# Walking the Talk: Tools for Continuous Improvement in a Professional Development School

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I outline three structured protocols that professional development school steering committees and other collaborative groups could use to support an intentional reflective process aimed at growth and improvement. Using these protocols provides all participants with a voice in identifying current strengths and areas for growth, setting concrete goals, developing an action plan for meeting those goals, and monitoring progress toward goals. The purpose of these protocols is to support a group in moving from talking about improvement to taking action for change.

In recent years, there have been efforts to more clearly define what a professional development school (PDS) is and to articulate standards for quality, as evidenced at a national level by the creation of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE's) PDS standards (2001) and the recent articulation of nine PDS essentials by the National Association for Professional Development Schools (2008). Similarly, at a more localized level, the Maryland State Department of Education (2002b) published a set of standards for PDSs in the state. All three documents may help preserve the term *professional development school* as being distinctive from that of other teacher education programs and school–university partnerships (NAPDS, 2008). Furthermore, they may support researchers in describing the context for research so that they may begin to clearly identify what it is about PDSs that contributes to a positive impact on preservice teachers, in-service teachers, and student achievement (Zeichner, 2007). The documents may also serve as useful tools for external program evaluations and accreditation processes. Yet these

standards can serve as stimulants for internal reflective processes aimed at learning, growth, and improvement if PDS stakeholders can find a way to translate the words and boxes on paper into a living and breathing vision for practice in real and dynamic settings.

Several years ago, I was part of a PDS steering committee that attempted to undertake a reflective improvement process using the NCATE's PDS standards. Members of the steering committee included a mentor teacher from each of the 10 schools in our PDS partnership, a teacher who was not a mentor, several principals, several of the district's curriculum support teachers, methods course instructors, and supervisors of the yearlong internship. We divided up into five subcommittees, each responsible for discussing our PDS in light of one of the five standards. These stimulating discussions were useful in helping us to celebrate our strengths as a PDS and motivated us to think in new ways about how our PDS might grow stronger. In fact, at our next meeting of the full steering committee, there was so much to report and discuss that only two of the five subcommittees had the

opportunity to share in depth. Unfortunately, with only four or five total steering committee meetings available over the course of the school year and with other more pressing decisions to make, the ideas discussed in the subcommittees were never fully shared, and there was little, if any, resulting collaborative action taken. What started as an energizing collaborative endeavor soon lost momentum, fading into a vague recollection.

How many times does this same type of scenario play out in our work in a PDS or elsewhere? Our desires to improve and our many ideas for the future lead to rich conversations, but we remain there in the talk without moving forward into action and change. With limited time and resources, what processes might get everyone on board and headed in the same direction, translating ideas for improvement into concrete collective action?

The purpose of this article is to present one possible process, structured by a set of three conversational protocols, for using the PDS standards documents or nine PDS essentials for intentional collaborative reflection and self-assessment that will lead to concrete collective action. A PDS steering committee or some other representative body of stakeholders would be an appropriate group to gather for this continuous improvement process. Just as the concept of a PDS is grounded in collaborative partnership, reflecting for continuous improvement and planning for collective action must be truly collaborative work. The process presented in this article is not meant to provide one stakeholder or group of stakeholders with a platform for pushing a particular agenda. Rather, the facilitator of each protocol—whether a university faculty member, school principal, mentor teacher, or other stakeholder—seeks to ensure that the voices of all stakeholders are heard and works to build consensus among all participants.

Supporting true collaboration is one of the reasons why using protocols is useful to structure a continuous improvement process. Protocols are tools that provide structured guidelines for conversation to focus participants on essentials for a given period while promoting a safe and supportive environment for collaboration that invites substantive contributions from all participants (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999; McDonald, 2002). The three protocols outlined in this article are similarly designed to promote equitable collaboration between individuals from higher education institutions and K–12 schools while focusing and streamlining the group's use of a valuable resource: time. Those who have used these three protocols in the past have found them beneficial, stating that they promote conversations that disrupt routine ways of thinking, foster deeper common understandings of the community's work and purpose, and support participants in creating a new vision for what is possible and in developing a doable plan for attaining that vision while providing all participants with a voice in the process (Ballock, 2008, 2009).

