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Components of Effective Professional Learning Communities

Christy W. Cheek
University of Mary Washington

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CHRISTY W. CHEEK
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Signature of Project Advisor

Dr. Laurie Abeel
Associate Professor of Education
University of Mary Washington

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Abstract

Research indicates that Professional Learning Communities are a best practice of educators who wish to have continued and substantive school improvement (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Although most educators are familiar with the term and function of Professional Learning Communities, many educators appear to have difficulty harnessing their power to effectively drive improvement. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify the essential components of effective Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and create an action plan for leaders to utilize in the creation or reinstitution of PLCs in their buildings. The research project includes a literature review of best practices in regards to effectively running and managing PLCs. It continues with a report of survey and interview research results conducted of members of local PLCs who have found success as noted by their three-year SOL data is also included. The project concludes with recommendations for PLC implementation and further research. A professional development plan proposal and a monthly PLC expectations handout to be utilized as a reference for teachers first implementing PLCs are also included.

Introduction

Over the past nine years I have had the opportunity to teach sixth, seventh, and eighth grade English, Language Arts, and Reading classes in a middle school in the Northern Virginia area. Throughout those nine years I have been English department lead and a member of my school's leadership team, which focuses on using data to drive decision-making. Creating and leading professional development has been the easy part of the department lead job as I have been able to responded to survey, observation, and reflection data in order to provide development in the content and classroom management areas that our teachers need the most.

However, maintaining a goal oriented and effective PLC has been the hurdle that both the English department and entire school have struggled to maintain.

Although a number of teachers on the leadership team as well as our administrative team have attended conferences by Richard and Rebecca DuFour dedicated to bringing PLCs to schools around the nation and read a number of books and articles devoted to PLCs, we have not been able to figure out just what needs to be done in order for the school and subject-level departments to function as effective PLCs. Instead, our school works in isolated sets of dysfunctional PLCs that meet on an irregular basis and focus on items that we cannot control such as scheduling and class sizes instead of addressing student need and making improvements to our craft. We cannot figure out a way to obtain complete buy-in for PLCs as teachers overwhelmingly feel that this is just another fad.

According to Henderson (2008), who found inspiration from Richard and Rebecca DuFour, a PLC is a group of people, teachers and administrators, who are dedicated to students and their futures and who center their discussions and actions on student learning, create a culture of collaboration, and are results-driven (para. 2). Although the founding principles of PLCs outlined by the DuFours and echoed by other researchers seem simplistic, remaining focused on student learning, being goal oriented, collaborating, results driven, taking part in collective inquiry, and continually being committed to improvement, a true PLC is not created overnight or out of a prefabricated mold. PLCs are carefully crafted over time, as they are not a one-stop shop run solely off of reproducibles. By "creating" PLCs in a hasty fashion that over utilized reproducibles, my school left large chunks of our staff standing in the middle of a field by themselves; they are disengaged and feel as if PLCs are yet another "fad" that will come and go quickly in and out of the school vernacular. Instead of fostering collaboration, we ended up

emphasizing isolation as we push teachers to close their doors before the heaping stack of checklists, rules, and expectations smack them in the face.

According to research effective PLCs open new doors for teachers, pulling them out of the isolated worlds that many currently teach in. They provide teachers with the opportunity to not only grow by learning from their colleagues, but also collaborate for the purpose of increasing student achievement. As a teacher and aspiring K-12 administrator I see the priceless value in establishing and maintaining effective PLCs. With this research I will to gain a deeper understanding of what it takes to lead an effective PLC as both a teacher leader and future building administrator. I hope to answer the call to action made by Richard and Rebecca DuFour and Bob Eaker (2005) when they declared that "educators must develop a deeper, shared knowledge of learning community concepts and practices, and then must demonstrate the discipline to apply those concepts and practice in their own settings if their schools are to be transformed" (p. 10).

Literature Review

PLC History and Definition

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at their simplest form are a reform effort of a group of people intended to foster school improvement brought forth by such governmental actions including *Goals 2000* enacted by President George Bush in 1989 and The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 by President George W. Bush (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). In order for schools to be accountable to the new culture of higher expectations, school leaders were challenged Sergiovanni, 1994) to work in communities of lifelong learners that are not only focused on improving overall student success, but also challenged to become reflective practitioners. The

effort of the PLC reform is for schools and districts to make and maintain substantive school improvement.

