



# **Professional Learning Communities Team Guide**

*Increasing Student Learning through  
Collaborative Sharing & Inquiry*

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# 1. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)...What are they?

## PLC's Defined

A professional learning community is a group of individuals who have committed to meet regularly for an agreed upon amount of time guided by a common purpose. PLC's provide a forum for learning, assessing, planning and reflecting as a team. PLC's create a collaborative environment where teachers can share, problem solve and set goals that will strengthen teaching and learning resulting in improved student learning and outcomes. Professional Learning Communities focus on learning outcomes, indicators of success and best practice. Professional Learning Communities are a tool by which schools and teachers can continue to grow professionally through their own internal capacity.

## The Goal:

The goal of PLC's is to help all team members become more knowledgeable about their chosen topic through collaboration during team meetings and through individual study/work between team meetings, with the overall purpose of increasing student achievement.

## Basic Assumptions for Professional Learning Communities

- Every teacher will belong to a PLC team.
- Every team will establish a curricular goal/target.
- Collaborative cultures are more effective than teacher isolation.
- Improved student learning is most often linked to improved instruction.
- PLC's are a means of school improvement and professional development.
- Teachers will share expertise.
- Teachers will identify instructional practices that have been used in the past and research best practices through collaborative inquiry in the areas chosen for improvement.

- Members of the PLC will utilize expertise both from within the group and from outside the school environment to improve academic results in the areas identified for improvement.
- Structured time is required for PLC's to be successful.
- Both horizontal (grade alike/subject alike) groupings and vertical (across grades) groupings are important.
- The PLC team needs to have in place strategies for accountability and strategies for keeping things on track.
- Every team member will report to his/her Principal on their PLC meeting. A simple form will be provided.
- PLC meetings are guided by agreed upon norms.
- PLC's focus more on learning than on teaching.
- A focus upon results versus a focus upon activities.
- Teachers learn best from other teachers in settings where they teach each other the art of teaching.
- Intervention is better than remediation.
- Isolation and competition are enemies of improvement.
- Some students need more time to learn and succeed than others.
- Teachers and schools can make a difference.

#### **4 Key Questions for a PLC**

1. What is it we expect students to learn?
1. How will we know when they've learned it?
2. How will we respond when they don't?
3. How will we respond when they already know it? How will we deepen the learning for students who have already mastered essential knowledge and skills?

#### **Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community - "Meeting Grounds for Learning"**

- Shared Mission (What are we trying to achieve?)
- Shared Vision (What do we hope to become?)
- Shared Values (How will we behave?)
- Trust
- Spirit of Collaboration

- Action orientated - things happen at and between meetings
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- Outcomes orientated - focus on results
- Open classrooms
- Teams that gather data, identify strengths and pinpoint weaknesses
- Develop plans for improvement
- Share ideas, success and frustrations
- Environments where teachers talk about their practice
- Work on closing the achievement gap
- Focus on essential learning outcomes

### **PLCs move us from asking:**

What are we expected to teach to ...

How will we know when each student has learned?

How will we respond when they don't?

## **2. How will the NWSD PLC initiative be sustained?**

In our rural settings, teachers have little opportunity to meet with other grade or subject-alike colleagues. With this in mind, our first year of PLC development will focus on inter-school teams. To facilitate this, teams have been developed based on geography and time zones. Town of Meadow Lake schools are large enough to contain their own grade/subject-alike PLC's.

The overall goal is to improve student learning by providing teachers in NWSD with structured time to work collaboratively with colleagues. For the 2011-2012 School Year this will be accomplished through 4 half-days provided as indicated on the calendar as PLC afternoons. These half-days will be dedicated to horizontal groupings of teachers in geographic pods for 2011-2012.

K - 6 teachers will have the opportunity to meet with others in grade-alike groupings to focus on either math or ELA outcomes. The specific learning outcomes will be determined by each group.

7 - 12 teachers will be surveyed (in Appendix) to determine specific subject areas of interest. Math and ELA are priorities and should be considered as first choices where possible. Pods identified in the spreadsheet will apply here as well.

## **3. What are the timelines?**

The first PLC day will be Monday, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Teams should be very similar to last year. Three other half-days follow throughout the year.

Initial tasks for PLC teams include (Some tasks may be completed if your team has advanced):

1. Establish/review group norms
2. Use existing assessment data to identify goals or targets for the group (examples: problem solving, reading comprehension, phonemic awareness, writing, etc.)
3. Identify essential learning outcomes from the curriculum needed to achieve the goal.
4. Develop teacher-created common assessments to measure student progress and establish benchmarks or use data collected by the division.
5. Analyze assessment data.
6. Identify and share existing instructional practice and research best practice through collaborative inquiry. Adjust instruction.

During the year, these tasks will be accomplished by following the timeline outlined below. This timeline should allow a PLC to complete one cycle during one year. Some teams may find themselves ahead of this schedule and are encouraged to move ahead in the PLC journey.

