a good fit for your district/school?

- Is there strong leadership support that can help build a climate of openness and trust in the school, empower teams to make decisions based on student needs, and apply appropriate pressure to perform?
- Is there a collaborative culture that is open to educators learning from each other for the purpose of creating momentum that drives improvement?
- Is there a commitment to continuous improvement?
- Is there a culture of authentic assessment by which teachers hold themselves collectively accountable for improving student achievement?

Core Components, Elements & Activities

The Core Components listed below are roughly sequential, though elements of each are likely to overlap. The first and second Core Components (the Purpose and Vision of PLCs and Supporting Structures for PLCs) should likely be in place before the start of the school year, as they set the conditions for success with PLC meetings and practices.

Core Component 1: Purpose and Vision of PLCs

Elements or Activities	Description
Focus is on student learning	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.
Approach is one of collaborative inquiry and reflection	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.

Core Component 2: Supporting Structures for PLCs

Elements or Activities	Description
Dedicated time is set aside for PLC meetings	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., <i>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?</i>) Staff should also have ongoing, consistent meeting times for PLCs such that they are able to respond to students' needs in a timely manner.
Schoolwide approach to student assessment, data collection, and data analysis	While not required for PLCs, a coherent approach to assessing student performance and to collecting and analyzing data can help to increase the effectiveness of PLCs. A strong data culture provides PLCs with additional ways of understanding and responding to student learning needs.

Core Component 3: PLC Meeting Focus and Supporting Processes

Elements or Activities	Description
Clear process and facilitation guidance for PLC meetings	There are clear and communicated expectations regarding the outcome of each meeting. Additionally, school leaders may provide agenda outlines, guiding questions, and/or protocols for teachers to use in order to effectively implement PLCs.
PLCs look at student work and student data, and/or reflect on key elements of teacher practice	In order 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).

Guidance for Implementation

Implementation Element	Guidance or Considerations
<i>Staffing and Teams</i>	PLCs are most effective when there is a strong culture of collaboration and openness to honest data reflection. PLC members should be open to learning and trying new approaches as these are suggested or indicated based on team reflections on data and student work products.
<i>Training & Resources</i>	Practitioners (PLC members) will need a strong understanding of the structures and expectations for PLC meetings (e.g., cadence of meetings, meeting protocols or standing agendas, and norms for collaboration). Because PLCs focus strongly on reflections on student data and student work, teams will need easy access to this data. This may entail establishing a data management system or a set of clear and user-friendly trackers that PLC teams can use during their reflections.
<i>Pacing</i>	Make sure these factors are in place before the year begins: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear, shared vision and purpose for PLCs • Protected meeting times for PLCs built into schedule
<i>Progress Monitoring</i>	Data collection: Ask PLCs to provide meeting minutes, planning documents (e.g., instructional plans), data analysis, or other evidence of their work in order 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. In any areas where expectations are not being met or data indicates the PLC isn't finding success, focus on identifying the nature of the barrier or obstacle to success and determine what additional support is needed for the PLC or its members.
<i>Change Management</i>	Because PLCs focus strongly on collaboration, it is particularly crucial that team members who will be participating in PLCs feel a sense of engagement in and ownership of the strategy. Consider how you can loop these staff members into the process early in order to ensure they understand the vision for the PLCs, the rationale for adopting them, and the aims or purpose of the PLC approach.

Sample Implementation Plan

Context: The following Sample Implementation Plan assumes that a school does not currently have a Professional Learning Community strategy in place and is installing this strategy for the first time. Note also that the dates given in the table below are suggested approximate ranges for the given activities. A true action plan should specify precise dates and date-ranges for each activity.

Name	Description	Start/End Date	Key Personnel
<i>Establish vision for PLC approach</i>	Articulate clear vision for the PLCs (including purpose, outcomes, and norms).	April - June	School Leadership
<i>Identify PLC members and adjust schedules</i>	Identify different PLCs to be established and team members involved. Ensure that school schedules set aside adequate protected time for weekly PLC meetings. Identify a "PLC Lead" for each PLC to act as liaison and facilitator.	June - July	School Leadership
<i>Create data trackers.</i>	Create or identify the data trackers that each PLC team will use during the year. Ensure the data tracker is clear and accessible to PLC team, to coaches, and to school leadership.	June - July	Coaches, PLC Leads
<i>Assign and train coaches on supporting PLCs</i>	Assign one coach to each PLC to provide feedback, support, and point of contact for any emergent needs. Train coaches on data and reflection practices and on skills for supporting healthy team dynamics and facilitating effective collaboration.	Late July	School Leadership, Coaches
<i>Train staff on PLC practices and expectations</i>	Session during BOY orientation to introduce PLC vision, practices, norms, and expectations. Include time for each PLC to meet with supporting coach to begin establishing collaboration and any team-specific practices or expectations.	Late July / Early August	PLC members, Coaches
<i>Weekly PLC meetings</i>	PLCs meet weekly during the school year. PLC coach is pulled in monthly or whenever additional support is needed.	August through May	PLC teams, (Coaches as needed)
<i>Monitor Implementation</i>	Coaches review data trackers, data reflection takeaways, and team-identified next steps weekly. This information is used, as appropriate, to enable coach to identify any barriers or to support team in refining their collaboration. School leadership reviews this information monthly, and debriefs with coaches to identify and clear any emergent obstacles.	August through May	Coaches, School Leadership

Sources

Academic Studies Leading to ESSA Rating

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