



# An introduction to professional learning communities

School resources

Since the late 1980s, educational researchers have identified professional learning communities (PLCs) as a key factor used by effective schools to improve outcomes for students. The term 'professional learning community' is used to describe the way in which teachers engage in professional development in a collaborative, interactive and ongoing way, in contrast to traditional models of professional development which is developed by outside experts and delivered to teachers. Other terms that have used to describe this idea include professional learning group, collaborative learning communities, critical friends group, and community of practice.

In addition to the range of names, there is a range of definitions of professional learning communities and how they operate, although there are common themes across the literature:

- The main purpose of PLCs is to improve teacher practice in order to improve outcomes for students
- Teachers work together in a collaborative way for their professional development
- Teachers share, and inquire into, their teaching practice
- Discussions are evidence based, using data such as student voice, lesson observations and student achievement data as well as empirical research
- In order to be effective, PLCs require robust discussion and challenge, rather than reinforcing the status quo
- PLCs leverage the expertise and diversity of the group for the learning of all in the group
- The work of a PLC is an ongoing process of improvement

## The state of the evidence

PLCs have been linked to school improvement and successful school reform<sup>1</sup>. Research has found that when school communities are collaborative, innovative and underpinned by a common vision of increasing achievement for all students, teachers experience greater growth and development than schools with collegial cultures that lack such a vision<sup>2</sup>. There is an abundance of empirical evidence that demonstrates the links between PLC participation and positive outcomes for teachers such as increased efficacy and shared practices.

However, PLC research has been critiqued for its reliance on teacher self-report data and the lack of studies that measure outcomes for students. With many factors affecting student achievement such as prior achievement, socio-economic status, and variation between cohorts, it can be difficult to reliably measure the impact of PLCs on student achievement. Instead, PLC research tends to evaluate performance against key components of PLCs such as collegial trust and shared vision, and rely on the few studies that link PLC components to student achievement. Studies that do report on outcomes for students (either academic or non-academic) have shown mixed results ranging from small to large effect sizes<sup>3</sup>

## Setting up an effective PLC

PLCs take time to develop and often progress through several stages, from beginning to mature communities, as they increasingly demonstrate attributes such as shared responsibility for student achievement. In order to effectively implement a PLC, one of the first tasks is to **ensure the right school culture**. In schools with a strong professional environment that includes peer collaboration and a culture of mutual trust, respect, and commitment to student achievement, teacher effectiveness is measurably greater (in terms of impact on student achievement) than for schools with a weak professional environment<sup>4</sup>. The key features of a culture that supports effective PLCs are:

## Shared values and a vision focused on student learning

A focus on raising student achievement is a key purpose of PLCs<sup>5</sup>. A shared vision focused on student learning has been found to influence collegial trust and sharing of teaching practices, and has been identified in frameworks that guide PLC formation and development and used as a measure of PLC effectiveness<sup>6</sup>. Involving staff, parents and the wider community in creating the vision for student learning has been shown to increase commitment<sup>7</sup>.

## Trust

Trust is essential for effective sustainable PLCs<sup>8</sup> and schools with greater trust between staff are more likely to positively impact student achievement<sup>9</sup>. Trust is a foundation for genuine (rather than contrived) collegiality, and enables teacher learning and wellbeing. Trust in colleagues has been positively associated with shared practices, collaboration, teachers' level of commitment to students and factors such as deprivatised practice that have been linked to teachers' professional learning. Key qualities associated with trust include interpersonal respect, personal regard for others, competency and integrity<sup>10</sup>.

## Collective responsibility and shared leadership

Collective responsibility refers to the degree to which teachers within a school take on responsibility for student outcomes. When collective responsibility is high, this positively influences teacher expectations, which in turn positively impacts student achievement<sup>11</sup>. Teachers' collective responsibility is higher in schools where teachers feel supported by their principal, and can be built through 'inclusive' or shared leadership where teachers feel trusted to make decisions about their practice and have the responsibility and agency to drive PLC discussions<sup>12</sup>. It should be noted that, while shared leadership is important, strong and supportive leadership from the top is also necessary to create and sustain PLCs and to provide support for teachers to enact PLC work<sup>13</sup>. In order for PLCs to thrive it is likely that a balance will need to be struck between shared leadership and strong principal leadership.

## Inquiry mindsets and teacher beliefs

An inquiry mindset enables the cycle of reflection and learning that drives improvement in the complex school environment<sup>14</sup>. An inquiry mindset is underpinned by a set of teacher attitudes that include curiosity, responsiveness, open-mindedness, fallibility, persistence and a willingness to learn and change. Without an inquiry mindset, the dialogue in PLCs can fail to challenge beliefs and test ideas, and instead reinforce the status quo, resulting in teachers missing out on opportunities to learn. However, where a school culture enables teachers to feel safe asking questions and taking risks, discussion can include the critique of ideas and enable teacher learning and growth<sup>15</sup>.

