# Professional Learning Communities: An Effective Mechanism for the Successful Implementation and Sustainability of Response to Intervention

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Models of response to intervention (RtI) are being widely implemented in schools across the country in order to increase effective teaching and remove barriers to student learning. The implementation of RtI is greatly facilitated when teachers and staff see themselves as a professional learning community (PLC). This article begins with an examination of the essential features of these two mechanisms and their compatibility, presents the results of survey data from 84 members of RtI Leadership Teams who participated in PLC sessions, and provides recommendations for integrating these two mechanisms to build school capacity and ensure sustainability of educational change.

Administrators, teachers, and staff are more productive and more highly motivated when a school's environment is imbued with a sense of collaboration (Birenbaum, Kimron, & Shilton, 2011; Bush & Glover, 2012; Kennedy, Deuel, Nelson, & Slavit, 2011), and the spirit of collaboration is most easily cultivated when the school's operational structure is built upon a foundation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (Schmoker, 2004). Collaboration alone does not automatically translate into enhanced student performance of course, but it greatly enhances a school's ability to adopt an approach to instructional procedures that better serve all students, including students with disabilities. Response to Intervention (RtI) is one such approach, and the implementation of RtI may be greatly facilitated when PLCs define a school's working environment. This article explores the successful interplay between RtI Leadership Teams and PLCs, including survey results from RtI Leadership Teams who participated in PLCs over the course of a year, and recommendations for blending these two mechanisms.

## Essential features of Professional Learning Communities

In this paper a PLC is defined as a group of teachers who generate timely responses to student issues that are based on intervention rather than remediation, and that generate action steps to ensure the implementation of high-quality evidence-based practices with fidelity (Hoover & Love, 2011). In PLCs, teachers learn from and with each other, and come to see themselves as a community of teachers who focus on the implementation of new ideas and practices tailored to their individual strengths and capacities such that the familiar phrase 'my students' genuinely becomes 'our students'. They reflect on their individual and collective teaching and its impact on student learning, and jointly analyze data from a variety of sources that lead to an examination of instruction where

learner-centered challenges are reframed as instructional challenges, where teaching practice is examined, where teachers observe one another, and where feedback and debriefing are consistently evident (Attard, 2012; DuFour, 2004; Morrissey, 2000; Wood, 2007).

PLCs help bridge the research-to-practice gap at the school and classroom levels because they help teachers focus on student learning, utilize data to inform instruction, and help them to come to see themselves as unique sources of information that leverage the collective skills and competences of the group. Because teachers problem-solve around real issues and teaching events in their own classrooms, they are supporting the implementation of RtI at the point of actual practice, which is all to the good.

## 'Big Ideas' of Response to Intervention

RtI models include common features such as the universal screening of all students, high quality multi-tiered instruction, frequent monitoring of student progress, and the use of learning rate over time as well as the level of an individual student's performance (Batsche, et al. 2005; Gresham, 2007; Reschly, 2005). Research-based, high-quality core instruction is provided, and when additional or supplemental instruction is found to be necessary, the focus is on specific skill areas and is matched to student need.

RtI includes ongoing progress monitoring of individual students that tracks the rate of growth, and compares it to other students or to district/state standards. Teachers therein determine the effectiveness of interventions for individual students or small groups of students, which helps them answer a number of questions: (a) Is the student achieving at benchmark levels for the age/grade? (b) If not at grade level how far behind is the student? (c) What resources and interventions are needed, both in intensity and nature? (d) If we are observing a favorable response, is the student catching up to his/her peers? The success of RtI rests on the capacity of educational professionals to collect and interpret student achievement data, and to identify and implement interventions that support student progress. It refocuses attention from identifying deficiencies to identifying research-based instructional practices that support the learning of all students in both general and special education (Bernhardt & Hebert, 2011; Byrd, 2011; Sugai & Horner, 2009).

The successful implementation of RtI requires teachers to engage in a collaborative, iterative process that depends first on an organizational structure supporting meaningful change in the school. PLCs do just that, and Table 1 illustrates a series of elements common to both RtI and PLCs, and the way they complement one another and provide mutual support.

