

INTRODUCTION

“I have a PLC team meeting today.”

That statement conjures up a range of responses among administrators and teachers. Each of us has likely been part of a PLC in some way, shape, or form. Our experiences in those PLCs may have been good, bad, or ugly. You may have wondered to yourself: *What am I supposed to get out of this meeting? What does this have to do with me and my teaching? Aren't there better uses of my time?* We fully recognize that although most PLCs have noble intentions, there is a need to remedy some of the dysfunction that, at times, makes its way into a PLC structure and thus hinders the impact the PLC can potentially have on learning—our own learning as well as that of our students.

Lots of educational terms are introduced into our profession, and over time, many of them are watered down, are misused, or eventually lose their meaning altogether. *Professional learning communities* is just such a term. One of the biggest hinderances to the impact the PLC can have on teaching and learning is the misconception about the intention and implementation of PLCs. So, to clear up any misunderstandings, let's start off by exploring what PLCs are *not*. We'll call them the myths of PLCs. Maybe you have seen or experienced something on this list:

- **The PLC Book Club.** Reading a book or article together as a staff can be a fun and even enlightening experience, but doing so does not make a PLC. In a PLC, groups of teachers may choose to learn more and read something in common, but that occurs only when they are in search of an answer to a specific question (what we call a common challenge) they have crafted about moving the learning of their students forward. Unfortunately, too many teachers



Video 1

An Introduction to PLC+
[resources.corwin.com/
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To read a QR code, you must have a smartphone or tablet with a camera. We recommend that you download a QR code reader app that is made specifically for your phone or tablet brand.

have been assigned a book in the absence of a common challenge and have been told it was PLC work.

- **The PLC Planning Time.** Teachers need planning time, no doubt about it. But planning lessons is not what a PLC does. It's planning time. It is true that part of the work accomplished by teachers working collaboratively in professional groups can result in awesome lesson plans, but there is a lot more to an effective meeting of a PLC besides planning lessons.
- **The PLC Data “Admiring” Group.** Data are important fodder for the work that a professional learning community needs to do, but looking at data is not the only work. Too often, teams get bogged down in the data analysis that doesn't go beyond what might be described as observing, remarking, and wondering aloud—in short, admiring the data in all their surprising detail and the complex stories they contain without taking the next step toward action. Sometimes this is because the data admiring takes too long, and other times it's because the team is unaware of the potential they have to use the data to impact learning. Instead, the data analysis often devolves into a discussion about the characteristics of the student body and the seemingly intractable factors that can't be directly influenced by the team, such as poverty. The team remains oblivious to (or perhaps even intimidated by) what they *can* control. Effective PLC groups are action oriented. Data are fuel for the team. They use data to make decisions and then monitor those decisions for their impact on learning.
- **PLC—Survivor Edition.** This one is far too common for many teachers. The team feels it is in survivor mode for a myriad of reasons:
 - They feel an overwhelmed sense of needing to complete limitless forms and documents as well as many other compliance-based tasks. They do not understand why or how they will use these forms and tasks to learn about their students or change their practice.
 - They have the same level of dysfunction as the tribes on the CBS show *Survivor*. There is constant bickering,

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frustrations are shared, and rarely is anyone thinking about anything except how to fend for themselves and simply *survive*.

- **The PLC PD Meeting.** There are times in all of our lives when we need to learn new things. Those things might be skills or concepts related to teaching and learning. Members attend workshops and conferences, or participate in professional learning opportunities to address a need. That's beneficial, but it's not what PLCs do. PLCs do hard work. PLC members utilize what they have learned to ask hard questions and apply ideas in their classrooms. They dive into data and make decisions that impact learning.
- **The PLC Meeting.** This is perhaps the most common error of all—a perception that a professional learning community exists only on Wednesday afternoons when teams meet. A PLC is a vibrant and iterative mechanism for engaging in inquiry across space and time. PLCs should operate in the hallways of the school, in the classrooms where we teach, and in the parking lot when we linger to continue a conversation with a colleague. Consider this—you belong to many communities whose membership is defined by shared interests, affiliations, and causes. Your family unit is one such community, and one that exists even when you are not in face-to-face interactions. You don't suddenly become a family when you share a meal together, only to dissolve again when you are apart. A true PLC similarly maintains its shared interests even when its members are apart from one another.