DuFour (2004) believes that the term PLC is used too broadly in today's society as it encompasses any number of professional teams from teachers at the classroom level to staff members at the Department of Education, thus it is not being implemented with fidelity and losing it's overall effectiveness. DuFour (2004) shares that professional learning communities have hit an important crossroads, they can either take on the "all too-familiar cycle, [where] initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative…[followed by the feeling that] another reform movement has come and gone, reinforcing the conventional education wisdom that promises, 'This too shall pass'" (para 2). Or professional learning communities can avoid this cycle if educators reflect and apply the concepts of learning communities to their schools in an effective and meticulously systematic approach with constant support for teachers undergoing a significant change in their teaching philosophy.

A PLC as defined by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many (2010), is an "ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 11). DuFour, DuFour and Eaker (2008) outlined six characteristics of successful PLCs including maintaining a shared mission, vision, values, and goals, constructing a collaborative culture, taking part in collective inquiry, being action oriented, committed to continuous learning and improving, and being driven by results. PLCs are focused on the learning that takes place not just the teaching or what has been taught. In a PLC teachers are challenged to look past the checked off curriculum map and truly investigate through common formative assessments whether true learning has taken place.

PLC Characteristic #1: Establish a Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

The main function and lifeblood of a PLC is student learning and success. As a school begins to work as a successful PLC, this focus shifts from what is taught to how well students are learning. Teachers begin to embrace high-level learning expectations not just for gifted students but instead they embrace this idea and it becomes a fundamental foundation for all learners and educators within the organization (DuFour et al., 2008). In order to achieve this shared purpose of student learning and success, an effective PLC must continuously work under a shared mission. The mission of the organization becomes its purpose and according to both DuFour, et al. (2008) and Kanold (2006) answers the question as to why the organization exists. Kanold (2006) believes that a mission statement should be short and clearly stated in one sentence so that the mission does not become too overly complicated and lose it's vitality.

A successful PLC works to achieve its mission by working with a clear vision or direction in mind. The vision provides PLC members with the path needed to focus their efforts. Kanold (2006) asserts that a vision is crucial in moving an organization forward and answering the question what of what it wants to become. This question frames the PLC members and their thought process as it acts as a guide by helping them identify their organization's aspirations for the future. The vision of a PLC aids teachers in imagining what things will be like, how their work today will help the future of their students, while also providing clarity and coherence to a group of educators from a variety of backgrounds (Kanold, 2006). Huffman & Hipp (2003) echo the thoughts of Kanold (2006) when they emphasize that the vision of a school must be realistic and inspire educators and stakeholders to aspire to reach the future goals set forth in their mission.

According to Kanold (2006), if the mission answers the question of why the PLC exist, and the vision provides the picture of what the PLC hopes to become, then the values represent the collective commitments of PLC members. Collective commitments answer the question of how must we, as members of the PLCs, behave in order to achieve our vision and therefore guide the behavior of the PLC (DuFour et al. 2010). Collective commitments include establishing team norms such as arriving on time, remaining positive and student focused, and collectively decide what each member will bring to the learning community while also holding one another accountable for their participation and support. Sergiovanni (2005) states "When people gather together to…commit themselves to ideas, their relationship changes—they have made promises to each other and are likely to feel morally obliged to keep their promises" (p. 32).

In order for an effective PLC to reach its mission and vision not only does it establish values, but also PLC members mark their progress through the use of short and long-term goals. According to DuFour et al. (2010), establishing goals helps a PLC to prioritize its action steps. Short-term goals allow PLCs to celebrate the small victories while also building momentum that creates substantive long-term success. Short-term goals should be attainable so that incremental progress can be documented, where as long-term goals, also referred to as stretch goals, should provide inspiration for the team to continue striving for their vision. Both short and long-term goals should include SMART goals in that they are strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, and time bound (DuFour et al. 2010). Effective goal setting supports the collective accountability aspect of PLC set forth in the establishment of their values.

