


From Isolation to Collaboration:

*Promoting Teacher Leadership
Through PLCs*

September 2008



Teacher Leadership • Research • Policy



The Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) seeks to improve student learning through developing teacher leadership, conducting practical research and raising public awareness about what must be done to ensure that every student in America has a qualified, well-supported and effective teacher. Over the past nine years, the Center's work, rooted in the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) landmark report, has sought to promote a coherent system of teacher recruitment, preparation, induction, professional development, compensation and school-design policies that could dramatically close the student achievement gap. As a small nonprofit with big ideas and ambitions to promote a true teaching profession, the Center has worked on a large range of research studies and policy development initiatives designed with the goals of cultivating leadership, spreading expertise and elevating the voices of accomplished teachers so that their knowledge of students and schools can inform the next generation of teaching policies and practices.

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through Empowering Teachers (ASSET)
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Introduction

Professional learning communities have made our school more democratic, returning the power to the teachers. We no longer look for our principal to make and hand down decisions, but we convene in our circles of influence and tap the expertise within ourselves to make the difference we wish to see in our classrooms, our school, and our community.

- 7th Grade English/Language Arts Teacher

In many schools across America, teachers enter their classrooms each morning only to close the door and teach with little to no peer interaction. While some teachers exert almost complete control over their instructional practices, their sphere of influence is typically confined to their four walls, and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues are limited. Responsibilities for critical school-wide decisions, such as budgeting, hiring, and scheduling, rest primarily with their school and district administrators. Feeling disempowered, teachers in these buildings retreat to their rooms and wait for decisions to be “handed down” from above.

At the same time that teachers tackle this professional challenge, our nation faces an impending crisis as schools struggle to attract and retain teachers who have the preparation, resources, and support required for effective instruction of all students. Research indicates that high teacher turnover is costly in its detrimental impact on schools and on student learning.¹ The development of strong professional learning communities (PLCs) has been introduced as one way to reduce the attrition rate of teachers.²

It is time that educators take cues from those in business who have promoted employee empowerment for some time. A glance at Harvard Business Review titles captures an almost endless list of case studies of and empirical investigations into how organizations’ various forms of “empowerment” enable employees to compete more effectively in the 21st century global, knowledge-based economy. Fortunately, some schools are embarking on this journey to transform from top-down hierarchies to collaborative communities of shared learning and responsibility. Working with their peers, teachers in professional learning communities (PLCs) collect and analyze classroom data, share best practices, and make instructional decisions as a team. Together, they engage in deeper learning as teaching professionals to better meet the needs of their students.

At the **Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ)**, we strongly believe that teachers are central to improving schools; therefore, for the past nine years, we have been engaged in a wide variety of policy and research initiatives aimed to promote and support high quality teachers in all classrooms. In 2003, the Center launched the **Teacher Leaders Network (TLN)** as a virtual venue for cultivating leadership, spreading expertise, and elevating the voices of highly accomplished teachers in important debates

about their profession and school reform. TLN members draw on available research evidence as they advocate for the policies and programs that these experts believe can close the achievement gap among students.


Since 2005, CTQ has been grateful for the funding provided by the **Wachovia Foundation** to support one of TLN’s major projects, the **Achieving School Success through Empowering Teachers (ASSET)** Initiative. The goal of the ASSET Initiative has been to document the efforts of schools implementing PLCs as a means of distributing leadership and empowering teachers. Over the course of the past year, approximately 100 teacher leaders from our nine ASSET schools have engaged in ongoing dialogue in a virtual community, known as ASSET Online. Specially trained teacher liaisons from each school, identified as PLC Fellows, have served as community leaders among their peers, encouraging participation and modeling positive behavior for online dialogue. The members of ASSET Online have logged hundreds of email messages, addressing critical topics such as finding time for collaboration during the school day to meeting the diverse needs of their students. From these virtual conversations, staff members at CTQ have created this document — a best policies and practices guide for promoting teacher leadership through PLCs.