PLC members utilize what they have learned to ask hard questions and apply ideas in their classrooms.

SO WHAT IS A PLC?

The body of literature around PLCs summarizes the two main purposes for them in the preK–12 learning environment:

1. To improve the pedagogical knowledge (skills and knowledge about **how** we teach) and the content knowledge (skills and knowledge about **what** we teach) of educators through collaboration among colleagues

(see Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, & Kyndt, 2017, for a systematic review of the PLC research).

2. To improve the learning outcomes of students (see Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

Working toward collective efficacy, taking responsibility for learning, and being flexible in instructional practices transform a PLC from being purely additive to being transformative.

As the work and focus of PLCs has drawn more attention over the decades, we acknowledge that they have also evolved to incorporate an additional purpose, which is to enhance educators' attitudes and dispositions about students and learning. Working toward collective efficacy, taking responsibility for learning, and being flexible in instructional practices transform a PLC from being purely additive to being transformative. Vescio and her colleagues noted that, "although teachers' perceptions about the value of PLCs are both valid and valuable, understanding the outcomes of these endeavors on teaching practice and student learning is crucial, particularly in today's era of scarce resources and accountability" (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 81). The net effect is that done well, PLCs shift beliefs, mindsets, and behaviors through teacher empowerment. Consider the following questions:

What is the ultimate goal of your classroom teaching?

Take a moment. Jot your thoughts down. Why do you show up to school every day? When we ask this question of educators, almost to a person, instructional leaders and teachers will use the word *learning*. Although the details will differ, every response will reference some type of *learning*.

If learning is the common thread across responses, how do we ensure that we take steps, each day, to fulfill the goal of learning?

Learning is a process through which experience causes permanent change in thinking or behavior (Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2011). In preK–12 classrooms, instruction is the primary experience. Through instruction, we facilitate students' acquisition of skills and knowledge. As instructional leaders and teachers, we accept the responsibility of teaching students so that they can not only demonstrate mastery of the skills and knowledge contained in our standards and curriculum, but also develop the capacity to be lifelong learners beyond

school walls. (By the way, *lifelong learners* is another common phrase used to answer the question about the ultimate goal of schooling.)

We assert that if you want to impact learning, you have to make high-impact decisions about what *and* how to teach. And, if you want to make decisions that have the greatest impact on learning, you have to engage in focused reflection and analysis, or conceptual change, about teaching and learning that will guide you through those decisions. PLCs, when done well, support the thinking, decision making, and learning in our schools and classrooms. They create a space for instructional leaders and teachers to engage in facilitated dialogue around instructional practice, foster innovation, apprentice novice educators, develop pedagogical content knowledge, and make data-informed decisions in our classrooms.

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THE STORY BEHIND PLCs

The history of PLCs goes back 60 years. The need to establish such a collaborative network emerged from the historically isolated nature of teaching and learning. Put differently, we work in a profession where, for many years, it was accepted that “what happens in my classroom is my business and what happens in yours is yours.” Closing our classroom doors literally and metaphorically resulted in isolated thinking, decision making, and learning in our schools and classrooms. The result left learning up to chance and required that all educators develop a rich professional knowledge base, refine their own lessons and assessments, and then make isolated decisions about what to do with the results. This also impacted our ability to address gaps in curriculum and instructional decisions being made throughout the school.