Literature on facilitating group development strongly influenced decisions regarding the design and content of each protocol. This literature suggests that in addition to the foundational importance of collective ownership, taking action for change requires that groups assess its current status, identify the most important areas for change, consider factors that might help or hinder the change process, and establish methods for follow-up and accountability (Buzaglo & Wheelan, 1999; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hustedde & Score, 1995). Therefore, in the first protocol, participants assess their PDS work in terms of strengths and areas for growth and conclude by articulating concrete goals for improvement. In the second protocol, participants develop a clear plan of action and process for intentionally monitoring progress toward goals. Finally, the third protocol serves as a checkpoint for celebrating progress, adjusting goals, and planning continued action.

The cyclical nature of academic calendars suggests certain beginning and ending points for a continuous improvement process. The reflection, goal setting, and action planning involved in the first two protocols may naturally fit with the wrapping up of one school year and the beginning of the next. As such, these two protocols might be used to structure a summer planning day, a year-end reflection,

or a beginning-of-the-year kickoff meeting. The third protocol is meant to serve as a checkpoint. It might be used in January as a way to monitor progress toward the year's goals or during the next year's summer planning as a means of checking in on longer-term goals and preparing for another new beginning.

Each of the three protocols in this continuous improvement process requires at least an hour-long session. Attempting to abbreviate any of the protocols into a shorter block of time would prove a challenge and compromise the value of the process. However, some have suggested that a longer block of time, even a half-day retreat, would be useful for supporting a richer reflective process, particularly in the case of the first two protocols (Ballock, 2008). Although time is a scarce resource in schools for higher education faculty and K–12 partners, it is a critical component of an effective continuous improvement process.

## Selecting the Self-Assessment Tool

Selecting the self-assessment tool that will serve as the basis for the reflection and goal setting that occur in the first protocol is an important preparatory step for engaging in the continuous improvement process outlined here. Table 1 provides a side-by-side comparison of three possible self-assessment tools from which PDS partners might choose. These assessment tools vary in format and complexity. The selection of one assessment tool over another may affect both the amount of time needed for the first protocol and the depth of reflective conversation possible during the full process. NCATE's (2001) *Standards for Professional Development Schools* is one possible tool for analysis. The Developmental Guidelines section highlights four stage descriptions (beginning level, developing level, at standard, and leading level) in an easy-to-use chartlike form. Groups opting to use this tool in its entirety assess their PDS work on 21 distinct elements across the five standards (learning community; accountability and quality assurance;

collaboration; diversity and equity; and structures, resources, and roles). Locally developed guidelines for PDSs could also serve as tools for analysis. For example, the *Developmental Guidelines for Maryland Professional Development Schools* (Maryland State Department of Education, 2002a) features a similar chartlike format describing three stage descriptions (beginning, developing, and at standard) for 4 PDS components (teacher preparation, continuing professional development, research and inquiry, and student achievement) across 5 standards, for a total of 20 elements for analysis. Both these self-assessment tools, if used in their entirety, allow for analysis of many different aspects of what it means to be a PDS, and both provide many details on which to reflect. Such a comprehensive self-assessment has tremendous value but requires a significant time commitment. Attempting to reflect on 20 or 21 elements of analysis at once is likely to result in participants' merely skimming the surface in their discussions or going indefinitely around in circles without coming to consensus on which goals and action steps are a priority. Opting to focus on one standard at a time or using NAPDS's (2008) descriptions of the nine essentials of a PDS would still prove valuable while reducing the enormity of the task. The needs and interests of the PDS and the time available for engaging in this process should help a group determine which type of tool it would like to use for this protocol.