Defining PLCs

Professional learning communities in the educational setting can be defined as groups of individuals committed to continuous improvement through shared values and reflection. In PLCs, teams are open to critical thinking, reflective dialogue, self-examination, and resolving issues that impede student success. Each member must be committed to the time, energy, and collaboration required to bring about lasting change in their classrooms and school.

PLCs — when implemented properly — are driven by the interest and needs of participants and based on professional inquiry into research, reflection, examination, discussion, and experimentation. Often the cycle repeats itself as new practices ignite further questions. PLCs provide participants with a network of professionals facing similar challenges. One key feature is the understanding that setting high standards

for all students is the responsibility of each individual as well as the team collectively. Membership requires not only commitment to time and energy, as stated above, but also to an examination of current practices and why those practices have been put in place, as well as whether they serve the current needs of the organization.



Podcast: PLC Fellow Erica Sullivan shares how PLCs took “teacher talk” to the level of professional collaboration.

Many schools across the country are currently using the term “professional learning community” to loosely describe groups of teachers that work together at specified times in their buildings. Unfortunately, a great majority of these schools falter in their efforts to truly create PLCs because they are not implementing them appropriately or they do not provide them with proper support. To counteract these failed attempts, Hord reviewed the literature on educational leadership and school reform and generated a list of five critical attributes for successful PLCs. These attributes include:

- **Supportive and shared leadership** in which administrators and teachers are viewed as equal partners in decision-making;
- **Collective creativity** that encourages and promotes collaborative brainstorming to solve common problems;
- **Shared values and vision** with a strong focus on what’s most important — student success;
- **Supportive conditions**, including available time and resources to implement the work of PLCs; and
- **Shared personal practice** that requires colleagues to open up their classrooms for observation, discussion, and critique.³

Extensive research has shown the power and potential of PLCs on teacher practice and ultimately student performance. Louis and Marks found, for instance, that professional communities boost student achievement because they tend toward authentic pedagogy.⁴ When teachers work in genuine PLC groups, school cultures begin to evolve as teachers explore new instructional practices and learning becomes more authentic. Tasks transform from those requiring simple rote memory and recall to more sophisticated, intellectually challenging activities, resulting in higher standardized test scores.⁵

Similarly, Hord discovered that in schools where PLCs are present, changes occurred for both teachers and students.⁶ Teachers decreased the time they worked in isolation, shared more responsibility for student achievement, increased their understanding of content, and adapted more quickly to change. They also became well-informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire. Meanwhile, students made larger academic gains in math, science, history, and reading (as compared to their peers in traditional schools) and decreased their rates of dropout, truancy, and absenteeism.

Podcast: PLC Fellow Cindi Rigsbee explains how PLCs supported her development as a teacher leader.



With a compelling research base and growing popularity in schools, why aren't more PLCs successful? During our online conversations this past year, the teachers of the ASSET Online virtual community noted the many challenges that often stand in the way of effective implementation and offered their own examples of exemplary strategies. What follows is a compilation of best policies and practices they recommended to support teacher leadership through PLCs.

Best Policies to Support Teacher Leadership through PLCs

School reform efforts, such as implementing professional learning communities, do not exist within a vacuum; rather, they function within the context of existing state, district, and school policies. In order for teacher leadership to be supported through PLCs, policies must be in place at all levels of the educational system to encourage shared decision-making and promote collaboration between administrators and their teachers.

State Policies

At the state level, school boards and departments of education have the opportunity to impact change in a variety of ways. For starters, they can help to revamp the requirements for school administrators, beginning with their preparation programs. These programs could take the lead of most business schools, which prepare managers with skill sets that promote distributed leadership. Yet, while some schools of education across the country have embraced the notion of shared leadership, others still promote a more top-down philosophy for school leaders, with a focus on oversight and supervision. With the ever-increasing demands in today's schools, effective principals simply cannot perform the entire scope of school leadership tasks alone. Professional learning communities offer one venue for teachers to take on more leadership involvement, but unfortunately, many future leaders are still trained in outdated and inadequate models of school leadership that fail to fully tap the rich resource of accomplished, expert teachers. As one member of ASSET Online told us:

Without the right kind of support and encouragement, PLCs can wither and become a 'going through the motions' activity. Hence my belief that the first people who should learn about, be trained in, and participate in a PLC are administrators.