PLC Characteristic #2: Culture of Collaborative

In order to function as a PLC, one crucial challenge that many schools face is to overcome the challenge of creating a collaborative culture (DuFour, 2004). All too often teachers

and administrators are willing to collaborate but become uncomfortable when the task requires them to take a deeper look at their own teaching and instead they prefer the collaboration to stop at their classroom door. Teachers and administrators can sometimes get caught up in what David Perkins (2003) referred to as "coblaboration," where instead of collaborating and having data-rich discussions the focus of their discussions turns into a collective complaint about items in the building instead of remaining focused on the PLCs' collective commitment to student success. When collaboration turns into "coblaboration" team members are left with the feeling that meetings are unproductive, worthless, and an overall ineffective practice as they yield little to no personal or student growth.

An effective PLC establishes a collaborative culture with common goals where all teachers are mutually accountable for the work of the PLC. A collaborative culture allows teachers the opportunity to work together in an interdependent manner that will ultimately impact their classroom practice in ways thus leading to better results for their students, for their team of teachers, and for their organization (DuFour, et al., 2010). Collaboration leads to a greater understanding of curriculum, student development, and ultimately teaching because teachers are challenged to be reflective and apply change to their philosophy. Teaching and working in a building that does not foster a collaborative culture will, in the end, breed isolation and ultimately student and teacher professional learning will be stifled.

Morel (2014) asserts that teachers who work together not only share ideas and point of views, but also do so in a facilitative manner while continuously growing from one another's insights. The exchange of ideas and teaching methodology requires each teacher to reflect on both their teaching and assessment data, and then apply their new knowledge to their craft and the craft of those around them. The knowledge exchanged and gained by all throughout this

reciprocal and reflective process leads to improved teaching and learning for both students and teachers because they share a common goal of overall improvement. Morel (2014) further stresses that collaboration requires interpersonal skills, significant work, trust, and a consistent process. Administrators are tasked with teaching and supporting these requirements while also living and breathing them with their teachers and community. Morel (2014) believes that both administrators and teachers need to take steps to promote and enhance the collaborative practice within their building. Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, (2009) further the argument that collaboration is key to the success of a PLC when they assert that PLCs who collaborate together, instead of taking part in "coblaboration" and other surface level discussions, dig deeply into the content being taught and how students are learning it. They focus their efforts into defining what they expect students to learn and what to do if students do not learn what is expected.

PLC Characteristic #3: Collective Inquiry into Best Practice and Current Reality

As a function of effective PLCs, teams must be willing to consistently inquire about best practices in teaching and learning while also inquiring about not only their own current understanding of teaching and learning but also the current practices and conditions within their school in order to promote lasting success (DuFour et al., 2010). Effective PLCs strive to build a shared capacity of knowledge in order to not only benefit their own craft but also the learning of their students. According to DuFour et al. (2010), as PLCs that continuously take part in collective inquiry not only develop new skills that they can apply in their classrooms they also benefit from the shared life experiences of their colleagues. Over time and through the use of a strong PLC mindset, the shared experiences collected through collective inquiry and the act of building capacity amongst teachers contribute to an overall shift in both the attitude and belief

systems of teachers within the building leading to a cultural change across the school (DuFour et al., 2010).

Effective collective inquiry requires that teachers work together to answer the following questions: what is it we want our students to learn, how will we know when each student has learned it, and what will we do if they are not learning (DuFour et al., 2010). The dialogue that comes from these probing questions drives the actions of the PLC. According to DuFour et al. (2010), collective inquiry does not fall on the doorstep of one teacher or a handful of teachers, instead effective collective inquiry is the professional responsibility of all teachers thus requiring the entire school to work as a PLC.

In order for administrators to support the culture shift and support a collective inquiry environment their thoughts on professional development also have to shift from outside experts to embedded professional development opportunities (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Job-embedded learning is active learning that requires reflecting on the experience, following by applying and sharing your new ideas and insights with others (Wood & McQuarrie, 1999). Job-embedded learning creates the atmosphere for collective inquiry, as it requires PLC members to learn and apply their new-shared knowledge and understandings. Easton (2012) reinforces the value of job-embedded learning when she asserts that marked improvement in schools comes from long-term, embedded professional learning opportunities, not from state mandates.