Table 1

*Crosswalk of PLCs and RtI Leadership Teams*

| Element | PLC | RTI Leadership Team |
|---|---|---|
| Membership and Roles | Shared leadership with members representing grade levels, content areas or specialized instruction | Shared leadership with members representative of key roles, school leaders |
| Focus | School improvement;<br>Achieving essential learning/development expectations aligned with state standards | Student achievement;<br>Achieving benchmarks for grade-levels aligned with state standards |
| Vision | Shared vision, values, goals e.g. equity and access for all students | Shared vision, values, beliefs, goals e.g., increase the percentage of students demonstrating success with core instruction |
| Evidence Used | District and school data from a variety of sources drives critical analysis and inquiry,<br>Frequent common assessments,<br>Action research | School and student data drives problem-solving process,<br>Screening and progress monitoring data,<br>Systematic intervention and decision protocols |
| Communication patterns | Established meeting times,<br>Open dialogue | Established meeting times tied to data cycle |
| Collaborative Culture | Shared decision-making, Feedback loop to all faculty at designated meetings | Shared decision-making, Feedback loop to all faculty at grade-level meetings and whole school |
| Systematic Interventions | School-wide interventions to assist students who need additional instruction or support | School and classroom interventions with increasing levels of support matched to student need |

## Essential features of an RtI Leadership Team

An RtI Leadership Team is composed of representative grade-level or content-area teacher leaders and support staff who work collaboratively to implement multi-tiered levels of support for students in their school. The team engages in data-based decision-making which includes screening and monitoring of students' progress, implementing evidence-based interventions, and documenting procedural fidelity.

RtI Leadership Teams hold ongoing conversations and work collaboratively in response to questions directly related to classroom concerns such as 'What exactly do we expect all students to learn?' 'How will we respond when some students don't learn?' 'How can we further challenge students who already meet our expectations?' Such questions reflect the fact that they are team concerns, not problems that teachers must deal with alone in the isolation of their classrooms. PLCs encourage each member to develop new insights, skills, and competencies (DuFour, Eaker, DuFour & Many, 2010), and an RtI Leadership Team focuses these emergent insights and skills toward the enhancement of the classroom educational processes – again, for the betterment of all students.

## A challenge in RtI implementation: Dealing with change

The implementation of RtI brings change, and some individuals handle change more easily than others. The use of PLCs may ease the process of change, because the emphasis on a professional community has been shown to relate positively to teachers' commitment to students and their achievement (DuFour, et al., 2010; Lee, Zhang & Yin, 2011). Specifically, PLCs harness the collective power of the staff and promote shared leadership (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000; Richmond & Manokore, 2010), and implementing change becomes much more palatable when the changes empower more people. PLCs promote a shared vision, refocus attention to articulating the core school mission, and thus help fight the inertia that often maintains the status quo. As a collaborative spirit emerges, it inevitably strengthens a school's capacity for the successful implementation and sustainability of its RtI framework, and, hence, effective RtI Leadership Teams look to PLCs for the key elements of their structure.

## RtI Teams as PLCs

The relevance of PLCs to RtI Leadership Teams is clear: both view participating teachers not just as educators, but as empowered leaders in their school who embody a sense of ownership and investment in the school community (Barth, 2001). Literature on the implementation of RtI also suggests that the school principal is a critical component of the process (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009; Knight, 2013), but the decisive element in successful implementation is a leadership culture rather than an individual leader (Fullan, 2005). When school decisions are informed by teachers, then real educational improvements are possible (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Thus, with shared leadership and teacher leaders who are empowered to make decisions about instruction, the RtI model can be fully implemented.

RtI frameworks are designed to increase the learning of all students (McDougal, Graney, Wright, & Ardoin, 2010), but the critical elements of consensus building, infrastructure, and implementation require long-term comprehensive professional development (Emihovich & Battaglia, 2010).

Incorporating the core principles of PLCs into RtI Leadership Teams helps create a more collaborative culture, and provides a model for professional development. PLCs and RtI Leadership Teams focus on the teaching-learning process, provide opportunities for collegial inquiry, and connect teachers to external expertise while respecting their own talents and creativity. This focus on the teaching-learning process, if sustained over time, is likely to have a positive impact on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Sigurdardottir, 2010; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). At the outset, teachers in PLCs identify learning standards and establish a culture of shared experiences. Ideally, PLCs evolve into a community of teachers learning together and building shared knowledge (Johnson, 2003). This builds the school's capacity for professional development, and promotes full implementation of RtI.