Strong school performance depends on shared leadership mobilizing the collective action of individuals to produce high-quality teaching and learning. Effective leaders, who understand the tenets of distributed leadership, establish high expectations for all, provide relevant, ongoing professional development for their teachers, and ensure that the proper conditions are in place to support their efforts.⁷ Administrators-in-

training must learn how to make this happen by moving beyond traditional leadership models and instead, guiding and cultivating their teachers to become informed decision-makers in order to improve the performance in their classrooms.⁸

Principals, who are currently employed in schools and have already completed their administrator preparation programs, need access to ongoing training and support. Indeed, just as teachers need continued professional development, so do principals. School leadership academies, organized at the state level, could pair principals and teacher leaders together to learn the “nuts and bolts” of creating professional learning communities and supporting teacher leadership.

State policies can help to support these efforts by:

- Requiring administrator preparation programs to include training and education on how to implement PLCs and promote teacher leadership;
- Developing professional development courses through the state departments of education for school district leaders interested in creating PLCs;
- Allocating additional dollars to school systems for hiring teachers to serve in leadership roles as Teachers on Special Assignments (TOSAs) at their schools or district offices; and
- Evaluating administrators on their ability to share leadership and create collaborative cultures.

District Policies

Indeed, central to cultivating teacher leaders are administrators who recognize that their teachers want to improve student learning. Effective school leaders trust teachers to make responsible choices that promote student success. Administrators who do more than “go through the motions” understand there will be diversity among professional learning teams as various groups work simultaneously to achieve a range of professional goals. They recognize that PLC goals can be met in a variety of ways, so they cultivate teacher leadership by empowering teachers to set their own targets for success and outline the steps to reach them. They also realize that teachers need regular time during the school day to collaborate and plan instruction.

But even the most effective school leader can struggle to maintain focus, if districts do not support the work of teachers. For example, in several of our ASSET Online schools, district mandates dictated the topics for discussion in PLC meetings.

Podcast: PLC Fellow Lynn Flood explains how supportive school leadership empowered teachers at her school.



Principals were required to have teachers spend inordinate amounts of time reviewing standardized test data and completing forms provided by central office. As one ASSET Online community member said:

PLCs that have a singular focus on data and paperwork miss the whole point. As teachers, we don't have time to collaborate on how to meet our kids' needs because we must only talk test scores.

This teacher leader urged district officials not to lose sight of the explicit purpose of PLCs, which is to promote a collaborative teaching culture that focuses on student learning — which is defined and measured by more than test scores. True professional learning communities encourage a more holistic evaluation of teaching techniques, along with their relationship to students' academic and social progress. Most teachers report that behavioral issues and home/community factors confound teaching and learning. Collecting and analyzing student achievement data is, therefore, a significant first step to identifying areas of improvement, but fixating on numbers alone is not the answer.

When teachers face numerous demands from district administrators, they struggle to find balance in their classrooms. Myriad professional development initiatives may even present conflicting strategies, making it even more difficult for teachers to ascertain what's best for them and more importantly, their students. Taking on so many initiatives at once does not allow teachers to deeply engage in the work of their PLCs, as this ASSET Online community member reflected:

I'm often not able to master one teaching method before the district is pushing me to try out a second or third strategy.... I can't neglect the other initiatives, so I can only skim the surface. Instead of focusing in on one and doing it right, I'm touching on all of them in more of a haphazard way.

While teachers — like this one — are certainly looking for new and innovative ways to improve their instructional practice on a daily basis, time for practice and experimentation is an important commodity to ensure success. Many of our teacher leaders in ASSET Online urged district administrators to solicit teacher feedback and incorporate their responses into district policies as well. One teacher surmised:

If [the district is] serious about PLCs and making them work, why are they going against the research? Why not give teachers the time they need to focus on really impacting student learning? Why not let us choose the strategies to work on — the staff development we want or need?