PLC Characteristic #4: Action Oriented

Members of an effective PLC work under the notion that action drives improvement. Instead of sitting idly on data, they act quickly to create positive change and "turn aspirations into action and visions into reality" (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 12). PLCs who are action oriented listen to their colleagues and learn from their prior experiences and life-lessons, both positive

and negative, in order to promote change within their own teaching and classroom routines. They understand and live by the notion that learning is an active process for both students and teachers that requires engagement and trust. The idea that learning is an active process extends to the work of the PLC and requires that all teachers take an active role in the PLC by remaining steadfast to their collective commitments. Active learning, or learning by doing, drives the work of the PLC as the members recognize that until change is made within their teaching and how students are learning, there is no need to anticipate a change as change is an active verb that requires action by all PLC members (DuFour, et al., 2010).

PLC Characteristic #5: Commitment to Continuous Learning and Improving

Effective PLCs are committed to continuous learning and improving of all students. Schools can no longer just say they want all students to learn in the mission statement, instead they must demonstrate this commitment to learning through investigative data digging coupled with intervention for students who are not meeting their learning goals (DuFour, 2004). With a focus on learning instead of teaching, teachers and staff form a collective responsibility that builds "shared knowledge" and provides the platform needed to create change (DuFour, 2004).

Members that are committed to continuous learning do not rely solely on one form of data, instead they gather evidence throughout a learning experience and respond to the data accordingly. Shifting from merely focusing on summative data, to concentrating on formative assessments coupled with timely, directive and systematic intervention encourages improvement for all students and allows teachers to focus on what is being learned instead of merely focusing on what is being taught (DuFour et al., 2005). Assessments become the catalyst for change within the building as PLC members are continuously responding in an action-oriented manner to each and every need of the learner.

Embedded in their active response to student learning, the effective PLC member also responds to assessment data by changing the way they are teaching the material and use the data to inform their instruction (DuFour, et al., 2005). PLC members utilize the curriculum map as a guide and not the end-all-be-all of their instruction; the true measure of what has been taught is the level of mastery amongst students not the curriculum check off list or end of unit summative assessments.

PLC Characteristic #6: Results Oriented

Not only do PLC members assess their students' data utilizing multiple measurement forms throughout a formative assessment process, PLC members must also assess their efforts in being a member of an effectively run PLC. All initiatives that provide positive change must undergo a continual assessment process (DuFour et al., 2010). Being an effective PLC means that all aspects of the PLC are continuously assessed—focused on learning, collaboration versus coblaboration, collective inquiry, action oriented, and continuous learning and improving. According to DuFour et al. (2010), effective PLCs remain focused on results rather than their original intentions. Each PLC must closely analyze what it has accomplished and compare it to what it set out to do. Each improvement goal must be measurable and each member must be held accountable for reaching that goal.

Being results driven also encourages teachers within a PLC to create common formative assessments that can be analyzed as a team. During the analysis process, team members identify and respond to strengths and weaknesses across a multitude of areas including student learning, teacher learning, how the instruction is being provided, as well as any hiccups in the intervention process. Given the result of their findings, each PLC member is able to grow as a teacher, PLC member, and learner (DuFour et al., 2010).

PLCs are a necessary component for student and teacher learning and success. Principles and school leaders must prepare and support teachers in developing and maintaining PLCs within their building. Teachers must be taught how to collaborate, dig into data, and use the data they find in a manner in which improves student learning. Both teachers and administrators within an organization must utilize the six characteristics of effective PLCs in order to achieve maximum results.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research project is to address the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of effective Professional Learning Communities?

2. How are effective Professional Learning Communities held accountable?

Methodology

Research on the effective components of PLCs was conducted through two qualitative measures: a teacher survey and three interviews. A portion of the survey worked as a quantitative measure because the Likert Scale was used to measure the degree to which each respondent agreed or disagreed with a provided statement (Alreck & Settle, 2004). Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the University of Mary Washington's Internal Review Board, as well as the appropriate local school officials before the research was initiated. Teachers who completed the survey read a consent form (see Appendix A) and accepted conditions electronically before submitting the survey, and teachers participating in the interview read and signed a consent form (see Appendix B).