RtI Leadership Teams should not to move too quickly to resolve technical problems related to implementation without first establishing the infrastructure that makes genuine change possible. There may be a rush to find interventions for each tier, for example, or to collect data even if teachers are not yet skilled enough to interpret and use them. Functioning as a PLC helps teams to focus first on finding consensus about the principles and practices the school will then move to adopt. Consensus, or "buy-in", is often a necessary first step in a successful systems change (Hoover & Love, 2011; Klingner, Ahwee, Pilonieta, & Menendez, 2003; Kwakman, 2003), but it can be difficult to achieve. That said, failure to gain widespread acceptance of a new initiative such as RtI can undermine what would have been productive outcomes, even when evidence of its effectiveness in other schools is presented (Gersten, Chard & Baker, 2000).

The necessary first step, then, is to create an environment where teachers see themselves as a PLC, and this is done most effectively by addressing the core values they hold. For example, when teachers say "I don't believe in RtI" or "This is just another educational bandwagon" an appropriate response might be to ask them, "What are your goals for your students?" or "What values do you hold for all students?" In an environment where teachers hear one another discussing their core convictions about the educational process and what they want for their students, their confidence, trust, and sense of being a community will surface and develop. Finally, PLCs help clarify how to maximize current resources in order to implement an RtI model with the interventions that will be most effective in their school and for which there is a high enough level of acceptability to ensure successful implementation.

## Implementation of PLCs with RtI Leadership Teams

We had been working for several years with RtI Leadership Teams as part of a state-wide grant project, and one lingering concern was how to ensure sustainability after the project period. Knowing that PLCs provide a mechanism for ongoing professional learning and dialogue, we established a systematic process wherein teachers worked together to improve their professional practice related to specific topics. We held three PLC meetings during the school year, each devoted to a topic that posed continuing challenges for the RtI Leadership Teams: 1) establishing a collaborative culture; 2) providing differentiated instruction; and 3) data-based decision-making. We invited each team to send a representative to our PLC meetings in order to address common issues related to the sustained implementation of RtI in each of their schools, and to experience the PLC

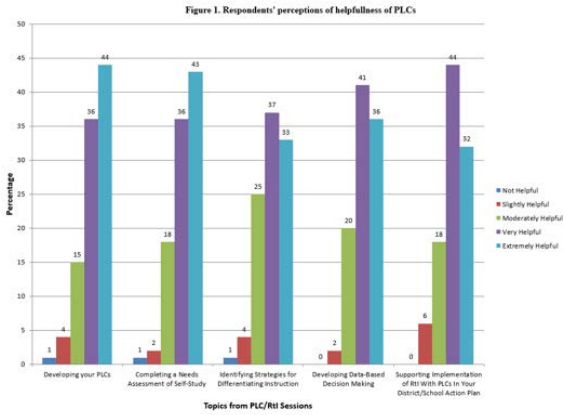
structure they could duplicate with their own team.

The teams were composed of an administrator, an instructional coach, a data coach, and at least one classroom teacher, and each sent one of their members to our PLC meetings for a kind of cross-pollination across teams. A week before each session, the agenda and an article on one of the three topics were distributed electronically, and each meeting began with introductions if new members were present. After a brief overview of the topic, discussion was opened to elicit participants' thoughts on the 'Big Ideas' of the article, and specific applications in their schools. Poster paper was used to visually display individual comments and observations, and all were encouraged to elaborate or expand on their own or others' comments in order to expand the discussion and further connections to the contexts of individual schools. The dialogues created a powerful synergy as participants identified commonalities, challenges, and solutions that could be adapted to their unique situations. At the end of each meeting, the comments were summarized, and members identified action steps to be taken in their school. Notes from the poster paper were transcribed and distributed electronically, and participants were encouraged to continue the dialogue with each other electronically. Many of them did so.

These meetings revealed the value of the PLC model to RtI Leadership Teams as the participants returned to their own schools with an expanded understanding of the topics discussed and practical ideas feasible for their own situations. What they were doing, in fact, was modeling a PLC approach to the implementation of the RtI framework in their school that focused on student outcomes and real improvements in instructional practices.

