# 2016 Educator Effectiveness Webinar Series
# Creating and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities
# Q&A with Stephanie Hirsh, Ph.D.
# August 25, 2016

In this webinar, Dr. Stephanie Hirsh, Executive Director of Learning Forward, presented the research on effective PLCs and shared her experiences in creating, assessing, and leading PLCs. This Q&A addressed questions participants had for Dr. Hirsh following the webinar. The webinar recording and PowerPoint presentation are also available.

## Questions

1. How would you suggest PLC's be systemized while also allowing for team level autonomy?

   Dr. Hirsh suggests the following ways to systemize a PLCS while still allowing for team level autonomy: clarify district and school priorities, systemize the process, ensure expertise in implementing it, and allow autonomy in the choice of learning strategies and lesson design for achieving educator and student learning goals.

2. Can you speak to varied schedules and ways to keep the PLC connected?

   There are a variety of ways to keep PLCs connected with varied schedules. Dr. Hirsh states that educators can accomplish this by utilizing shared drives and google docs in-between meetings. Educators can also ensure the PLC is connected by common planning time and in service days.

3. How can we ensure equality in participation and contribution?

   Equality in participation and contribution to PLCs can be accomplished by having supportive and shared leadership with shared values and a shared vision, collective creativity, supportive conditions, and peer support. The more everyone understands the work of the PLC the more prepared they are to share leadership and responsibility of the work. Assigning roles and responsibilities can contribute to equity in participation.

4. How do you sustain the effort and continue to create buy in from teachers who use it more as housekeeping than answering the 4 essential questions?

   Buy in and accountability for results are equally important. Buy in comes from empowerment to implement the process as well as evidence of impact of the investment. Accountability for using time in a way that leads to the intended results is also important. Continuing professional learning for PLC facilitators, building networks across PLCs, and elevating and celebrating results increases buy in and shared accountability.

5. What regulations are associated with the PLC, and what is the best strategy for creating and building membership especially when there is no professional organization in place?

At the beginning of the presentation, Dr. Hirsh discusses six assumptions about PLCs: 1) they are focused on learning for both its members and students, 2) adults in the organization must learn together during their routine work day to ensure students learn, 3) PLC team members are intentional about setting their own learning goals based on student needs, 4) PLC teams work interdependently to improve their practices, 5) PLC teams collect and analyze data to apply and adjust practices to improve, and 6) PLC teams focus on measurable outcomes. Along with these assumptions are the requirements for effective PLCs as cited by research (Hord, 1997); these requirements are supportive and shared leadership, collective creative, shared values and visions, supportive conditions (physical and person) shared practice, and peer support.

6. How do you keep teachers accountable and still allow them the freedom to work without an administrator being present?

Dr. Hirsh explains the importance of community members of PLCs having mutual respect and regard for one another, being consistent with their interactions and mindful with conflict, since it only helps to build trust and contribute to a smoothly functioning PLC. She also explains that teachers must develop their own knowledge and skills about the PLC cycle, invest deeply in the process and its outcomes, apply the learning, and then document and report the results; this way, teachers are accountable, have the freedom to develop their own learning without the presence of an administrator. (Also see points in question 1)

7. Do you recommend a particular mentoring model? What would you consider to be an interactive, innovative method to keep enthusiasm of the community up?

Buy in and accountability for results are equally important. Buy in comes from empowerment to implement the process as well as evidence of impact of the investment. Accountability for using time in a way that leads to the intended results is also important. Continuing professional learning for PLC facilitators, building networks across PLCs, and elevating and celebrating results increases buy in and shared accountability.

8. What is the administrator's and principal's roles in PLC meetings, and to what extent should they involve themselves?

It is the role of administrators to improve teaching and learning for all students, by improving the conditions of teaching and learning for their educators. Administrators and principals alike, must also develop their own knowledge and skills about the PLC cycle, model the application of the PLC cycle with their own team, provide leadership development and support for PLC facilitators, and create the conditions necessary for success. Administrators can observe and provide feedback to ensure that teams are on track and focused.

9.  How can you build a PLC through technology (i.e. Distance methods)?

Dr. Kozak describes the Professional Learning Research Alliance (PLRA) which focuses on various research topics including how online learning communities can achieve the goals of traditional professional communities. PLRAs offer a wide range of technical assistance to partners to ensure that schools are cultivating professional education to improve student achievement. Becoming involved in a PLRA also allows stakeholders to collaborate to identify common challenges to and opportunities for professional learning, share and exchange perspectives and experiences, and engage in evidence-based inquiry to develop, implement, and evaluate professional development programs that meet their needs and circumstances.