In the 1960s, PLCs appeared in the research as a way to offset this isolated approach to teaching and learning. Subsequently, Susan Rosenholtz (1989), in a study of 1,213 teachers from 78 schools, found that learning was enhanced by the collective commitment of teachers in a setting that promoted collaboration. She highlighted this

distinction by comparing what she called learning-enriched schools to learning-impooverished schools. Learning-enriched schools promote collaboration, which enhances the commitment of teachers to students and student learning. This idea of collaborative professional networks continues to be a focus in the preK–12 setting.

Simply providing time for professional learning communities to meet is not enough to ensure what Rosenholtz (1989) refers to as a learning-enriched school. Judith Warren Little (1987) reported that teachers benefited from the collaborative work of PLCs when they examined different perspectives, created dissonance, and raised

curiosity. However, she noted that simply putting teachers together and telling them to collaborate would not produce the desired outcomes for the teachers. Instead, there must be shared beliefs, values, and norms that promote positive professional relationships among professional learning community members. Furthermore, there must be a culture of collaboration that engages members in reflective practice and inquiry leading to professional growth and supported by mutual support (Little, 1987). Since then, research has continued to explore the role of collaboration through PLCs in schools (e.g., Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006), though, as noted above, simply having a PLC does not effectively negate the isolationism common in schools and classrooms. So what are the characteristics of an effective PLC?

Shirley Hord (2004) posed the same question, and sought to develop an evidence-based list

of characteristics of effective PLCs. She identified six factors that needed consideration for professional learning communities to thrive:

1. Structural conditions
2. Supportive relational conditions
3. Shared values and vision

SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE PLC	CURRENT RATING
<p>1. Structural Conditions: Does our PLC have established times that we are able to meet? Are there schedules in place that support collaboration and diminish isolation? Is there availability of needed resources?</p> <p>Ideas for Maintaining or Strengthening This Characteristic</p>	4 3 2 1
<p>2. Supportive Relational Conditions: Is there trust and respect in place within our PLC that provides the basis for giving and accepting feedback in order to work toward improvement?</p> <p>Ideas for Maintaining or Strengthening This Characteristic</p>	4 3 2 1
<p>3. Shared Values and Vision: Do members of the team have the same goal? Do they have shared beliefs about student learning and the ability of team members to impact student learning?</p> <p>Ideas for Maintaining or Strengthening This Characteristic</p>	4 3 2 1

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COLLABORATIVE WORK WITH YOUR TEAM

Module 1: Characteristics of an Effective PLC

page 5 in
The PLC+ Playbook

4. Intentional collective learning
5. Peers supporting peers
6. Shared and supportive leadership

In and of themselves, the characteristics are necessary but not sufficient for the implementation of a successful PLC. Thus, the story takes us to the most well-known approach to PLCs—one developed by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many. This particular model seeks to structure and focus the actual work within the PLC. Moving beyond the six characteristics, this team identified four essential questions designed to drive the conversations of the PLC. These guiding questions put the PLC into action:

1. What is it we want our students to learn?
2. How will we know if each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn it?
4. How can we extend and enrich the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency? (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010, p. 119)

ADDING THE EXAMINATION OF TEACHING PRACTICE TO THE PLC STORY

The above questions have assisted countless educators in purposefully focusing on student learning, which should rightly be the centerpiece of our mission. Yet there remains a crucial gap in the exclusive examination of student learning, and that is the examination of our *teaching*. Instruction is an essential ingredient that we ignore at our own peril. Imagine a hospital that analyzed only patient outcomes and never queried the medical procedures used. There is a link between learning and teaching, and to examine only one side of the equation limits our ability as educators to take action.

Yet there remains a crucial gap in the exclusive examination of student learning, and that is the examination of our *teaching*.