## Protocol 1: Analysis and Goal Setting

The first protocol in this continuous improvement process was designed to help participants take stock of their current collaborative work by using a self-assessment tool to reflect on strengths and areas for growth (see text box, "Protocol 1"). The protocol culminates with participants crafting one or more concrete goal statements representing directions they believe are important for moving the work forward. The use of go-rounds in the early stages of this protocol gets all participants actively

Table 1.   Comparison of Assessment Tools

*National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education:*
*Professional Development School Standards*

| | |
|---|---|
| Learning community | Support multiple learners |
| | Work and practice are inquiry based and focused on learning |
| | Common, shared professional vision of teaching and learning grounded in research and practitioner knowledge |
| | Serve as instrument of change |
| | Extended learning community |
| Accountability and quality assurance | Develop professional accountability |
| | Assure public accountability |
| | Set professional development school participation criteria |
| | Develop assessments, collect information, and use results |
| | Engage with the professional development school context |
| Collaboration | Engage in joint work |
| | Design roles and structures to enhance collaboration and develop parity |
| | Systematically recognize and celebrate joint work and contributions of each partner |
| Diversity and equity | Ensure equitable opportunities to learn |
| | Evaluate policies and practices to support equitable learning outcomes |
| | Recruit and support diverse participants |
| Structures, resources, and roles | Establish governance and support structures |
| | Ensure progress toward goals |
| | Create professional development school roles |
| | Resources |
| | Use effective communication |

*Maryland Professional Development School Standards*

| | |
|---|---|
| Learning community | Teacher preparation |
| | Continuing professional development |
| | Action research / inquiry |
| | Student achievement (K–12 priorities) |
| Collaboration | Teacher preparation |
| | Continuing professional development |
| | Action research / inquiry |
| | Student achievement (K–12 priorities) |
| Accountability | Teacher preparation |
| | Continuing professional development |
| | Action research / inquiry |
| | Student achievement (K–12 priorities) |
| Organization, roles, and resources | Teacher preparation |
| | Continuing professional development |
| | Action research / inquiry |
| | Student achievement (K–12 priorities) |

*National Association for Professional Development Schools*

| | |
|---|---|
| Nine essentials | 1. A comprehensive mission |
| | 2. School–university culture |
| | 3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development |
| | 4. Commitment to innovation and reflective practice |
| | 5. Sharing deliberate investigations of practice |
| | 6. An articulation agreement |
| | 7. Structures for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration |
| | 8. Formal roles across institutional settings |
| | 9. Resources, rewards, and recognition |

**Protocol 1: Analysis and Goal Setting**

1.  As you read individually, use one color to mark words and phrases that best describe your PDS now, and use a second color to mark words or phrases that either point to an area of difficulty or describe a direction in which you would like your PDS to grow. (15 minutes)

2.  Which words and phrases in this document best describe our PDS at this time, and what evidence can we provide? (10 minutes)
    *   Begin with a "go-round" where each person has an opportunity to contribute or pass.
    *   Use sentences like "I think ___ describes our PDS because we _____"
    *   Consider charting so all can see.
    *   It's ok to repeat a word or phrase more than once.
    *   It's ok to respectfully disagree, provided that supporting evidence is used. "I disagree because our PDS___"

3.  Which words and phrases in this document point to an area of difficulty or best describe a direction in which we would like our PDS to grow? (10 minutes)
    *   Begin with a "go-round" where each person has an opportunity to contribute or pass
    *   Use sentences like "I'd like our PDS to be _____ because _____"
    *   Consider charting so all can see.
    *   It's ok to repeat a word or phrase more than once.
    *   It's ok to respectfully disagree, provided that supporting evidence is used. "I disagree because our PDS ___"

4.  Which of these areas are most important for our future growth and development as a group? (10 minutes)

5.  What two or three specific/concrete goal statements can we make in these areas we see of highest priority? (10 minutes)

6.  Debrief the protocol. (5 minutes)

involved in contributing their perspectives, breaks the ice for those less inclined to speak up in a group, and communicates the value of every participant's voice.

## Facilitative Considerations

*Time.* The times provided in Protocol 1 should prove feasible if the group uses the nine essentials of PDSs or focuses on one standard from the NCATE or Maryland state PDS standards documents, but facilitators should reconsider the time needed for the first three steps if taking a more comprehensive approach to analyzing the PDS. Reflecting on all 20 or 21 elements from the standards documents could take a half day or longer.

