

#4 Professional Learning Community, PLC What Works?

Let's put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children."

– Sitting Bull

Richard De Four has outlined 3 big ideas of Professional Learning Communities:

Big Idea #1: Ensuring That Students Learn

The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn.

This simple shift—from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning—has profound implications for schools.

The three crucial questions that drive the work of those within a professional learning community are:

- **What do we want each student to learn?**
- **How will we know when each student has learned it?**
- **How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?**

The answer to the third question separates learning communities from traditional schools.

Big Idea #2: A Culture of Collaboration

Educators in Professional learning communities work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.

“Are students learning what they need to learn?” and “Who needs additional time and support to learn?”

Rather than relying solely on summative assessments effective teams ask, “Which students learned what was intended and which students did not?”

Collaborative conversations call on team members to make public what has traditionally been private—goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. These discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers—individually and collectively.

Big Idea #3: A Focus on Results

Professional learning communities judge their effectiveness on the basis of results. Working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the school.

Schools and teachers typically suffer from the DRIP syndrome—Data Rich/Information Poor. The results-oriented professional learning community not only welcomes data but also turns data into useful and relevant information for staff.

Successful PLC teams ask:

“Have we made progress on the goals that are most important to us?”

The PLC process must move beyond simply talking about various forms of student data, brainstorming possible teaching strategies and the like to concretely demonstrating/observing/modeling the actual teaching that is producing the data being discussed. This “actionable feedback” provides the context for developing the reflective practice essential to instructional improvement. Connecting the dots, one could say, between our teaching and student learning...or connecting the “talk to the walk.” Elmore, Richard, *A Key to High Performing PLCs: Connecting the “Talk to the Walk”*

Data

Data drives decision making!

Why is data important?

- It is effective in improving student achievement.
- Gives students access to their own data.
- Technology provides easy access to data and eases data analysis.
- Accountability requires that schools and districts measure effectiveness.
- Provides parents with evidence of student progress.
- Encourages self-reflection for students, teachers and teams.
- Identifies specific learning gaps.
- Easy access to data allows more time for planning quality instruction.
- Facilitates collaboration.
- Key to continuous improvement.

Process for using data

- Plan: Develop a plan for improvement.
- Do: Implement the plan.
- Study: Evaluate the impact according to specific criteria.
- Act: Adjust strategies to better meet criteria.

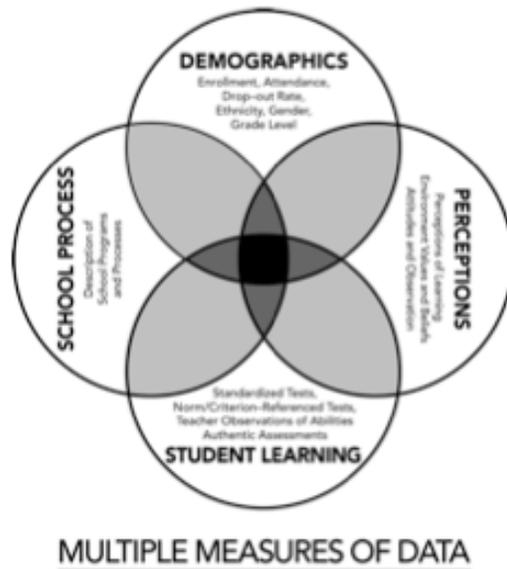
Benefits of using data to drive decision making

- Meetings become focused on improvement strategies that address documented problems and needs.
- Goal-setting is based on the data.
- Allows for regular communication with parents regarding the progress of their student.
- Grading systems based on common student performance criteria that report progress on the standards as well as work skills.

Types of data

Collecting data should be a planned, purposeful process

Figure 2. Types of Data



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- *Student learning*: not just standardized tests. Use on-going assessments, observations, periodic assessments, annual assessments, etc.
 - PALS
 - SRI
 - CRT
 - SAT
 - Explore
 - Fountas & Pinnel
 - My Access
 - Dibels
 - Six-minute Solutions
 - Benchmarks
 - CBA's
 - Lexile scores
 - CBM's
 - Observations

Guiding Questions for Collecting Achievement Data

- What evidence can we collect about our students' learning?
- What evidence do we have that shows the knowledge, skills, and understandings our students have achieved?
- Which data indicate the degree to which our students show the conceptual understandings and generalizations in our standards?
- What evidence shows which students are meeting or exceeding our achievement expectations and which are not?
- What do we know about how each individual student learns?