There is a reason the fields of medicine and law use the term *practice* to describe what doctors and lawyers do. In both professions, there is a symbiotic relationship between the well-being of the patient/client

and the skill of the doctor/lawyer. The practice of medicine is driven by inquiry. *What are the desired outcomes? What worked? What didn't? Why? Were the decisions that led to a treatment plan correct or flawed?*

Likewise, teaching is inquiry. *What are the desired outcomes? What worked? What didn't? Why? Were the decisions that led to a learning plan correct or flawed?* It is necessary to question one's practice, not just outcomes. And we're better when we do this collaboratively rather than individually, because none of us has all of the answers for all of the questions that surface in trying to meet the diverse needs of students. But we also have to develop our own skill set if we are to effectively engage in such inquiry. This is the **plus**.



PLC+ GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Where are we going?

This first question is critical. Teams that can answer this question have high levels of teacher clarity. They are keenly aware of the academic standards their students are held accountable to, and they have analyzed these standards to ensure a thorough understanding of the skills, concepts, and rigor level that lie within each standard. That clarity is used to drive the engineering of learning tasks so that evidence of student learning can be gathered and used to make instructional inferences moving forward. This work is often guided by pacing guides and supported with a variety of curricular resources.

2. Where are we now?

In order to answer this question, teams need to have evidence to determine current student proficiency and readiness levels against what they captured in the "Where are we going?" question above. This allows teams to determine appropriate entry points for instruction starting with where students are and moving them to where they need to be. This may require an inventory of existing assessments to identify current resources your team has access to, as well as determining the assessments that will need to be collaboratively designed by the team members. From there, teams identify a common challenge that will drive inquiry into their students' current learning needs.

3. How do we move learning forward?

This question focuses on our teaching practices and the means by which we learn from one another. Learning walks and microteaching are two effective ways to frame the ways in which we analyze our own teaching using the wisdom of peers. These are not the only ways to consider how to best move learning forward. We cross-examine the tasks that we have designed for our students by analyzing assignments for rigor and alignment to standards.

4. What did we learn today?

This is a question often asked of students that has just as much power when asked of the adults. Focusing on this question helps teams to synthesize the information discussed and the data reviewed to examine student progress and achievement. Posing this question to teams helps to ground actions and commitments moving forward. By the same notion, we have to acknowledge the simplicity but significance of this question: *if we gathered and met as a PLC and didn't learn anything, couldn't we have just emailed each other what we talked about?*

THE FIVE KEY QUESTIONS

PLC+ provides a framework for the planning and implementation of student learning as well as our own professional learning (e.g., microteaching, classroom observations). Reflected in five essential questions, our **plus** framework asks us to identify:

1. Where are we going?
2. Where are we now?
3. How do we move learning forward?
4. What did we learn today?
5. Who benefited and who did not benefit?

COLLABORATIVE WORK WITH YOUR TEAM

Module 1: PLC Guiding Questions

page 8 in
The PLC+ Playbook

The PLC+ framework, led by the guiding questions above, grounds the work of the PLC in both teaching and learning. As we will see in the subsequent chapters, the use of the pronoun *we* refers to both the learners in our classroom and the learners on our PLC+ team. The **plus** emphasizes not only the learning that we want to occur in students, but also the teaching and learning component for ourselves

as educators. This has been missing from past PLC structures. So, the **plus** in the PLC+ is you. The teacher.

Examining our instruction is now part of the equation.

In the past you, or other teachers working in PLCs, may have felt pressure to have an immediate plan to address or respond to the data put in front of you. In this model, we are acknowledging that the adults present need to reflect on their current practices, determine whether quality experiences have been provided for students, and then continue to learn about practices or strategies that would most likely further impact student learning. We are not just teachers. We are learners, too—lifelong learners—and that needs to be celebrated and encouraged as a necessary part of our profession.