By keeping the professional needs of their teachers a priority, districts can provide the support needed for successful PLCs. An ASSET Online teacher shared with his col-

leagues that just giving him the opportunity to meet and collaborate was professional development enough for him. He explained it this way:

When my teammates and I are planning and working together, it is difficult to even think about that being professional development, but it is. It is nice to switch the focus from people who are paid to tell you what works for them to knowing what can work for you.

Indeed, many school districts often forget to differentiate the professional development opportunities for their own teaching staff when they plan workshops and in-service trainings. A great source of frustration is the lack of recognition that many accomplished teachers within the district have areas of expertise that could be shared with their colleagues. A large number of our ASSET Online teachers told us that some of the best resources for professional development are their fellow teachers. Districts should honor the knowledge and skills of accomplished teachers (such as National Board Certified Teachers, for example) and promote teacher leadership by identifying and supporting individuals who can provide professional development to their peers, either face-to-face or virtually through developing hybrid teaching and district coaching roles.

Sarah Henchey, a PLC Fellow and third-year teacher who began teaching the same year we started ASSET, recalls how our initiative enriched her entry into the profession in a Teacher Magazine essay.

District policies can help to support these strategies by:

- Sharing models for creative scheduling to principals and their school leadership teams so that teachers are able to spend greater amounts of time collaborating across grade and content area;
- Limiting the number of new initiatives introduced in the district so that teachers are not overwhelmed and have the time needed to understand one reform and its components before pursuing another;
- Honoring the knowledge and skills of accomplished teachers and promoting innovation by developing hybrid teaching and district coaching roles; and
- Creating district-wide professional learning communities, both face-to-face and virtual, for teachers to collaborate across schools.

School Policies

Just as the district should place teacher empowerment at the core of their policies in support of PLCs, school-based administrators should also reinforce that idea by promoting teacher leadership. As many of our ASSET Online team members pointed out, it is one thing for school administrators to say they encourage self-directed teacher development, and completely another to take the concrete steps to ensure it. A frustrated virtual community member expressed her concern about the lack of teacher input at her school:

Training implies that teachers must depend on new or external guidance because they don't know enough about instruction to begin making serious improvements. I am made to feel that I am incapable of implementing best practices without following a prescription or a canned program.

By developing school policies that allow teachers to select their areas for professional improvement within their PLCs, school administrators support teacher leadership and the bottom-up approach. Principals and teachers should, therefore, work collaboratively to achieve shared understanding and promote consistent, coherent, and properly aligned goals.

Once goals have been delineated, additional support (perhaps through funding) is needed for teachers to develop their knowledge and skills. Teachers cannot — and should not — be expected to increase their learning, without the materials and resources required to do so. Offering time for teachers to attend conferences, finding sub coverage so that they can observe their colleagues, and providing professional development dollars to purchase books are just a few of the examples generated by the ASSET Online community.

Historically, principals have harbored sole responsibility for setting the vision and evaluating the school's success. Insights from our ASSET Online community have shown, however, that effective administrators look to their teachers for information when they want an accurate picture of the school's progress, as well as when they want ideas on how to improve its functioning. The teacher quoted at the beginning of this document offered a glimpse of what a school might look like, when a principal is willing to share leadership:

Professional learning communities have made our school more democratic, returning the power to the teachers. We no longer look for our principal to make and hand down decisions, but we convene in our circles of influence and tap the expertise within ourselves to make the difference we wish to see in our classrooms, our school, and our community.

Consequently, school policies can promote teacher leadership through PLCs by:

- Preparing and empowering all teachers to make decisions about their professional learning needs;
- Providing funding and support for teachers to pursue these needs (through conferences, book studies, etc.); and
- Soliciting evaluative feedback from PLCs and then sharing “lessons learned” with parents, fellow administrators, and district leaders.