**Teacher efficacy** – the degree to which teachers (at the individual or group/school level) believe they can positively impact student outcomes – is a predictor of both teacher performance and student outcomes. Teacher collaboration has been associated with increases in teacher efficacy, and high functioning PLCs have been associated with high collective efficacy<sup>16</sup>. However, teachers' beliefs about whether collaborative work leads to learning have been associated with their degree of engagement with PLCs, and subsequent learning. Uncovering and engaging with teachers' beliefs about PLC participation may assist in enabling effective collaboration that leads to teacher learning.

## Next steps in PLC implementation

Ensuring there is a school culture that can enable PLCs to function effectively is important, but only the first step in the process of implementing a PLC. Clear guidance about [effective practices for PLCs](#) are also an important consideration.

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## Recommended further reading

DuFour, R. (2013). A principal's advice on PLC practices. Phi Delta Kappan.

Kruse, S.D. (n.d). 5 ways to build a culture of collaboration with staff, teachers and parents. AASA.

Le Fevre, D., Timperley, H., Twyford, K., & Ell, F. (2019). Leading powerful professional learning: Responding to complexity with adaptive expertise. Corwin.

In this video , Professor Helen Timperley talks about professional learning that makes a difference to students and her resource on Teacher professional learning and development

## Endnotes

1 McLaughlin, M. W., & Talbert, J. E. (2007). Building professional learning communities in high schools: Challenges and promising practices. In L. Stoll & K. S. Louis (Eds.), *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas*. Open University Press.

2 Lieberman, A., & Miller, L. (2008). Developing capacities. In A. Lieberman & L. Miller (Eds.), *Teachers in professional communities: Improving teaching and learning* (pp. 18–28). Teachers College Press.

3 Doğan, S., & Adams, A. (2018). Effect of professional learning communities on teachers and students: Reporting updated results and raising questions about research design. *School Effectiveness & School Improvement*, 29(4), 634–659.

4 Kraft, M. A., & Papay, J. P. (2014). Can professional environments in schools promote teacher development? Explaining heterogeneity in returns to teaching experience. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(4), 476–500.

5 Little, J. W., & Horn, I. S. (2007). 'Normalizing' problems of practice: Converting routine conversation into a resource for learning in professional communities. In L. Stoll & K. S. Louis (Eds.), *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas*. Open University Press.

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7 Hipp, K. K., Huffman, J. B., Pankake, A. M., & Olivier, D. F. (2008). Sustaining professional learning communities: Case studies. *Journal of Educational Change*, 9(2), 173–195.

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9 Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. L. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation.

10 Robinson, V. M. (2011). *Student-centered leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

11 Park, J.-H., Lee, I. H., & Cooc, N. (2019). The Role of School-Level Mechanisms: How Principal Support, Professional Learning Communities, Collective Responsibility, and Group-Level Teacher Expectations Affect Student Achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 55(5), 742–780.

12 Jäppinen, A.-K., Leclerc, M., & Tubin, D. (2016). Collaborativeness as the core of professional learning communities beyond culture and context: Evidence from Canada, Finland, and Israel. *School Effectiveness & School Improvement*, 27(3), 315–332.

13 Wells, C., & Feun, L. (2013). Educational change and professional learning communities: A study of two districts. *Journal of Educational Change*, 14(2), 233–257.

14 Le Fevre, D., Timperley, H., & Ell, F. (2015). Curriculum and pedagogy: The future of teacher professional learning and the development of adaptive expertise. *The SAGE Handbook of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment*, 2, 309–324.

15 Snow-Gerono, J. L. (2005). Professional development in a culture of inquiry: PDS teachers identify the benefits of professional learning communities. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 21(3), 241–256.

16 Voelkel, R. H., & Chrispeels, J. H. (2017). Understanding the link between professional learning communities and teacher collective efficacy. *School Effectiveness & School Improvement*, 28(4), 505–526.

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PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



### Rachel Cann

Rachel is a PhD student at the University of Auckland. She completed her Master's thesis on the actions that educational leaders can take to help enhance teacher wellbeing. She continues to explore teacher wellbeing for her doctoral studies, in particular using the perspectives of positive psychology and social network theory. Previously, Rachel was a head of science in an Auckland secondary school, and has also led cross-curricular teams of teachers for project-based learning, pastoral care, and teaching as inquiry.