Dr. Kozak notes that there are online PLCs with teams of educators who use digital and mobile communication technologies at least part of the time to communicate and collaborate on learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. There is also a partially online, hybrid model of PLCs which combine online and face-to-face interaction. Dr. Kozak describes a study that examined whether online learning communities can achieve the goals of traditional professional learning communities. The results indicate that the internet and mobile communication technologies have greatly expanded opportunities for teams of educators to reflect and collaborate with each other, with experts outside their schools and outside their districts for learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. These electronic platforms provide access to knowledge and resources without the usual limitations of time, space, and pace.

10. How do you create a cadre of PLC leaders?

During the webinar, Dr. Kozak recommends that educators and others participate in the Learning Forward training, in order to start the process of creating a cadre of PLC leaders. Dr. Hirsh states that it is the district's responsibility to be the leader and provide the resources necessary to ensure that PLCs can be formed.

11. How do you address regional learning communities vs. building level-- are there different strategies for those differences? What are best practices in setting expectations for length of time a learning community will last?

Distance PLCs are plausible options for those who are not in contact with other people on a daily basis. As mentioned above, PLCs may be addressed through technology by working with the Professional Learning Research Alliance (PLRA), which Dr. Michael Kozak mentioned and discussed during the presentation. Being involved and reaching out to a PLRA provides educators and school leaders with focused, data-driven approaches to help SEAs, LEAs, and institutions of higher education obtain the knowledge necessary for achieving an effective PLC environment despite being long-distance. PLRAs offer a wide range of technical assistance to partners to ensure that schools are cultivating professional education to improve student achievement. Becoming involved in a PLRA also allows stakeholders to collaborate to identify

common challenges to and opportunities for professional learning and share and exchange perspectives and experiences.

In terms of expectations for length of time for a PLC, it is important to keep in mind that the PLC should be built to last long term so that efforts to improve education are sustained. Dr. Hirsh notes that quick fixes do not typically work.

12. How do you encourage teachers in submitting/sharing continually?

During the presentation, Dr. Hirsh explains how, in order to contribute to trust and to a smoothly functioning community, community members must demonstrate respect and regard to each other in terms of their interactions and how they confront conflict. Changes in school culture and practice happen when teachers and administrators focus on building trust within collaborative contexts, and in an effective learning community, members bond around a commitment to shared ideals, ideas, and norms. She states how only regular and open communications can build trust. (Also see response to Question #3.)

13. Can you touch on the absolute first steps for a building administrator?

Dr. Hirsh explains how administrators and school leaders are essential, in order to create and sustain effective PLCs. The first step administrators can take, is to develop their own knowledge and skills about the PLC cycle, model the application of the PLC cycle with their own team, and provide leadership development and support for PLC facilitators. Administrators must also create the conditions necessary for success.

14. How do you set up PLCs in a small school setting?

In small school settings, it is mostly the principal's role to ensure that PLCs are being set up properly. Similar to administrators, principals must ensure PLCs are properly set up by developing their own knowledge about them and providing the proper leadership and support for facilitators. More specifically, Dr. Hirsh explains that it is the job of school leaders to create a supportive and collaborative culture in the following ways: emphasize that teachers can succeed by learning and working, allocate time for collaboration during the school day, guide PLCs toward self-governance, and make data accessible. In small school settings the shared goal will need to be one that has applicability across all grade levels.

15. How do you use PLCs with educators of ELLs?

Dr. Hirsh states that the bottom line is, PLCs improve the teacher and learning of *all* students: EL students, students with disabilities, specialists on faculty for these students, and families and caregivers of these students. When schools and leaders focus on collective responsibility for all students, PLCs allow staff to apply principles of social justice and equity as a way to transform discourse and address broader systemic inequities facing students and faculty who may be

marginalized. Establishing shared goals for ELL outcomes will enable all PLCs to leverage their shared commitment, expertise, and learning. This shared focus should also result in net less work for all PLC members as new learning and solutions can be shared from team to team and school to school.

16. Is the PLC concept supported in the new ESSA legislation? Where and how?

ESSA supports the allocation of funds to support professional development. The new PD definition makes reference to team-based learning aligned to student standards. Overall ESSA reinforces the importance of continuous improvement.

17. How do we create PLC's around data practice?

Dr. Hirsh explains how data must be examined in order to identify student and educator learning challenges; PLC teams must analyze available data to identify and understand the highest learning needs, and PLC team members must prepare a number of data summary statements to guide goal development. Team members need specific knowledge, skills, and supports to analyze, interpret, and use data effectively.

18. How do you get buy in from staff?

In order to engage staff in a PLC, the school community must provide a setting in which staff can be active, reflective, learning-oriented, and improvement-focused. This type of environment can be fostered through sharing relevant data and making informed decisions about how the PLC will operate, including how and where it will meet, in order to make PLCs easily accessible to staff. Also, an important component of PLCs is sharing results on how well goals are being achieved. (Also see responses to Questions #3 and #12.)

19. How do you move beyond group preconceptions about a topic?

In a high-performing PLC, members consider ideas based on analysis and interpretation of data. Conversations about any topic should be open and improvement-focused.