Best Practices to Support Teacher Leadership through PLCs

With strong policies at the state, district, and school levels in place to support teacher leadership through PLCs, teachers and administrators can shift their focus to implementing these reform efforts in the most efficient and effective manner. That is, they can ensure that they are utilizing the most productive strategies to organize PLCs, develop shared goals, and build trust and community. What follows is an overview of best practices shared by our ASSET Online community members.

How to Organize PLCs

As previously mentioned, many schools use the term “professional learning community” to loosely describe a variety of team configurations in their buildings. To truly achieve PLCs in the fashion in which they are intended, they must have structured organization. Teachers may be committed to improving student learning through their PLCs; however, if their efforts for collective inquiry and decision-making are not seamlessly integrated into their busy workday, PLC meetings simply become one more thing to check off their “to do” lists. For teachers to invest their efforts in both the long-term and short-term academic interventions of PLCs, there must be a strategic approach to the issues of time, participant roles, and behavior.

When school administrators schedule regular PLC meeting times into a teacher’s workday, it demonstrates their commitment to supporting the PLC process and goals. Some schools have instead chosen to reserve PLC time for select workdays, as this ASSET Online community member noted:

Our school district has delayed opening days. I agree that we need time to plan together and have professional conversations ... but I think they need to be part of the regular day. They need to be seamless and fluid ... not reserved for just special days.

By integrating PLCs into the school schedule, rather than squeezing them in here or there on random occasion, school administrators enable their teachers to focus on collaborative and reflective practice on a regular basis. At the same time, school leaders should be careful not to overwhelm teachers by requiring too frequent meetings. Members of each PLC should be able to determine how often they meet during the

Podcast: PLC Fellow Jill Foshee reflects on how PLCs paved the way for strong working relationships across grade levels and content areas at her school.



school day (whether several times a week, once a week, or less often), within a range of acceptable guidelines. To maximize productivity of the teams and ensure professional development of all members, PLCs should take the time to set their own schedules that work best for their goals and expectations.

Once a time has been established for PLCs to meet, members should be expected to generate agendas defining how the time will be utilized. Several teacher leaders in ASSET Online expressed the importance of pre-establishing focus for meetings. One middle school teacher shared with the group:

Getting together to hash out the nuts and bolts of PLCs and having an agenda ... really helps everyone stay focused. It eliminates sidebar conversation [because] everyone is aware of the present discussion.... I think it is the best thing that could have happened at our school.

Truly successful PLCs promote the participation and leadership of all members, not just an eager few. Being proactive and decidedly firm about full participation will combat long-term apathy. An ASSET Online member offered this suggestion to encourage participation:

[At my PLC meetings] it concerned me that there were ten teachers present and few seemed involved in making the agenda or participating. There were comments and debate, but very little inquiry and questions for improving practice. Our goal with PLCs is to learn, so I enjoy rotating the group roles. Allowing each member to facilitate, keep time, record notes, etc. really enhances the participation and accountability of every person.

To promote productivity during meetings, many ASSET Online members also recommended setting norms for the group, including expectations for staying on-task and being respectful of time. In addition, several noted the importance of establishing norms of professionalism. This became particularly clear as they described colleagues who did not adhere to the norms and disrupted their meetings. One community member shared her personal struggle:

PLCs [at my school] do have norms about staying on topic, being on time, and adhering to time frames; however, admittedly, myself and others consistently bend (perhaps to the point of breaking) these norms. As someone who tends to avoid confrontation and tries to practice the manners her mother ingrained in her, I find it difficult to address these issues. This is especially true when you work with colleagues whom you consider to be close friends.

Developing a cohesive and consistent set of norms for PLC participation takes time and commitment by all of its members. By clearly identifying undesirable conduct at the onset, members are made well aware of their professional expectations. An ASSET Online colleague, who has led professional development on PLCs, provided this recommendation for helping to set norms for expected behavior:

I usually ask teams to think of six behaviors they value in other team members and to write each one on a different sticky note. Then I ask them to share and cluster similar behaviors together. This allows them to establish a norm to address each set of behaviors that they want to see happen in their team.