## Survey Results from PLCs

A survey of 84 participants in six PLC groups gauged the value of the PLC sessions on a 5-point Likert scale on the degree of helpfulness (from 'not at all' to 'extremely') in their school's efforts to implement RtI. Results show that participants judged the sessions as a highly acceptable way to further their professional development (Figure 1). Specifically, the sessions were viewed as helpful for 'Developing your PLCs' (80% very or extremely helpful), 'Completing a Needs Assessment' (79% very or extremely helpful), 'Developing Data-based Decision Making' (77% very or extremely helpful), and 'Supporting Implementation of RtI with PLCs' (76% very or extremely helpful).




## Implication for professional development

In order to build capacity for the effective implementation of RtI, Leadership Teams need ongoing collaborative and critical analysis of practices that support knowledge sharing and innovation. Our work with numerous teams has repeatedly demonstrated the value of the PLC model in the way the teams function, and confirms the importance of professional collaboration as an essential component of real school change (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008; Garrett, 2010; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Leonard & Leonard, 2001). Hence, PLC's have directly

contributed to improving the educational experience for *all* the students, and that improvement, of course, is the most fundamental goal. The question now centers on identifying the most effective strategies for incorporating PLCs within RtI frameworks in more schools.

Because school reform efforts are sometimes viewed as little more than add-on requirements or passing fads, PLCs can help educators shift from cynicism to 'buy-in' and 'ownership' of the RtI process. PLCs help teachers view themselves as active participants in a learning community who are empowered to translate educational research into best practices within their own context (Jacobson, 2010; Klingner, et al., 2003; Schmoker, 2004) by linking their core values with measureable student learning outcomes. As mentioned, in the development of RtI Leadership Teams, conversations often begin with a focus on resolving technical issues for implementation, but PLCs can be instrumental in directing teams back to the primary question about their shared vision for all their students.

The use of data for decision-making is essential to sustained implementation of multi-tiered systems of support (McIntosh, Mercer, Hume, Frank, Turri, & Mathews, 2013). Hence, there is an unmistakable need for continuing conversations to help teachers shift toward acceptance of the idea that data must be used in order to critically analyze and reflect on instructional procedures and their impact on student learning (Slavit, Nelson, & Deuel, 2013; Vendlinski & Phelan, 2011). In his book *Don't believe everything you think: The 6 basic mistakes we make in thinking*, Thomas Kida (2006) notes that people often prefer stories to statistics. Taking Kida's point to heart, we say that educators' convictions about student learning should be based on evidence, not just opinion, which means that teams can challenge members to back up their beliefs with examples of student success based on data that supports their point. That said, teams must also be brought to the point where they know how to translate them into instructional planning and evaluation. Hence, we need to provide sufficient professional development activities where teachers examine their own instructional data until they are comfortable engaging in evidence-based decision-making.

One of our primary objectives must be to ensure that schools recognize the importance of the problem-solving nature of RtI Leadership Teams. They are the ones who continuously analyze individual student, grade-level, and school data, who utilize that data to address specific problems that impede student learning in their classrooms, and who identify solutions acceptable to teachers that are practical, realistic, and possible to implement in their school (Jerald, 2005; Lingo, Barton-Atwood, & Jolivette, 2011; Little, 2012; Thessin & Starr, 2011). The PLC model in Leadership Teams, can foster professional development focused on building the collaborative skills necessary for all the teachers to engage in this problem-solving process that effectively serves as a catalyst for implementing RtI.

We already had evidence that the RtI Leadership Teams we had been working with were making real improvements in the core instruction for all students through establishing and encouraging a culture of community within their schools. Our experience with the PLCs illustrated their potential to harness the collective power of the staff, to draw on their knowledge, skills, and individual dispositions, to build capacity within the school's RtI framework, and thus to improve student achievement by influencing and promoting shared leadership

(Cranston, 2009; Newmann, et al., 2000; Richmond & Manokore, 2010). The focus quite naturally shifts toward identifying strategies that ensure the sustainability of that implementation at a level of fidelity that continues to produce valued outcomes once an RtI model has been implemented (Han & Weiss, 2005). PLCs have visibly demonstrated their effectiveness in supporting efforts to maintain and sustain positive educational change.

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