*Evidence.* It is important that participants not only share perceptions or impressions of the PDS during the first few steps but also seek to use supporting evidence. The facilitator should emphasize the use of evidence in Steps 1 through 3 and gently press for evidence if it is overlooked.

*Individual preparation.* Some have opted to ask participants to complete Step 1 of the protocol before meeting, which allows for the possibility of a more leisurely examination of whichever self-assessment tools are used. It also provides the possibility of gathering documentation to strengthen the evidence base for the process. If participants cannot take the time to do any preparation outside formal meeting times, then the protocol is followed as written.

*Step 4.* Although it may not be difficult to identify areas for improvement, narrowing the focus to just a few ideas of the greatest importance can be challenging. It may be helpful to begin this step by grouping the words and phrases generated in Step 3 into broader headings or to look for ideas that seem to reoccur, given that the ideas most important to the growth of the PDS may appear more than once. Frequency is not always a sign of importance, however. The aim is to identify areas most needed for pushing the work of the PDS forward.

*Debrief.* Protocols almost always end with a time of debriefing. Participants separate themselves from the content of the conversation in which they have been engaged and take a few minutes to reflect on the group process. Questions such as the following may guide this time of debrief:

- How did this process work for us today?
- How did the process help or hinder us in what we set out to accomplish today?
- What did you like/dislike about the process?
- What should we improve in our group processes for the future?

## Protocol 2: Planning for Action and Accountability

The focus of the second protocol (see text box, "Protocol 2") is that of devising a clear plan of action for attaining the goals established in Protocol 1. Not only do participants discuss the next steps they need to take to accomplish their goals, but they also discuss ways to monitor progress toward these goals so that the group plans for accountability from the beginning. This protocol should follow as soon as possible after the first, whether that means going through two protocols on the same day in one long meeting or scheduling this protocol for the next meeting.

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**Protocol 2: Planning for Action and Accountability**

1. Post your goals so that all can see. The facilitator or another participant will "present," or recap, the goals your PDS hopes to work towards this year. (5 minutes)

2. Go around the circle to give each group member a chance to ask for clarification on one or more of the goals or to expand upon the meaning of the goals as stated by the "presenter." (5 minutes)

3. Go through steps 4 through 7 for each of the group's goals. Plan on 15–20 minutes per goal.

4. What will your PDS's work look like, feel like, sound like, be like when this goal has been attained? How will your PDS be different than it is today?

5. What forces are at work (either within or outside your PDS) that could hinder you or help you as you strive for this goal?

6. What concrete steps will you take to work towards this goal? (Who needs to take on particular responsibilities?)

7. How will you know when you have reached your goal? What evidence can you collect so that you will know how you are doing?

8. Discuss how you will stay on track as you work towards these goals. How will you monitor your progress? What will ensure accountability? (10–15 minutes)

9. Debrief the protocol. (5 minutes)

## Facilitative Considerations

*Time*. This protocol runs a minimum of 50 minutes when discussing two goals. If the group has established more than two goals, it may find it beneficial to divide into smaller groups and assign each just one goal for Steps 4 through 7. Then the small groups could report back to the larger group and provide others the opportunity to offer suggestions for revision before moving on to Step 8.

*Materials*. Creating a chart for each goal in advance of the meeting can provide a visual reminder of each area to address during the discussion: forces that hinder or help, concrete action steps, and what serves as evidence of success in the goal area. Figure 1 offers a possible template for this chart.

*Step 5*. As participants discuss the forces that could help or hinder goal attainment, the facilitator should challenge group members to consider ways to diminish negative forces and accentuate positive forces. If participants determine that the bulk of the forces are working against them, it could be a sign that a different goal would be more appropriate and achievable in the current time and context.

