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# Governance Brief

## Improving Student Achievement Through Teacher Collaboration

### Introduction and background

Research reveals that teacher collaboration is one of the most effective methods of improving teachers' professional expertise and, as a result, student outcomes.<sup>1</sup> In the words of the State Board of Education English Language Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD) Framework, "School districts are at their best when teachers across the district have an expanded professional learning community they can rely upon as thoughtful partners and for tangible resources."<sup>2</sup>

While teacher collaborative groups go by a variety of names including communities of practice, critical friends, teacher collaborative networks, and professional learning communities, they all share a common focus. Their goal is to promote collegial dialogue focused on student data as a means of improving teacher practice and student learning. In this article such collaborative groups of teachers who meet regularly to improve their practice and foster student achievement will be described as professional learning communities (PLCs).

### *How professional learning communities work*

Research indicates at least three ways in which PLCs support student learning by providing teachers with opportunities to:

1. Review student data and share expertise to tailor instruction and curriculum to student needs
2. Improve professional practices through sharing ideas, experiences, and strategies related to instruction and curriculum
3. Work with colleagues from across the grade span to develop systematic learning pathways so students can more easily build knowledge and skills as they progress from one grade to the next

Through participation in effective PLCs, teachers learn to analyze students' work and discuss ways to improve their instruction and/or curriculum and how to measure these improvements. Teachers share experience, expertise, and questions as they examine data that indicate how their students are doing. These group interactions facilitate the flow of information, sharing of resources, and support for specific actions.

The underlying premise of PLCs—borne out by the emerging research—is that ongoing, job-embedded professional development of teacher practices will improve student learning. An important contributor to the success of PLCs as an approach to this ongoing professional development is that PLCs shift the focus away from an individual's professional knowledge and toward group professional knowledge. This shift to an emphasis on the group's professional expertise expands the pool of information and experience on which teachers can draw as they take this collective knowledge back into their individual classrooms and call on it to inform their instruction.

### *Establishing and supporting successful professional learning communities*

Developing the processes and relationships necessary to the success of PLCs takes considerable time and effort.<sup>3</sup> True collaboration among teachers is not the current norm. Schools have traditionally been environments characterized by insular classrooms in which teachers work alone and interact privately with their students. Effective PLCs require teachers to move away from these norms and toward relinquishing some of their traditional autonomy. Teacher collaboration also necessitates that teachers reveal their students' work and open their classroom practice to others. School leaders can have an important impact on the success of PLCs by designing effective change processes.

## Research

All teachers — from novices to veterans — can benefit from effective and well-implemented PLCs. Research indicates the following best practices in PLCs will likely result in gains in student learning:

1. **Data-driven discussions:** PLC discussions focused on student data to ensure student needs are met.
2. **Trust:** A safe environment in which honest communication and mutual respect supports open dialogue.
3. **Time:** Frequent meetings so teachers can respond to data and address students' immediate learning needs.
4. **Engagement:** Full engagement of all PLC teachers in improving curriculum and instruction.
5. **Focused leadership:** Leadership commitment to align PLCs with other district and school site initiatives.

These practices and the research that supports them are described in detail below.

### 1. Data-driven discussions

Researchers are discovering that teachers in PLCs that engage in deep exploration and discussion focused on student data are more likely to improve their classroom practices. Student data encompass student information of many kinds, for example, observations, work samples, test scores, and other student-generated material. In two separate studies, researchers from UC Berkeley and Stanford came to the same conclusion: they found that PLC participants must make instructional and curricular decisions based on student data to improve student outcomes. Conversely, PLCs that do not closely examine student data do not significantly change their instruction or curriculum.<sup>4,5</sup>

### 2. Trust

Studies indicate that successful PLCs are dependent on the contributions of all members. In order to facilitate this level of contribution, teachers must have a safe environment that supports reflective dialogue to evaluate their current instructional strategies and curriculum. A safe environment can be defined as one in which positive relationships are evident and there is honest communication based on mutual respect. If there is a lack of trust in the discussions, self-reflection will be limited and change will be unlikely. Trust is closely associated with social capital. Social capital is a network of relationships that facilitates the flow of information, resources and actions. In a comprehensive study conducted in Chicago public schools, researchers found that central to all elements of an effective school are the trusting relationships that facilitate the social capital within and outside the school community.