The survey (see Appendix C) was sent to about 150 teachers and I received 35 responses; 58% of what I had hoped to receive. The survey was distributed via email to the building principals in three Stafford County Middle Schools through the Stafford County Public Schools

Office of Professional Learning. The building principals then forwarded the email with the link

to the survey to the general education teachers in their building. No teachers were excluded

therefore perspectives from general education, special education, elective, and physical

education staff members were elicited. The survey was sent to all staff members at the three

corresponding schools in Stafford County twice, once immediately following Spring Break and a

second time two weeks later as a reminder. Teachers had one month to respond to the

questionnaire. Survey Monkey survey software was used to create the survey and collect the

responses.

The survey included seven open-ended questions, also referred to as unstructured

questions, where the respondent was given a question but no alternative answers were provided

(Alreck & Settle, 2004). The open-ended questions did not specify a particular range or degree to

which the respondent should use when answering the question (Alreck &Settle, 2004). In order

to analyze open-ended questions, Alreck & Settle (2004) suggest grouping answers into similar

categories, which required me to make many judgments concerning the meaning behind each

respondent's answer. The following trends were noted throughout each answer: common

assessments, collaborative environment, establishing norms, using data to drive instruction,

groups of professionals, student learning, life-long learning of the teacher, common goals, and

teacher planning and practices.

The open-ended questions on the survey included the following: in your opinion, how

would you define a Professional Learning Community (PLC)? What is the focus/purpose of a

PLC? What do you feel a PLC must possess in order to be successful? In your opinion, what are

the strengths of your current vertical PLC? In your opinion, what are the strengths of your

current horizontal PLC? And what data currently drives your building level PLC's decision-making?

Benefits to using open-ended questions include the following: they allow for a number of different answers, they allow respondents to answer the question as fully as they would like as they are not required to fit their opinions into a pre-established point of view, and unanticipated findings can be discovered (Alreck & Settle, 2004). However there are disadvantages associated with using open-ended questions including the difficulty related to comparing open-ended responses, respondents could be intimidated by the question, which directly affects their response, and the judgments made during analysis may be inaccurate (Alreck & Settle, 2004).

The survey had three questions grouped utilizing the Likert scaling technique. The Likert scaling technique asks the respondents to state the degree to which they agree or disagree with a provided statement (Alreck & Settle, 2004). The Likert Scale was used to obtain participants' perceptions and/or opinions regarding PLCs in their building. Participants' chose strongly agree (5), agree (4), neither (3), disagree (2), or strongly disagree (1) in response to a provided statement (Alreck & Settle, 2004). Benefits of utilizing Likert survey technique include its versatility, ease for the respondent, and ease of data collection (Alreck & Settle, 2004). The Likert scale allowed me to obtain a summated value for each opinion provided (Alreck & Settle, 2004). The summated value was used to determine overall perceptions towards the effectiveness of utilizing PLCs within a middle school environment (Alreck & Settle, 2004).

The Likert scaling statements on the survey included the following: My PLC utilizes norms and/or protocols regularly at meetings. The use of norms and/or protocols benefits the meeting. And, being a member of a PLC is having a positive impact o my classroom practice.

I interviewed three middle school teachers, one sixth grade, one seventh grade, and one eighth grade math teacher, individually in my building for 30 minutes each during their designated planning time. The interviewees were chosen using their three-year Standards of Learning Assessment data growth. Each teacher interviewed had a 15-20% growth each of the past three years yielding 95-100% pass rates on the 2014-2015 math 6, 7, and Algebra SOL assessment. The date of the interview was established two weeks prior to the interview allowing the interviewees time to arrange their planning schedule to permit 30 minutes of uninterrupted discussion time. Before the interviews, information from the literature review was used to generate a list of interview questions (see Appendix D). A week prior to the interview, I emailed the questions to each interviewee to allow them time to preview, process, and ask any questions they had concerning the interview questions prior to the interview. None of the interviewees had any questions prior to the interview.

The interview process was guided by a responsive interview style noted by Rubin & Rubin (2005). Although questions were provided, the questions served a facilitative function during the interview. The interview took on a conversational tone instead of relying solely on the predetermined questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Notes were recorded during the interview on the question sheet that was provided to each interviewee ahead of time (see Appendix D). I recorded exactly what the teacher said to each question posed. Due to the conversational nature of the interview, not all questions were explicitly posed, however, each question was included in one form or another throughout the conversation. At the end of the interview I asked each interviewee how they felt during the interview and recorded their feelings on the same question sheet. I also asked each interviewee to clarify and elaborate on any areas of the conversational interview in which I felt required clarification prior to leaving the interview.

