The What of PLC: Foundational Principles

The Professional Learning Community (PLC) process provides a guiding framework where student learning data is used by collaborative teacher teams to focus their work and implement best practices to ensure every student learns. DuFour and DuFour (2011) define a PLC as "an on-going process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve."

Three Big Ideas of a PLC:

The PLC process rests on three big ideas and each idea has significant implications for educators. PLC practices are interconnected, and only have power as a whole.

1. A Focus on Learning

The first big idea is that the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure all students learn at high levels. In order to bring this idea to life, educators work together to clarify the following four critical questions:

• What do we want students to learn?
• How will we know if our students are learning?
• How will we respond when students do not learn?
• How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?

2. A Focus on Collaborative Teamwork

Helping all students learn requires us to work together to meet their needs. In order to bring this idea to life:

• Educators are organized into collaborative teams in which members work together to achieve common goals and hold each other accountable.
• Educators are clear on the purpose and priorities of their collaboration.

3. A Focus on Results

Educators must create a results orientation to know if students are learning. They must have and use evidence of student learning to drive continuous improvement of the PLC process. In order to bring this idea to life:

• Educators work together to achieve SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented and Time-based) goals.
• Educators gather and analyze evidence of student learning on a regular basis to inform and improve individual professional practice, as well as the collective practice of the team, and use assessment results to respond to students by name and by need.
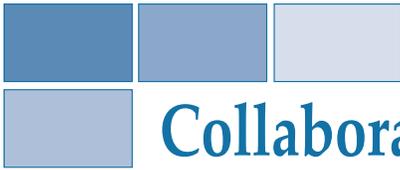
Collaborative Teams: Background

Anyone who has worked to implement the PLC process knows how challenging it can be. It requires a large amount of commitment and effort from everyone in the school. The process is based upon the idea that no single educator will have all the energy and expertise to lead a district, improve a school or meet the needs of all students each and every day. It requires teamwork, combined resources, and shared expertise. The collaborative team is the basic structure of a PLC and the engine that drives improvement. In a PLC, collaboration is a process in which teachers work together in order to improve their classroom practice in ways that ensure students learn.

1. The What of Collaborative Teams: The Work

PLCs go beyond organizing staff into teams. It is essential the district is clear about what the work is and what the team will be asked to produce. Teacher teams will be expected to:

- Clarify the learning for each subject or course
- Develop common formative assessments
- Collaboratively analyze the results of the assessments
- Monitor the learning of each student on a frequent basis, skill by skill
- Develop plans to provide students with additional time, support, and enrichment
- Reflect their own instructional practices to improve effectiveness

2. The When of Collaborative Teams: Wednesday Early Dismissal

Time for these teams to meet is important for successful PLC implementation. Recognizing the need for time in which to engage in the work, in June 2012 the Board of Education approved the calendar for early dismissal on twenty-seven Wednesdays throughout the school year. It is critical this time is used to focus on improving student learning.

3. Collaborative Teams: The Wrap-up

In summary, in a PLC, collaborative teams work to achieve common goals designed to improve student learning. Teams also learn from and assist one another, which builds a culture of understanding and support. In short, collaborative teams of teachers are the heart and soul of a school that functions as a PLC.

Get a View of PLC in Action:

Visit our district website and watch the PLC public service announcement and watch what teachers are doing to help better educate children in the RCAS district.

Go to www.rcas.org -> Administration -> Superintendent of Schools -> Superintendent Video Archive -> What is a PLC?

Aren't near a computer? Catch the same PSA on television by tuning into Midcontinent cable channel 19 or Knology channel 143.