In summation, the ASSET Online teacher leaders recommend the following best practices for organizing PLCs:

- Establishing regular times, within the school day, to conduct PLC meetings;
- Allowing PLC team members to determine the frequency of meetings, within a range of acceptable guidelines;
- Preparing an agenda to outline items for discussion and deliberation in advance of meetings;
- Rotating roles and sharing responsibilities for PLC meeting tasks;
- Preparing teachers to use research evidence; and
- Generating and enforcing a set of norms for participation and professionalism.

How to Develop Shared Goals for Teaching and Learning

The goal of professional learning communities should be continuous inquiry, improvement, and achievement of school-wide goals. Too often, however, time is focused simply on the examination of student test scores, without discussion about the teaching practices that led to those results. PLC meetings should be approached as opportunities for brainstorming and problem-solving, with multiple stakeholders bringing ideas and strategies to the table for experimentation and reflection.

As PLCs agree upon meeting norms and structures, it seems only logical that they also set working goals and mechanisms for evaluation. Allowing teachers to set their own achievement benchmarks validates their professionalism and empowers them to seek the means to reach their goals. This is not the norm in many schools, however. Many teachers simply are not accustomed to searching for research-based solutions. They often get stuck in what they've always done, without looking for new solutions. Consequently, one ASSET Online member urged her colleagues to change their way of thinking:

We, as teachers, need to accept the responsibility of basing our instruction on research. I would love to think that there is a place where all of the talk is about how to improve instruction because it's in the best interest of the child.

By using relevant data and research, teachers become the drivers of change in their classrooms and schools. Once teachers begin using collaborative discussions and analysis to inform their decision-making process as a group of practitioners, they can start to function as a true professional learning community. Throughout the year, PLCs should revisit their goals and tools of measurement to keep the process fluid and dynamic. One teacher shared her school's approach to this task:

At the end of each quarter, there is formative feedback. Then, at the end of the year, we look for summative results. All of this is based not upon what the teachers accomplished, but what students had learned as a result of the teacher's PLC.

Feedback throughout the year is one of the most crucial components to a successful PLC. It is important to provide regular opportunities for teachers to reflect on the impact of new teaching and learning efforts on their classrooms.



Podcast: PLC Fellow Karen Fichter discusses the setbacks and successes of integrating PLCs at her school.

As previously stated, many teachers are not used to discussing their work in this manner. In fact, some may be outright resistant because they feel pressured to discuss their more immediate concerns and questions, such as problems with classroom management and student motivation, as this ASSET Online member described:

Team and department meetings are starting to move away from the stereotypical gripe sessions to productive discussions on teaching and learning. Teachers are concentrating more on effective student achievement and less on improper behavior. While there is still room for improvement in the area of school-wide communications, we are doing what we can to get everyone on the same page and to really embrace the intent of a true professional learning community.

It is important for PLCs to function as working groups with agendas, goals, and norms — all focused on teaching and learning. PLCs are not meant to be an extension of the teacher's lounge, where gossip, general frustrations and grievances are aired for all to hear, with little to no resolution or problem-solving. One ASSET Online teacher leader found the change in dynamics at her school to be refreshing:

Most 'teacher's lounge' conversation [in previous years] centered on venting about students with behavior problems and difficult parents. It is so refreshing now to walk into a school every day where teachers are talking about best practices and are reflecting with each other about lessons.

Valuing everyone's contributions is critical to creating shared goals. Novice teachers should feel as much a part of PLCs as their more seasoned peers. As a result, efforts must be made to offer all participants time to share and respect for their ideas. In the end, everyone can benefit from this arrangement, explained a middle school literacy coach in ASSET Online:

The members of my PLC range in teaching experience from near double-digits to a first year teacher; however, I think that we all recognize and respect our independent strengths, passions, and interests that we bring to the table. It is often the new teachers who bring the most cutting-edge strategies to the school. Because they are just out of colleges [that are] conducting some of the recent research, they often have such great ideas and methods; sometimes they just need the content of the curriculum to make it all come together. PLCs are such great vehicles: experienced teachers are grounded in content and new teachers have really great ideas for teaching.