Time	Task	What to Bring
First Meeting	Introductions, establish/review Team Norms, K - 6 groups determine major focus area (Math or ELA) Identify goals or targets as suggested by assessment data. Determine essential learning outcomes from the curriculum. You may also use assessment data from the previous year and curriculum unwrap if applicable.	Curriculum guide and current assessment data
Between Meeting Tasks	Collaborative inquiry into best practice or determined by group.	
Second Meeting	Analyze data. Curriculum unwrap if applicable.	Curriculum Guide
Between Meeting Tasks	Collaborative inquiry into best practice or determined by group.	

Third Meeting	Use assessment data to inform instruction. Curriculum unwrap were applicable.	Assessment ideas and resources.
Between Meeting Tasks	Collect data. Collaborative inquiry into best practice or determined by group.	
Fourth Meeting	Share common assessment data and analyze. Sharing best practice.	Assessment data

**Inter-school and in-school PLCs.** In-school PLCs will be developed and scheduled by the principal at the school level as with previous practice. Principals can arrange for additional time through creative timetabling, after school meetings etc. for in-school targets.

Professional Learning Communities are one tool among a larger continuum of supports for Professional Development in the NWSD. Other Professional Development opportunities include:

- ✓ Personal PD - workshops, conferences, classes, professional reading
- ✓ Division-wide PD days/Convention
- ✓ Mentorship Program
- ✓ Curriculum Inservice
- ✓ Staff Supervision Policy
- ✓ Professional Growth Plans
- ✓ Action Research Projects
- ✓ Teachers observing teachers
- ✓ Staff meetings/In-school PD

*Some of the best staff development occurs  
not in workshops but in the...*

## **WORKPLACE**

**Professional learning with/through peers has often been described as the most effective professional development.**

## 4. PLC – Practices & Procedures

The following is an explanation of the six tasks each team should accomplish (Some teams are at varying stages of development):

### TASK 1 – ESTABLISHING GROUP NORMS

"Norms describe how we intend to operate on a day-to-day basis as we pursue our vision." -Peter Senge

The first thing the PLC team needs to do is to establish "norms" and a method to monitor them. In a PLC norms represent protocols and commitments to guide members in working together. Norms help team members clarify expectations regarding how they will work together to achieve their shared goal.

When establishing group norms, consider:

#### **TIME and Place**

- When do we meet?
- Where do we meet? How do we determine this?
- Will we set a beginning and ending time?
- Will we start and end on time?

#### **LISTENING**

- How will we encourage listening?
- How will we discourage interrupting?

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

- Will the meetings be open?
- Will what we say in the meeting be held in confidence?
- What can be said after the meeting?

#### **DECISION MAKING**

- How will we make decisions?

- Are we an advisory or a decision-making body?
- Will we reach decisions by consensus?
- How will we deal with conflicts?

#### **PARTICIPATION**

- How will we encourage everyone's participation?
- Will we have an attendance policy?

#### **EXPECTATIONS**

- What do we expect from members?
- Are there requirements for participation?

Examples of Team Norms and activities for establishing norms can be found in the appendix.

## **TASK 2- IDENTIFY A GOAL OR TARGET FOR THE GROUP**

Deciding on a goal or target for the PLC team is the first step in the PLC process. It is essential that the team agree on a common goal. The target chosen may be a target that **requires one, two or three years** to achieve.

Identifying where overall gaps in student learning are occurring is an important consideration when choosing a goal. These gaps may be identified through teacher assessments, teacher observations, standardized testing or results from Provincial assessments. Goals should be linked to Provincial priorities wherever possible. For the 2011-2012 year, grade K-6 teachers will focus on a Math or ELA target and grade 7-12 teachers will focus on Math or ELA. Professional Learning Communities outside these areas will be approved by the Principal in conjunction with the Superintendent of that area.

Topics should have a narrow curricular focus. Topics tend to often be more process orientated than content related. **Examples** of topics or goals for a professional learning community might be:

Increased student achievement in:

**English Language Arts:**

- ✓ Reading Comprehension
- ✓ Reading Fluency
- ✓ Phonemic Awareness
- ✓ Graphophonic skills
- ✓ Writing

**Math:**

- ✓ Problem Solving
- ✓ Computation

Teams should focus on one key area, even though the temptation might be to attempt to work on several topics at once. For example, a PLC team might choose reading comprehension as the focus rather than the broader topic of reading.

Each member of the team will bring different strengths and approaches to the selected topic. When the topic is selected, the **4 critical questions** should be asked:

1. What is it we expect students to learn?
2. How will we know when they've learned it?
3. How will we respond when they don't?
4. How will we respond when they already know it? How will we deepen the learning for students who have already mastered essential knowledge and skills?