A “before and after” example reveals how teachers can shift away from individualism toward collaboration through PLC participation. Before participating in a PLC, a teacher was asked what might help her to improve her instruction. She responded, *“I’ve been doing this so long I can’t really think of anything. Maybe to be left alone to do my job.”* After working in a PLC, she expressed a different view, noting that the weekly meetings led to student improvements in her classroom and, *“It was great to have time and divide up the workload. I’m able to share my ideas and learn from my colleagues. Even if we don’t have the same students, together we can figure out what they need a lot better.”*

Cultivating trust and social capital throughout the district is crucial to the implementation of effective PLCs.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Time

Early PLC research demonstrates that allocating enough time to allow for frequent meetings and effective conversations is an essential component of successful PLCs. This ensures that the PLC discussions are based on the immediate needs of students. The duration of the meetings must also be adequate to allow teachers to thoroughly analyze the data. Uninterrupted, non-negotiable, dedicated time is necessary to examine student data and determine needed improvements in curriculum and instruction. Teachers must be able to respond to the data in real time so that students' immediate learning needs are addressed. However creating time alone will not guarantee the success of a PLC. The allocated time must be dedicated to examining student data and improving instruction based on what teachers learn from those data and what they learn from each other about practice.<sup>7</sup>

### 4. Engagement

Case studies have determined that all teachers in PLCs need to be engaged in the process: teachers need to share a collective sense of engagement in the work and goal of improving curriculum and instruction. Teacher engagement in PLCs means that teachers take responsibility for sharing student data, contributing to problem solving, and assuming an obligation to use the ideas generated and report the outcomes. All teachers in the professional learning community need to commit themselves to the PLC process and hold themselves accountable to adopt the discussed classroom practices. Research has documented that without engagement, teachers are unlikely to enact the discussed actions back in their classrooms.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Focused leadership

In a study of 21 states, researchers found that when districts had too many competing new initiatives their effectiveness was diluted. These findings indicate that for PLC initiatives to succeed, district leaders need to align them with other initiatives and create cohesive systems across the district and at individual school sites, strongly focus their leadership efforts, and provide the necessary resources to fully support implementation of PLCs.<sup>9</sup>

### More research needed

Multiple studies have found that PLCs are effective if they incorporate these five essential research-based practices and qualitative data are strong enough for many educators to make a valid case that a collaborative approach to professional development increases student achievement.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, more information is needed and researchers note that important support for the effectiveness of PLCs could be gained from additional studies based on longitudinal student achievement data.

### Summary

Research indicates that well-implemented PLCs can improve teacher practice and raise student achievement. To be effective, PLCs necessitate a change in professional practice: they run counter to current school norms, requiring teachers to move beyond the familiar silos of traditional classrooms. There are five elements that school leaders should address when implementing PLCs:

- » Centering teacher discussions on student data
- » Creating trusting environments
- » Providing adequate time for discussions
- » Engaging teachers in the PLC process
- » Aligning PLCs with other district initiatives

### State policy context

When the California State Legislature passed the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), it created both greater flexibility and greater responsibility for school district governance teams. School boards and districts now have the flexibility to decide how to invest funds in ways that will improve academic instruction and increase levels of student achievement, and they will be held accountable for the results of these investments through their Local

Control and Accountability Plans. LCFF is being implemented at the same time as a huge change in curriculum and instruction: the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In choosing to invest some of their LCFF funds to provide resources for ongoing professional development in the form of PLCs, districts can concurrently improve teacher practices, align instruction with CCSS, and raise student academic outcomes.

### District policy implications

School districts allocate, on average, 80% of their budgets for personnel compensation.<sup>11</sup> Ensuring that those personnel use currently available best practices can be partially accomplished through effective PLCs. In order to do this, districts will need to prioritize teacher collaboration and allocate the necessary resources for success including: finding ways to create trusting environments, devising school schedules to accommodate time for PLCs to meet, and providing technical resources for enabling teachers to collect, aggregate, and disseminate student data.

### Questions for school boards

- » What role could PLCs play in professional development in your district?
- » Could PLCs be a part of a cohesive system that supports professional development to improve student learning?
- » Does your district have the necessary framework in place to support open lines of communication and relationships that enable the flow of reflective, professional discussions?
- » Are there ineffective professional development practices currently in use in the district and if so, might teacher collaboration strategies be a more effective choice in your district?
- » If your district has implemented PLCs, are the five, research-based necessities for success being implemented (discussing student data, creating trusting environments, providing adequate time for discussions, teacher engagement, and focused leadership)?

*Maggie Stevens, Ed.D, is an instructional coach and intervention teacher for San Rafael City Schools. She contributed this research as a fellow for CSBA.*

## Additional resources

The California Department of Education website, *Brokers of Expertise*, has substantial information on PLCs and how to implement and support teacher collaboration. [www.myboe.org](http://www.myboe.org)

## Endnotes

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