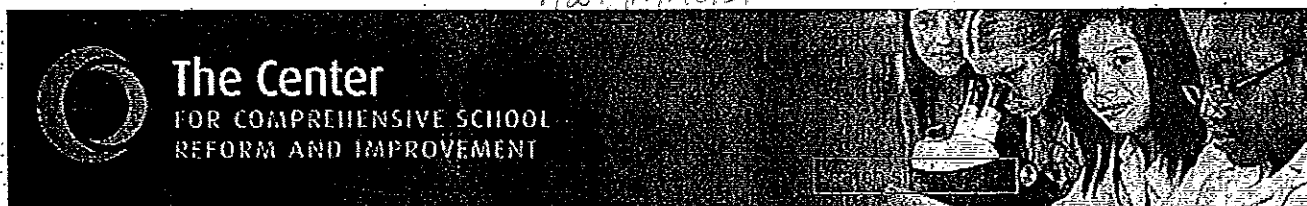


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## Professional Learning Communities - Introduction

### Introduction

In the context of school improvement, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) shift the focus of school reform from restructuring to reculturing. The PLC concept often is misused or implied to describe a committee or any weekly meeting in which the participants undertake data-based decision making. However, a PLC is much more than that. It is an ongoing process used to establish a schoolwide culture that is based on a fundamental belief in building teacher leadership in school improvement efforts. Through participation in PLCs, teachers enhance their leadership capacity as they work as members of ongoing, high-performing, collaborative teams that focus on improving student learning.

The PLC concept is relatively new, having grown out of the work in the mid-1990s to reculture schools. Since then, there has been much enthusiasm in schools as to the potential of PLCs for increasing teacher professional knowledge and enhancing student learning. Although research is just starting to emerge, much has been written about PLCs:

The purpose of this web-based resource is to provide practitioners with an overview of current resources -including literature and research- on PLCs. It includes:

- The **Professional Learning Communities Information Brief** which summarizes recent relevant literature on the following topics:
  - What is a PLC?
  - What are the defining elements of a PLC?
  - What does the literature and emerging research tell us about the benefits of PLCs?
  - How have schools used the PLC approach in the context of improving student achievement?
  - What supports are necessary to develop and sustain a PLC?
- A selection of **web sites** that feature PLC resources. While we do not necessarily endorse any of these sources, care was taken to direct readers to sites that are well established and offer a variety of resources, such as articles, research reports, links to documents, case examples, implementation tools, and blogs.

Next page: [What is a PLC?](#)

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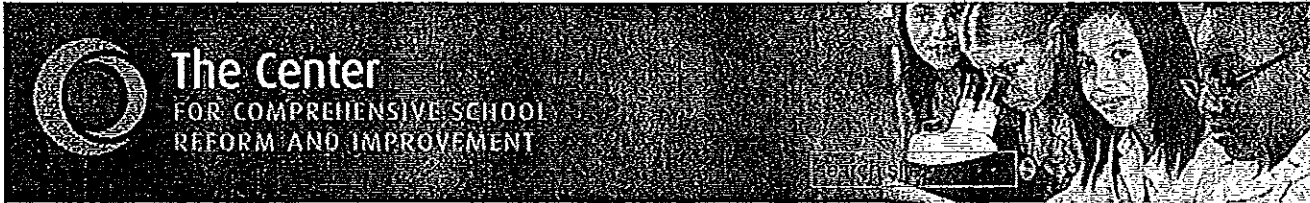
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## Professional Learning Communities

### What is a PLC?

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) shift the focus of school reform from restructuring to reculturing (Louis, 2006). A PLC is an ongoing process used to establish a schoolwide culture that develops teacher leadership explicitly focused on building and sustaining school improvement efforts. Generally, PLCs are composed of teachers, although administrators and support staff routinely participate (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Huffman, 2000). In some schools, PLCs are extended to community members and students, as appropriate (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007). Through participation in PLCs, teachers enhance their leadership capacity while they work as members of ongoing, high-performing, collaborative teams that focus on improving student learning (Rentfro, 2007).

This Information Brief presents an overview of PLCs. It summarizes recent relevant literature on the following topics:

- What is a PLC?
- What are the defining elements of a PLC?
- What does the literature and emerging research tell us about the benefits of PLCs?
- How have schools used the PLC approach in the context of improving student achievement?
- What supports are necessary to develop and sustain a PLC?

### Definition of a PLC

Although there is no universal definition of a PLC (Stoll et al., 2006; Williams, Brien, Sprague, & Sullivan, 2008), the following definitions offer a range of ways to describe a PLC:

- An ongoing process through which teachers and administrators work collaboratively to seek and share learning and to act on their learning, their goal being to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for students' benefit (Hord, 1997)
- A school culture that recognizes and capitalizes on the collective strengths and talents of the staff (Protheroe, 2008).
- A strategy to increase student achievement by creating a collaborative school culture focused on learning (Feger & Arruda, 2008).
- Team members who regularly collaborate toward continued improvement in meeting learner needs through a shared curricular-focused vision (Reichstetter, 2006).
- A group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive learning-oriented and growth-promoting way (McREL, 2003).
- Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).
- An inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other to inquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches to enhance student learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Thomas, Wallace, Greenwood et al., 2005).

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While these definitions capture the spirit of PLCs, they are only a starting point for understanding them.

What makes a PLC difficult to define is that it is not a prescription, a new program, a model, or an innovation to be implemented. Rather, a PLC is an infrastructure or a way of working together that results in continuous school improvement (Hord, 1997).