In previous sections, the value of accomplished teachers and their expertise as sources of instructional, pedagogical and institutional knowledge was emphasized. Ideally, PLCs would have a balance of novice and expert teachers to work together and design research projects so all teachers may experiment with new instructional strategies and practices, before assessing their effectiveness. Strategies for experimentation and collaboration include classroom observations and school-wide learning walks. Opening up classrooms can help teachers gain better perspective on their colleagues' teaching styles. An added benefit of PLCs then is the opportunity to share and work toward best practices. An ASSET Online participant offered up this success story from her district:

Cindi Rigsbee, a PLC Fellow and 2008 North Carolina Teacher of the Year, explains how a swift initiation into the world of PLCs changed her thinking on teaching as a profession in an essay for Teacher Magazine.

[My colleagues and I] thought we came up with such good ideas that we wanted other science teachers to hear what we were doing. We started sending out a brief newsletter (no wikis in those days). Eventually we got a group of science teachers from the district to get together each summer to demonstrate face-to-face what all of us were doing.

With these ideas in mind, the ASSET Online teacher leaders recommend the following best practices for developing shared goals for teaching and learning:

- Building school goals from the bottom-up and allowing teachers to set their own benchmarks for teaching and learning;
- Encouraging and expecting teachers to explore research-based best practices;
- Evaluating PLC progress toward goals multiple times throughout the year;
- Focusing PLC conversations on teaching and learning;
- Recognizing the value and importance all teachers have in contributing to student success; and
- Supporting teachers who are interested in completing classroom observations and school-wide learning walks.

How to Build Trust and Community

In our ASSET Online community conversations, PLC expert and CTQ consultant Anne Jolly wrote, “The best professional development occurs when teachers work together in teams to change, update, and improve instruction.” But as we’ve mentioned, in most schools across America, teachers are more accustomed to working isolated and independent in their own classrooms with little to no interaction with their peers. PLCs, therefore, require teachers to “step out of their comfort zones” and build trust and community.

Developing collaborative communities requires the full cooperation of the faculty, staff, and students. One of the ASSET Online teacher leaders made a keen observation of how these three stakeholder groups can work to strengthen teaching practices and morale:

My PLC partner and I thought we were working in a vacuum, but the real interest came when our strongest advertisers — the students — started the buzz about what was going on in our classrooms. Since we are both relatively new teachers, we are still learning what works for our kids and our classes ... it is great to have teammates to bounce ideas off of and to say ‘whoa’ when you may have gone too far. I would hate to have to do all this important work alone.

Not all teachers are ready to make the transition to becoming collaborative partners. An ASSET Online colleague shared this frustrating experience: “Just this week, I had someone say to me, ‘You can share your lesson with me, but if I don’t like it, I just won’t

use it.” While the middle school teacher recognized that others have the right to select their own ideas, she worried about the feeling behind this statement. She went on to say, “Granted, we all have permission not to use anything and everything given to us, but how can we make others more willing to share and more receptive to the idea of sharing?”

For starters, the ASSET Online community recommended developing an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. When teachers feel comfortable taking risks, they are not fearful of repercussions and are willing to try new things. Administrators must offer teachers numerous opportunities to experiment with new ideas and test out their effectiveness. Having school leaders join in on PLC conversations is one way to build this trust. Modeling this type of behavior is also critical. Principals themselves can experiment with new ideas, based on conversations they have with their teachers, and openly reflect on their success.

Podcast: PLC Fellow Sarah Henchey recalls how PLCs provided an opportunity to promote the work of both core content and elective teachers at her school.