*Evidence*. The facilitator should encourage participants to think broadly when consider-ing evidence of success. Whereas standardized test scores or scores on exit portfolios might provide evidence for some types of goals, documentation of the successful accomplishment of other goals might include meeting agendas, numbers of participants, classroom artifacts, and action research projects, just to name a few.

## Protocol 3: Checking In

The third protocol (see text box, "Protocol 3") serves as a checkpoint for monitoring progress toward goals. During this protocol, participants document and celebrate progress made toward goals, evaluate the continued importance of the goals, outline next steps, and update plans for continuing to monitor progress. As such, this protocol serves as a mechanism for "regular review of progress towards initial and developing goals of the PDS partnership" (NCATE, 2001, p. 28), essential for what NCATE terms a "leading" PDS. Participants might use this protocol 6 months to a year after setting their goals, and they could use this format annually for monitoring their work over a longer period.

| Goal: | | |
|---|---|---|
| What concrete action steps can we take to begin moving towards accomplishing this goal? | What "forces" might hinder us in achieving this goal? How can we address that? | How will we know when we have achieved this goal? What evidence could document our success? |
| What resources will we need? Who will take on specific responsibilities? | What "forces" could help us achieve this goal? How can we use those to our advantage? | |

Figure 1.   Action planning template

**Protocol 3: Checking In**

1. Post and review the goals and action steps you set during the first two protocols.

2. Break up into pairs or triads for brainstorming (10 minutes)
   • What concrete evidence shows us we have met or made progress towards each goal? (write each piece of evidence on a separate sticky note)
   • Which goals are still important for us to work on?
   • What steps do we still need to take (and why) in order to reach each goal?

3. Post sticky note evidence next to the posted goals as the group reconvenes together. Have one person read each of the sticky notes out loud. Then use "go-rounds" to address the following questions: (15 minutes)
   • What does this evidence tell you about our group's work together?
   • How have we grown or developed over time?
   • What can we celebrate?
   • Which goals are still important for the group's growth and development?

4. What steps do we need to take next? (15 minutes)
   • What will we do?
   • Who will take on specific responsibilities?
   • What forces will help or hinder us in our progress?

5. How will we continue to monitor our growth? What evidence can we collect? (10 minutes)

6. Debrief the protocol. (5 minutes)

## Facilitative Considerations

*Evidence*. Evidence is a crucial component of this protocol. The facilitator should ask participants to begin thinking about evidence before the meeting, encouraging them to identify and bring to the meeting any concrete documentation they have of progress toward goals to focus the conversation on more than impressions and perceptions. Again, participants should keep in mind a range of possible types of evidence.

## Concluding Remarks

Although the tools presented here are framed around a process for intentional reflection and goal setting in a PDS setting, their applicabil-ity is not limited to the PDS context. The first protocol requires identifying an appropriate tool to use for self-assessment, and there are many such tools available, such as the Collaboration Assessment Rubric (Patrizio & Gajda, 2007) or the Professional Learning Community Continuum (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Even in contexts where the first protocol is not useful, any type of collaborative community or group that has established meaningful goals could use the second and third protocols for developing an action plan and monitoring progress.

However, it is important to provide a word of caution against an overly fastidious preoccupation with the protocols presented here and to assert that they are merely tools intended to support a reflective process. As with other tools, it is a purposeful and intentional

application of these protocols that makes them useful. Using these tools at an appropriate time is one way of being intentional. A PDS or other type of group that is in the most nascent stage of development is not likely ready to undertake this full process, whereas those who are already moving forward in a clear and focused direction should persist in their current path. This full process is best suited for those feeling disillusioned with their current direction or uncertain regarding to how to proceed—specifically, for those feeling as though their collaborative work has reached a plateau or become stagnant or for those simply sensing a need to take a close look at what, how, and why they do what they do to grow and improve. Similarly, it is important to note that these tools cannot in and of themselves bring about change. Although these protocols focus conversation to lead to concrete action, growth and improvement depend on participants' willingness and ability to follow through on the plans for action over time. Finding a way to begin taking action immediately and referring back to goals and plans regularly can help ensure that the process begun with the support of these protocols actually makes a difference. `SUP`

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