Whatever data is available should be analyzed and shared. For example, if reading comprehension was the selected topic, then *Gates/McGinitie* results, *CAT 3* results, *Provincial AFL* results, etc., could be analyzed by the group to determine where gaps lie. If this data does not provide the required information, then teacher created common assessments may further pinpoint areas that require attention, as well as establish benchmarks by which to measure student growth.

## TASK 3 – IDENTIFY ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

After the topic for the Professional Learning Community has been chosen, the group will need to identify the essential learning outcomes for that topic. This will require looking into curriculum documents and pulling out the essential (most important) learning outcomes and indicators for that topic. This is where the question is asked, “**What do we want students to learn?**” Curriculum objectives must be turned into teachable learning targets

### Criteria for Identifying Essential Common Outcomes

- To separate the essential from the peripheral, carefully apply these three criteria to each standard:
  1. **Endurance:** are students expected to retain the skills/knowledge long after the test is completed.
  2. **Leverage:** is this skill/knowledge applicable to many academic disciplines.
  3. **Readiness for the Next Level of Learning:** is this skill/knowledge preparing the student for success in the next grade/course

## TASK 4 – USING ASSESSMENT DATA AND DEVELOPING COMMON ASSESSMENTS

In an effective, high performing PLC, student achievement is measured through **teacher-made common assessments** administered multiple times throughout the year. In fact, the construction and administration of these common assessments eventually becomes the primary task of the PLC. From the data gathered as a result of the assessments, teachers within the PLC can examine their instructional approach, resources and practices to better serve the students in their classroom.

It is also at this point that teachers within each PLC can collaborate and share teaching strategies for the betterment of all.

According to the Dufours, "Common formative assessments are created collaboratively by a team of teachers responsible for the same grade level or course and administered to all the students in that course or grade level. Common formative assessments are used frequently throughout the school year to identify 1) individual students who need additional time and support for learning 2) the teaching strategies most effective in helping students acquire the intended knowledge and skills 3) areas in which students generally are having difficulty achieving the general standard, and 4) improvement goals for individual teachers and the team."

In the first year of existence however, being a high performing PLC is the goal, not the reality. Members of the team will only be in the process of developing common assessments. In the meantime, and additionally, numerous student assessment tools exist that can be used to examine current teaching practices, and to function as a starting point in determining the focus for the PLC. Team members can consult data from the Assessment for Learning (Saskatchewan Learning), Gates, CAT 3, and OSR.

Suggestions for developing the Common Assessments:

1. Decide upon a specific minimum number of common assessments to be used in your course or each subject area during the year (semester)
2. Demonstrate how each item on the assessment is aligned to an essential learning of your course or grade level
3. Specify the proficiency standard for each essential learning being assessed; for example, *students must score at least 80 out of 100 possible points on each skill being assessed or at least 3 out of 5 possible points on the team's rubric*
4. Clarify the conditions for administering and scoring the test consistently in each classroom
5. Assess a few essential learnings frequently rather than assess many learnings infrequently.

Value of Common Assessments:

- Focused instruction

- Common core curriculum
- Focused, common learning
- Better tests
- Identification of curricular areas needing attention
- Provision of objective indicators of effectiveness for teachers
- Promotes collaboration
- Promotes higher order thinking skills

## TASK 5 – ANALYZE ASSESSMENT DATA AND ADJUST INSTRUCTION

Many schools suffer from the problem of being “data rich but information poor”. The key to becoming a high-performing PLC is to be able to turn the data received through the common assessment into *information* that can be used in the classroom.

### DRIP Syndrome

**Data-Rich...**

**Information-Poor**

### DATA NEEDS TO INFORM AND DATA NEEDS TO BE SHARED

After assessing students using common assessment instruments, goals are set by the PLC team. Initial benchmarks are determined and student growth is measured periodically. The team sets goals for student achievement and growth. These goals are realized through the sharing of teaching strategies, resources and best practice. In fact, it is at this point in PLC development that collegial collaboration truly affects the teaching-learning process in classrooms.

**Implement new strategies and approaches -- Monitor results -- Adjust**

## **TASK 6 – IDENTIFY AND SHARE EXISTING PRACTICE AND RESEARCH BEST PRACTICE**

Once common assessments have been created and administered, teachers will share current practices as well as begin to research best practice for each of the essential learning outcomes identified in Task 3.

Once best practices have been identified for each learning outcome, the PLC team will agree upon an implementation plan for the chosen instructional approaches. Best practices are often arrived at through collaborative inquiry. The team will then implement the plan (using SMART goals) into their daily teaching and re-assess student progress in an agreed upon manner as outlined in Tasks 4 and 5.

### **5. Between Meeting Expectations**

Official PLC meetings are scheduled in the division calendar and occur four times per year. The true work of PLCs however, is in the classroom with our students. It is at this time that the targets and goals of each PLC team are addressed and realized. It is assumed that each team member will have certain tasks and responsibilities to bring back to each team meeting.

### **6. Reporting**

Please report your groups work after each PLC session on the online form.