When colleagues do not jump on board immediately, teachers in PLCs can often struggle to figure out how to react to their colleagues’ hesitation. As one teacher leader lamented, “I’ve tried to isolate the pockets of angst, but any movement toward bettering instruction spirals into pessimism. So, enlighten me on how to re-direct negativity.”

Her colleagues suggested that some reticent PLC members simply may need time to digest this new way of thinking. Her fellow ASSET Online team member said it well:

Most schools and systems that undertake PLCs do not actually understand the magnitude of the change they are undertaking. Working in teams is a fairly common practice in schools, but working in PLCs is something new and different entirely! Helping colleagues see the difference between PLCs and ordinary meetings is a real challenge.

Others recommended providing mentoring and support from fellow team members. Providing time to share concerns — whether with the full group or individually — is an important first step to alleviating anxiety and apprehension, as this ASSET Online member reflected:

I look across the table at my best friends in our meetings — teachers I have gone to dinner and concerts with, colleagues who I’ve cheered with during the births of children, and cried with after deaths in the family. When we have strong personal relationships with each other, even if there is one ‘naysayer’ in the group, I believe that our positive energy is contagious. Problems can be worked out as those of us who trust each other coax the others to respond more positively.

That’s why the ASSET Online teacher leaders recommend the following best practices for building trust and community:

- Cultivating an atmosphere that supports and encourages risk-taking — departing from the tendency to teach to short-term gains in standardized test scores;
- Modeling experimentation and reflection through open conversations with teachers and administrators;
- Providing time and space for teachers to come on board with PLCs;
- Offering mentoring and support from colleagues on the value of PLCs;
- Establishing regular time to share concerns; and
- Building virtual learning communities, which give teachers more opportunities to share and learn 24/7 with colleagues at their schools and beyond.

Conclusion

Changing a school culture to support teacher leadership through PLCs is a complex endeavor requiring strong commitments, new skills and understandings, changing practices and structures, and a willingness to take risks with openness and respect among colleagues. Effective policies and practices must be in place to ensure a smooth transition from a top-down school culture to a bottom-up environment, where teachers and administrators share responsibility for inquiry, reflection, and decision-making. Examining teaching practices and student learning outcomes is a critical part of developing true professional learning communities, and a high level of trust among colleagues must exist before open dialogue can occur. An ASSET Online teacher leader, who is new to the profession, candidly shared his experience:

On a personal level, I was attracted to PLCs from the very beginning. As a novice teacher, I looked for support at nearly every turn. My PLC partner taught the same grade and content area I did. We were both willing to share and collaborated to accomplish much more than if we worked alone. While we didn’t realize it at the time, we were in fact engaging in

the 'best practices' discussion that is the foundation of PLCs. 'How did that lesson work for you?' was a question we asked each other time and time again. On many occasions, we re-taught lessons that didn't hit home the first time with students. By incorporating teaching and learning strategies we discussed in our PLC, the revisited lesson made a bigger impact on student understanding and engagement. Next year, I will have a new team with different colleagues, but I will take all of these experiences with me. Armed with the powerful knowledge of how successful a strong PLC can be, I look forward to meeting a new group of partners, organizing the school year, and implementing a new PLC all over again.

While our ASSET Online schools have just begun their journey to establishing collaborative cultures and promoting teachers as leaders through PLCs, numerous benefits are already apparent:

- New teachers, engaged with and supported by colleagues, are beginning their teaching career with expectations for collaboration and active roles as leaders;
- Experienced teachers are taking on new leadership roles that draw on their knowledge, skills, and dispositions;
- Teachers are systematically examining data to assess the progress of their students and to learn from one another about strategies for effective instruction; and
- Students are experiencing increased consistency among teachers and administrators in school policies and expectations as well as benefiting from instruction that is informed by their learning needs.

These lessons have prompted the Center for Teaching Quality to draw more heavily on and expand our virtual community for all of our teacher leadership efforts. In the future, we hope to continue building the capacity of teacher leaders to effectively use data to assess school needs, promote teacher-generated solutions for school improvement, and advocate for effective policy to support shared leadership in schools all across this country.

Endnotes

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