- *Demographic Data:* collect data that shows student's gender, ethnicity, economic status, attendance, suspensions, mobility patterns, transportation needs, special programs, parent involvement. Look at what trends you are seeing with students and factors that may be influencing them.
 - Attendance records
 - Behavior logs
 - School path
 - ESL
- *School Process Data:* look at what programs the student is involved in. How successful is the program the program for your particular student.
 - Courses of study
 - SEOP
 - Extra-curricular activities
 - Community involvement
 - Individual strengths/needs
- *Perception Data:* what are the belief systems of the parents and the student regarding learning and education?

Using data to plan

What outcome of improvement will we set for our student?

- Develop goals
 - Focused and clearly stated
 - Based on the data
 - Substantive and few in number
 - Measurable
 - Sustainable and systematic
 - Meet the students needs
 - Attainable

Hard Work and Commitment

Even the grandest design eventually translates into hard work. The professional learning community model is a grand design— It requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement.

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 rise or fall of the professional learning community 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 DeFour, Learning By Doing, 2006

Even Dumbledore believed in PLCs:

“We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided.”

“Now is the time when we must choose between what is right and what is easy.”



Cultural Shifts in a Professional Learning Community

A Shift in Fundamental Purpose

From a focus on teaching . . .	to a focus on learning
From emphasis on what was taught . . .	to a fixation on what students learned
From coverage of content . . .	to demonstration of proficiency
From providing individual teachers with curriculum documents such as state standards and curriculum guides . . .	to engaging collaborative teams in building shared knowledge regarding essential curriculum

A Shift in Use of Assessments

From infrequent summative assessments . . .	to frequent common formative assessments
From assessments to determine which students failed to learn by the deadline . . .	to assessments to identify students who need additional time and support
From assessments used to reward and punish students . . .	to assessments used to inform and motivate students
From assessing many things infrequently . . .	to assessing a few things frequently
From individual teacher assessments . . .	to assessments developed jointly by collaborative teams
From each teacher determining the criteria to be used in assessing student work . . .	to collaborative teams clarifying the criteria and ensuring consistency among team members when assessing student work
From an over-reliance on one kind of assessment . . .	to balanced assessments
From focusing on average scores . . .	to monitoring each student's proficiency in every essential skill

A Shift in the Response When Students Don't Learn

From individual teachers determining the appropriate response . . .	to a systematic response that ensures support for every student
From fixed time and support for learning . . .	to time and support for learning as variables
From remediation . . .	to intervention
From invitational support outside of the school day . . .	to directed (that is, required) support occurring during the school day
From one opportunity to demonstrate learning . . .	to multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning

A Shift in the Work of Teachers

From isolation . . .	to collaboration
From each teacher clarifying what students must learn . . .	to collaborative teams building shared knowledge and understanding about essential learning
From each teacher assigning priority to different learning standards . . .	to collaborative teams establishing the priority of respective learning standards
From each teacher determining the pacing of the curriculum . . .	to collaborative teams of teachers agreeing on common pacing
From individual teachers attempting to discover ways to improve results . . .	to collaborative teams of teachers helping each other improve
From privatization of practice . . .	to open sharing of practice
From decisions made on the basis of individual preferences . . .	to decisions made collectively by building shared knowledge of best practice
From “collaboration lite” on matters unrelated to student achievement . . .	to collaboration explicitly focused on issues and questions that most impact student achievement
From an assumption that these are “my kids, those are your kids”. . .	to an assumption that these are “our kids”

A Shift in Focus

From an external focus on issues outside of the school . . .	to an internal focus on steps the staff can take to improve the school
From a focus on inputs . . .	to a focus on results
From goals related to completion of project and activities . . .	to SMART goals demanding evidence of student learning
From teachers gathering data from their individually constructed tests in order to assign grades . . .	to collaborative teams acquiring information from common assessments in order to (1) inform their individual and collective practice and (2) respond to students who need additional time and support

A Shift in School Culture

From independence . . .	to interdependence
From a language of complaint . . .	to a language of commitment
From long-term strategic planning . . .	to planning for short-term wins
From infrequent generic recognition . . .	to frequent specific recognition and a culture of celebration that creates many winners

A Shift in Professional Development

From external training (workshops and courses) . . .	to job-embedded learning
From the expectation that learning occurs infrequently (on the few days devoted to professional development) . . .	to an expectation that learning is ongoing and occurs as part of routine work practice
From presentations to entire faculties . . .	to team-based action research
From learning by listening . . .	to learning by doing
From learning individually through courses and workshops . . .	to learning collectively by working together
From assessing impact on the basis of teacher satisfaction (“did you like it?”) . . .	to assessing impact on the basis of evidence of improved student learning
From short-term exposure to multiple concepts and practices . . .	to sustained commitment to limited focused initiatives