Upon completion of the interviews, I began to analyze the results using the first stage of interview analysis described by Rubin & Rubin (2005) known as recognition. During this stage, I examined the interviews for similar concepts, themes, events, and topics (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I made a number of judgments in order to group responses into clusters. These clusters became one of the first steps I took in coding the interviews in order to draw comparisons between the interviews and the survey responses.

The research was conducted using a triangulation technique, as the literature review, survey, and interviews were all used to address the research questions. The combination of these three techniques enabled me to complete a comprehensive analysis of the data and draw some valuable conclusions related to the research questions.

Results

The data collected through both surveys and interviews were analyzed to determine what components are necessary in order for a PLC to be effective. During this analysis, nine themes emerged from the data and were studied in detail. The nine themes were evident in both the survey and interview results, however, due to the nature of the open-ended survey and interview questions I had to apply my own judgment to the themes thus combining a few of them to create five overall themes. For example, given the nature of the open-ended questions, respondents were free to define the members of a PLC in a variety of ways including: professionals, grade level teachers, teachers who teach the same or a similar content, educators, and school staff. Thus those definitions were combined into one overall theme of professionals within a school environment. The themes included in the results of this research are the idea of a group of professionals in a school environment, working together through collaboration, ensuring students are learning, being a life-long learner, and using data to make decisions. After identifying the

themes, I coded both the open-ended survey responses and the interviews using the same coding

system. The codes made it possible to draw connections between the survey results and those of

the interviews as well.

Analysis of the survey revealed that in order for a PLC to run effectively it must be

composed of a group of professionals within an educational setting who work together

maintaining a similar interest focused on student learning. These educational professionals are

driven by data and dedicated to continuous learning through professional development. Survey

responder #1 defined a PLC as a group of "educators in the same grade level, who teach in the

same content area, who are continuously concerned with how students are learning and use data

to control their next moves. Effective PLC members are also committed to broadening their

teaching craft by furthering their education." The fives codes consisting of professionals,

collaborative work, data driven, student learning, and life-long learning of the educational

professional were echoed by 86% of the survey respondents when asked to define, in their

opinion, a PLC.

All three of the teachers interviewed echoed the same five themes when asked to describe

their experience in a PLC. Teacher #3 stated, "I have been in a multitude of PLCs throughout my

35 years of teaching. The successful ones work together for the betterment of students and they

use pre-assessment, common assessments, and post-assessments to really know how students are

learning. They do not wait until the SOL, or the weeks leading up to it, to change how they are

teaching." Teacher #3 included later in the interview that "teachers must be learners themselves,

they can not rely on what they were taught in teacher education courses decades ago. They must

be willing to put themselves back in the shoes of the learner and further their understanding of

their craft." Teacher #2 echoed the same sentiments as the 3rd teacher interviewed but also added

that a successful PLC is "not only focused on student learning, they are rooted in the mission and vision of the school." The idea of a PLC remaining focused on the school's mission and vision was not otherwise mentioned in the interviews or the survey.

When asked what the focus/purpose of a PLC was both the survey respondents and the interviewees echoed similar sentiments including student learning, teaching techniques, and the creation of assessments that showcase what a student knows, understands, and can do on their own. Seventy four percent of survey respondents felt as though the purpose of a PLC was rooted in knowing what students are learning based on common assessment data. Within the provided answers, 71% included the discussion of teaching techniques in a collaborative forum to enhance both how the content is being taught and what students are learning. Twenty six percent of survey respondents felt the purpose of a PLC was for teachers to, as respondent #33 reported, "meet more often and teach cookie-cutter lessons."