District-Level PLC Survey Results - October 2012

District leaders must model the behavior expected of others. Modeling is one critical way leaders communicate what they value. This means, just as teachers do, district leaders should develop and administer formative assessments periodically to assess the progress of major initiatives. Since the implementation of a PLC is such a complex and step-by-step endeavor, ideas of progress can vary. These ideas are important since they affect how we feel and ultimately how we act. To get an accurate view of how the RCAS staff viewed the idea of a PLC, staff members were issued a survey to express their thoughts and opinions. The administration of a survey, and then a thorough analysis of the data obtained can help district leaders identify misconceptions, as well as areas needing attention. Below are results from the survey.

Survey Questions	% Not there yet	% Starting to Get It	% Getting There	%Got it
Priority #1 – Shared understanding of PLC concepts				
Activities to clarify the why, what, and how of a PLC	4	20	36	40
Understand four critical questions and how they interconnect	5	15	37	43
Activities to develop a common language about PLC concepts and practices	5	19	46	30
Expectation of high levels of learning for all students has been articulated	4	12	29	56
Priority #2 – Develop high-performing collaborative teams				
Clear about the work my PLC is expected to do on early dismissal days	8	15	31	46
PLC team decisions made based on their impact on learning	6	14	37	43
Collaboration is embedded into routine practices	6	16	38	40
Team has identified norms	3	6	12	80
Team focuses on the critical questions of learning	5	16	40	39
Priority #3 – Clarify Essential learning outcomes/power standards				
Clear skills, knowledge, dispositions in course or grade level	11	24	49	16
Utilizes pacing guides	20	21	37	22
Has unpacked essential standards	18	28	38	15
Consensus about cognitive demand	22	27	39	12
Priority #4 – Develop and deploy common formative assessments				
Able to match assessment strategy with LT (Learning Target)	40	24	26	10
Has developed CFAs (Common Formative Assessments)	48	23	22	8
Has set proficiency criteria	54	21	19	7
Uses CFA results to identify students who need more time and support	51	19	20	10

Rapid City Area Schools - PLC Survey Feedback

Please find below an analysis of the RCAS District data from the initial PLC Survey:

District
Feedback based on Priority #1 – Shared understanding of PLC concepts: • A majority of the RCAS staff is developing a shared understanding of PLC concepts, processes, and language. The district needs to consider what to do for those who have not yet gained clarity on this first priority. What might the District PLC Team provide to support those who don't yet have this understanding?
Feedback based on Priority #2 - Develop high-performing collaborative teams: • Nearly all of the teams have developed norms, and a majority of the teams indicate they are focusing their collaborative work on the four critical questions. • There is a high level of "Starting to Get It or Got It" responses to all questions relating to high-performing teams. This sets the stage for success in the other priorities.
Feedback based on Priority #3 – Clarify Essential learning outcomes/power standards: • A majority of the RCAS staff are beginning the work to clarify the essential learning outcomes and power standards. Some agreement regarding specific learning targets is happening across the district. • The third and fourth priorities have not been addressed by most teams at this early stage of the work. It is to be expected that most teams have not done this work. However, for the teams that are emerging into essential standards early, what support can the District PLC team provide to both the teams that are 'ahead of the game' and the teams that are not?
Feedback based on Priority #4 – Develop and deploy common formative assessments: • Creating a shared understanding of various aspects of common formative assessment components and processes has not yet been undertaken by many, as would be expected at this point in the PLC process.
Feedback based on comments: • A common thread appears in many of the comments and it points to a need to continue to build understanding and clarity regarding the PLC components and individual's roles and responsibilities regarding the PLC process. This is anticipated at this stage of the work. • There were many comments submitted and some noted an appreciation for the PLC effort. Other comments shared concerns with focusing too much on the process and not getting to classroom application. • Another pattern referenced the issue of time. While there are no easy solutions to this, there might be ways leadership actions could lessen the stress from issues some teachers have expressed, while also creating a calm sense that this is manageable along with all the other work that is required of teachers. • Concerns over singletons emerged, but we would expect the changes being considered to the structure for those groups will change that outcome in future surveys. • Thanks to all the RCAS staff for supporting the PLC initiative throughout the district!