20. How do you overcome conflict in a grade-level PLC?

Productive PLC discussions should be centered around the analysis and interpretation of relevant data. Members of a high-performing PLC are open about their ideas and strategies, keeping in mind that all members are united by a common goal of improvement. Setting and using norms to guide member interactions is important to avoiding conflict or addressing it appropriately.

21. While social media provides an opportunity for PLCs to flourish, how can we create space for more face-to-face active participation with everyone's hectic schedules?

While the use of online collaboration can support a PLC, face-to-face meeting time is even more important, time should be allocated for members to meet in a space that is conducive to active collaboration, at a regular meeting time that is consistent week to week.

22. How can PLCs and PD be incorporated with administrators?

School district leaders and principals should develop a knowledge of the PLC cycle, and model the application of the PLC cycle with their own team. District supported PLCs for administrators can lead to learning and solutions that can result in net less work for everyone. Administrators and school leadership can foster a supportive, collaborative PLC culture by emphasizing that teachers can succeed by learning and working together, allocating time for collaboration during the school day, guiding PLCs towards self-governance, and making relevant data easily accessible.

23. How would you characterize the difference, if any, between the work of collaborative planning teams and professional learning communities?

PLCs are communities with shared goals based on analysis and interpretation of data. PLCs have accountability to and responsibility for the learning and growth of all members, and there is a focus on individual and collaborative professional study, as well as the analysis, application, and reflection of the ongoing improvements in professional practice and student achievement. Collaborative planning often is short term or solely focused on the production of products.

24. How do you implement effective PLCs with limited time and schedules that restrict participation?

In order for PLCs to fit into members' busy schedules, meeting logistics need to be conducive to regular, ongoing collaboration. The location should allow for serious interaction, resources should be made readily available to members, and there should be a time identified to meet weekly (at a minimum). The size of the goal should directly relate to the time allocated for PLCs. If PLC time is limited in the beginning – it is important to select a goal that can be accomplished within the time frame allocated. In addition, success with limited time may offer justification and advocacy for more time.

25. How do you make sure that PLCs do not revert to planning periods?

In order for PLCs to be effective, discussion should be intentional and guided by the PLC's predefined goals. To ensure that meetings do not revert to planning periods, members should implement a structure that allows them to monitor and assess the progress of the PLC in achieving their desired outcomes.

26. How do you think this can be replicated with non-profits collaborating together?

The elements of an effective PLC (supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared practice), can be fostered in any work community, as long as members are committed to continuous improvement and a common goal.

27. What artifacts should be required of a productive PLC group?

In order to foster a high-performing PLC, members should analyze and evaluate relevant evidence and data related to student and teacher performance in order to identify the highest learning needs. When examining the available data and evidence, PLC team members can prepare data summary statements to guide goal development. Regular public updates for other teams can be useful as well.

28. What are some recommended resources about evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of PLCs?

In order for PLC members to monitor progress, they should develop and implement a monitoring plan, document the PLC impact, and communicate results. PLC teams should review the impact of learning and practices on their theory of action, and should be engaged in an ongoing process to observe, assess, and reflect on data, and adjust their practice accordingly. Dr. Hirsh shared the Innovation Configuration maps included on the Learning Forward website which provide helpful tools for making sure a community's practices are consistent with effective PLCs. They are essentially rubrics for practice.

29. How can teachers of different disciplines and grade levels best provide support and insight for each other as a PLC?

PLCs allow for all educators and stakeholders to interact with each other as peers, striving toward a common goal of improvement. Educators from different disciplines and grade levels can support each other by sharing their own experiences with each other and engaging in open and honest discussion about the relevant needs of their classrooms.

30. What is a good PLC model for related service providers?

Effective PLCs encourage collaboration both within and beyond school-based communities. Members can encourage further growth and development by engaging other communities, experts, districts, and universities to collaborate and share solutions. An example of how this collaboration can take place is through engagement in professional networks, where PLC members can engage with stakeholders from other communities.

31. What are some ways to foster trust in a PLC?

Trust is an essential characteristic of a high-performing PLC, and can be fostered through regular, open communication. It is also important for members to bond through a shared commitment to goals, ideals, and norms.

32. How do you balance a PLC with content planning time?

To make PLC meeting time sustainable and realistic, meeting times should be ongoing, job-embedded, and scheduled during the work day. To be most effective, meetings should be planned on a weekly basis at a minimum, and should be focused on students' results and improvement. In some schools, teachers belong to multiple PLCs – grade specific and content specific. In many places secondary teachers are organized by content. PLC time should not be a substitute for individual planning time. Both are important for teachers.

33. How do you create a PLC that includes teachers from multiple systems?

A PLC can engage a variety of stakeholders from multiple communities. PLCs are effective if they foster supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared practice. This can be done both within and across individual school communities.