A common theme that ran throughout both the survey responses and the interviews was the importance of two-way collaboration. Teachers must be willing to not only work together but also learn from one another in an atmosphere that all feel comfortable and welcome in. Teacher #1 expressed her feelings towards collaboration when she stated, "The single most important aspect of a successful PLC, beyond remaining focused on what students are actively learning, is working together as a teacher team. I would never be able to dig through and act on all of the data that is collected throughout the year without the input and support of all of my PLC members." Respondent #16 reiterated the importance of collaboration but included the idea that all members must "productively 'buy-in' to the PLC. Nothing is more annoying than a member who refuses to take part in the work, they need to remember why they became a teacher (for students) and realize that it is no longer a profession where teachers work in isolation."

When asked how often a successful PLC should meet, the responses ranged from daily to once a month. The majority of respondents, 44%, stated that successful PLCs should meet once per week and then divide out tasks for each teacher to complete on the days that they do not meet. Survey respondent #6 stated, "By dividing out tasks for each teacher to completed within the week allows the PLC to cover more ground and use their time effectively when they meet to really dig into data or create common assessments." Twenty nine percent of survey respondents felt as though meeting once per month was sufficient in order to be a successful PLC. Within the 29%, nine of the 10 respondents voiced displeasure in the need to meet more often, including respondent 29; "I never understand the value of wasting precious time during the day. Teachers are not paid nearly enough to waste time during their planning attending meeting upon meeting. PLCs should learn to use e-mail as an effective form of communication."

All three interviewees felt that PLC should meet twice weekly in order to be truly successful. Teacher #1 stated, "Meeting twice per week offers a system of checks and balances to PLC members. It is difficult to slack off of your responsibilities when you know that you will be meeting with your colleagues to work on things in a day or so." Teacher 3 felt that two days should be the minimum for PLCs due to the heavy workload. "Often times my PLC ends up meeting daily because in the end we are all working towards the same goal. Although one might be working on an assessment and another on uploading data, we are doing it together. The more we meet and discuss where we are in meeting that goal, the more we are able to support one another."

In order to remain professional within PLC meetings, 83% of survey respondents and two of the three teachers interviewed felt that creating norms was an integral step and a noted strength of their vertical PLCs. The remaining 18% of survey respondents did not note a specific

strength of their vertical PLC. Instead, 14 of the survey respondents commented on what a waste of time vertical PLC meetings are for them. Respondent #35 stated, "Vertical PLCs are just a fancy name for a department meeting. All they end up being is a place to hear county updates and do professional development that not every teacher needs to have."

When asked what are the strengths of your horizontal PLC, a number of themes including collaboration, focused on student learning, and partaking in data-driven decision making were included in the survey responses. Ninety four percent of respondents felt their strengths lied in the way that they work together in order to better their teaching thus yielding higher learning levels for all students. Of the 94% who noted collaboration and student learning as strengths, 91% of respondents also included the idea of data-driven decision making as a strength of their horizontal PLC. The remaining 6% of respondents were split between maintaining a common subject planning time as a strength and focusing on intervention strategies as a strength of their horizontal PLC.

When asked what drives decision-making 94% of survey respondents reported that data drives all decisions made within a PLC. Six percent, 2 respondents, reported that they either "do not know" or "nothing" when asked to identify what drives decision-making in their school. Although 94% of respondents reported that data drives instruction, the types of data including School Improvement Plan, formative and summative assessment, countywide benchmarks, and SOL. All three teachers that were interviewed indicated that data drives all of their decision-making. All three reported that they use a combination of previous SOL scores, formative and summative assessments, and countywide benchmark data to make decisions regarding student learning and effective intervention. Teacher #1 stated, "We have to use data to make decisions, otherwise we would all float in our own directions with no regard to our group." Teacher #2

shared, "Although data drives our decisions, it is important for us to remember to use a number of forms of data. You can't see everything on just one assessment, you need to look collectively over time in order to make true data-formed decisions."