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WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS BOOK

We have identified and developed four crosscutting and fundamental values that underpin the PLC+ framework. You will find these values discussed and referenced throughout the book, as we explore in depth the work of engaging the five key questions. These four crosscutting values are as follows:

1. **Equity.** The PLC+ needs to be a place where we use information to identify and apply appropriate and impactful evidence-based instructional practices that value the background of every student and help prepare each of them for success. There may be different approaches for different students. In addition to valuing the backgrounds of every student, we must leverage their backgrounds to enhance learning and ensure that the curriculum is responsive and affirming.
2. **High Expectations.** Ensuring we create and maintain high expectations for all students is a critical component of the PLC+ framework. We hold all students accountable to reaching the same bar, yet the pathway by which they arrive at mastery will oftentimes look different. This, of course, is linked to equity.

TEAM TIME DISCUSSION



The crosscutting values are intrinsic to the work of educators. Consider how these values shape student learning as well as the professional growth of teachers. Record your team discussion in the columns below.

	THIS WILL SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING BY ...	THIS WILL SUPPORT MY TEACHING BY ...
<p>Equity: A PLC+ needs to be a place where information is processed to identify and apply appropriate and impactful evidence-based instructional practices and culturally responsive teaching that values the background of every student and helps prepare each of them for success. In addition to valuing the background of every student, we must leverage their backgrounds to enhance learning.</p>		
<p>High Expectations: Ensuring we create and maintain high expectations for all students is a critical component of the PLC+ framework. All students are held accountable to reaching the same bar, yet the pathway by which they arrive at mastery will oftentimes look different. This, of course, is intertwined with equity, as are all of the crosscutting values.</p>		

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COLLABORATIVE WORK WITH YOUR TEAM

Module 2:
Crosscutting Values
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The PLC+ Playbook

- Can any weaknesses be converted to strengths?
- Can any threats turn into opportunities?
- How can our PLC+ take advantage of its strengths and opportunities?

As a team, take a moment to talk through each of the four quadrants described in the analysis grid that follows. Remember to focus the SWOT analysis on the purpose of a PLC+, including the guiding questions and crosscutting values.

PLC+ SWOT ANALYSIS GRID

	HELPFUL	HARMFUL
INTERNAL	What are our STRENGTHS?	What are our WEAKNESSES?
EXTERNAL	Where are our OPPORTUNITIES?	Where are our THREATS?

COLLABORATIVE WORK WITH YOUR TEAM

Module 2:
SWOT Analysis
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- 3. Individual and Collective Efficacy.** There is an incredible amount of brain power we can capitalize on when we take our individual capacity and contribute it to a collective whole. This model asks us to build our collective efficacy to create the belief that we can make an impact on each and every one of our students.
- 4. Activation.** A high-functioning PLC+ doesn't just happen by chance. The PLC+ needs someone who supports keeping

the discussions focused on its goal and on what members need to do to move forward. This approach requires deliberate efforts as well as structures to ensure these efforts are efficient and focused. It requires **activators**. We don't use the term *facilitator* because, in the truest sense, a facilitator does not contribute to the group but rather focuses on the process. An **activator** not only facilitates the group but also adds ideas, asks questions, notices nonverbal cues, and helps the team make decisions. In other words, the activator is a full member of the team.

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As we move through the PLC+ framework in this book, we will look over the shoulders of a PLC+ team in action as they

- Use the PLC+ questions to maximize student learning in their classrooms as well as their own professional learning. We will take front-row seats as the team unpacks the meaning and intent of each of the five questions and engages in facilitated dialogue around teaching and learning in their classrooms.
- Wrestle with the difficult conversations that come with dialogue around teaching and learning. As each PLC+ team member brings his or her own beliefs, mindsets, and behaviors to the team meeting, how does the team, as a whole, address and respond to potential barriers in the dialogue that could impede the professional learning and student learning in their classrooms?

The PLC+ guiding questions combined with the crosscutting values create a platform that grounds the work of your community, while also considering the lens through which each teacher sees teaching and learning. It will allow you and your team to identify and nurture effective and impactful practices and also provide you with new considerations that have not been in place before. It will provide you with a structure to collaborate and learn. Together, we're better. Together, we're stronger. Together, we achieve more.