Next page: [Defining elements of a PLC](#)

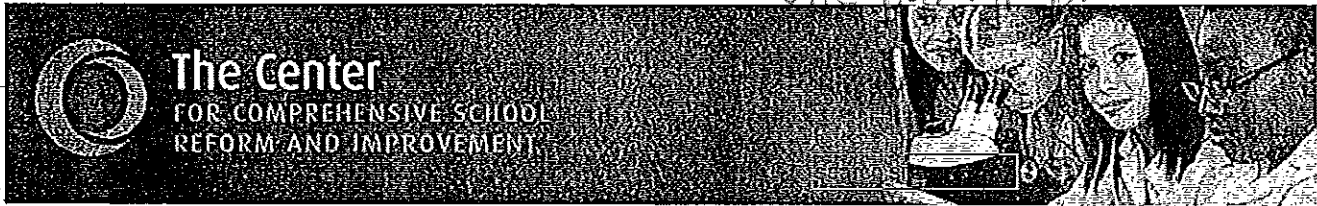
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## Professional Learning Communities

### 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).

### 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

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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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## Professional Learning Communities

### What Supports Are Necessary to Develop and Sustain a PLC?

It can be difficult to build and sustain PLCs (Moller, 2006; Wells & Feun, 2007). While organizing into small collegial groups may improve school culture, it does not necessarily result in improved instruction and student achievement (Supovitz, 2002).

PLCs require organizational structures and supports to be successful (Supovitz & Christman, 2003). A summary of two often-cited supports follows:

- Supportive leadership
- Structural supports

[Note: This Information Brief describes elements that are necessary for supporting a PLC; however, it stops short of presenting a specific plan that educators might use to develop and implement one. Readers seeking such information are encouraged to consult the websites listed in this resource for suggestions.]

#### Supportive Leadership

Strong, supportive leadership is necessary to build and sustain PLCs (Eaker & Gonzalez, 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006). Even though principals' roles may change as they redistribute and share leadership, their support is one of the resources necessary for schools to become a PLC (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Huffman et al., 2001; Huffman, Pankake, & Munoz, 2007; Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Principals actively build a context for PLC work. Their support includes such things as:

- Expanding leadership among teachers (Burnette, 2002). This may include encouraging teachers who may be reluctant to take on leadership roles (Moller, 2006) and defining autonomy and authority for teacher leaders (Supovitz & Christman, 2003).
- Securing fiscal and human resources to support teacher development (Bolam et al., 2005; Huffman, Hipp et al., 2001).
- Modeling the vision and shared focus of the PLC (e.g., maintaining an unwavering focus on student learning) (Huffman, Pankake, & Munoz, 2007; Leo & Cowen, 2000). Principals promote learning rather than teaching as the fundamental purpose of schools (Eaker & Gonzalez, 2006).
- Creating communication mechanisms to keep all of the staff informed (Burnette, 2002). Progress is monitored and acknowledged (McREL, 2003).
- Ensuring that student data are available (Eaker & Gonzalez, 2006; Supovitz & Christman, 2003). When data are not available but desired, principals find ways to provide them.
- Establishing a high-trust environment in which it is safe to learn and grow (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Approaches that support interdependent teaching roles (e.g., team teaching, integrated lesson design) are encouraged and fostered.
- Supporting teacher-determined professional development (DuFour, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003).

District support also is essential. Examples of support include:

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- Establishing a clear priority for PLCs districtwide and providing each school and/or department with the authority to chart its own course for achieving the goals (DuFour, 2003).
- Making resources (e.g., time, professional development, student data, etc.) available to support PLC development (Supovitz & Christman, 2003).
- Working out agreements with teacher unions as necessary, especially when time is being modified to fit shared meeting arrangements or teachers are being asked to take on new responsibilities (White & McIntosh, 2007).
- Embedding PLCs in mission statements and district policy (Tucker 2008). District policy can influence the depth of interactions (Coburn & Russell, 2008). School leaders influence the degree to which interactions are consistent with reform aims and how teachers talk about curriculum and instruction (Supovitz & Christman, 2003).
- Linking PLCs to existing district, school, and state program requirements and expectations (Burnette, 2002).

### Structural Supports

In addition to administrative support, PLCs require supportive conditions in which to develop and thrive (Hord, 1997). At the very least, PLCs require suitable spaces for meetings (Hord & Rutherford, 1998). Communication structures used to keep people involved and informed (e.g., meetings to discuss problem areas and new ideas, schoolwide announcements and distribution of information) also are in place (Burnette, 2002; Hord & Rutherford, 1998; McREL, 2003).



Perhaps the most significant resource that is required is time-PLCs require sufficient time to meet and talk (Burnette, 2002; Hord & Rutherford, 1998; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Reichstetter, 2006). Numerous strategies have been attempted to provide structured time. Examples include:

- Classes are scheduled to create common planning periods (DuFour, 2003; McREL, 2003).
- Particular school days are extended to bank time for professional learning (McREL, 2003).
- The schedule is built so that teachers are freed up by "specials" (music, art, physical education, student assemblies, etc.) (Burnette, 2002).
- Monthly faculty meetings and district professional development days are used for PLCs (Burnette, 2002; DuFour, 2003).
- Combine classrooms to free teachers to meet (Murphy, 1997). This should only be done when the teacher who is covering the class has expertise in the instructional content.
- The schedule is adjusted (Murphy, 1997; White & McIntosh, 2007). For example, every other Thursday, student start time is delayed 20 minutes; classes start late one day and teachers arrive 30 minutes earlier on that day.

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