The following information was yielded from the survey via Likert scale questioning (see Figures 1, 2, and 3):
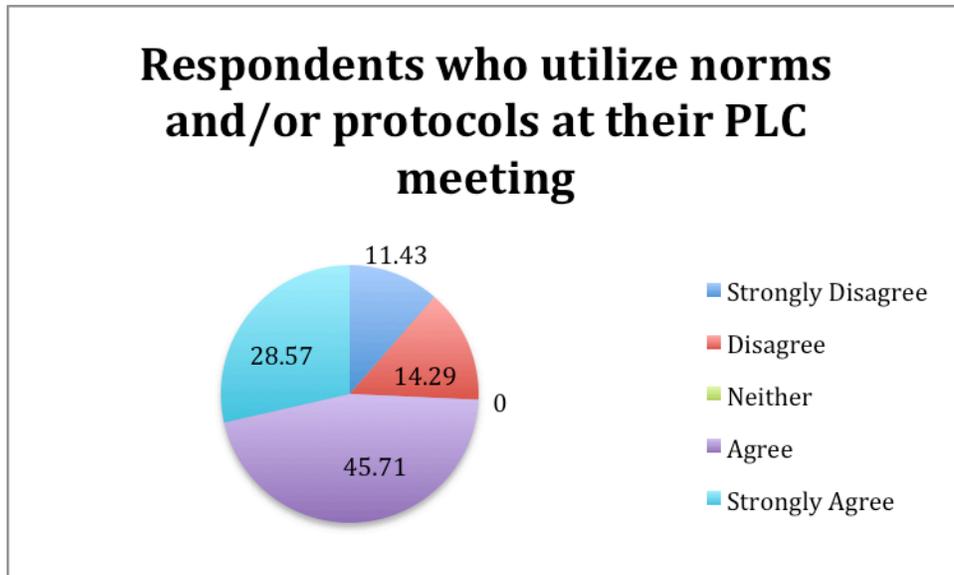
Figure 1. Respondents who utilize norms and/or protocols regularly at PLC meetings. This figure illustrations the opinion of respondents when asked if their PLC utilizes norms and/or protocols regularly at PLC meetings.

Norms and/or protocols benefit my PLC

Response	Value
Strongly Agree	40
Agree	34.29
Neither	0
Disagree	20
Strongly Disagree	5.71
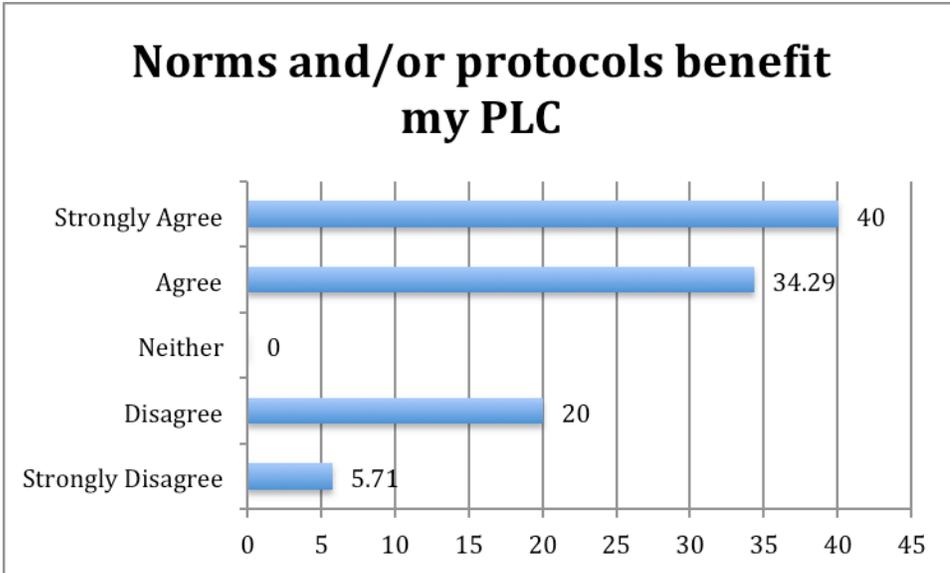
Figure 2. Norms and/or protocols benefit my PLC. This figure illustrates the opinion of respondents when asked if utilizing norms and/or protocols benenfited their PLC meeting.

Positive impacts of PLCs on classrooms

- Strongly Disagree: 11.43
- Disagree: 8.57
- Neither: 5.71
- Agree: 31.43
- Strongly Agree: 42.86

Figure 3. Positive impacts of PLCs on classrooms. Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of respondents who feel working in a PLC has a positve impact on their classroom.

During the interviews, I narrowed in on a few additional aspects of successful PLCs including administrative support, collective commitments, student intervention, and the idea of a PLC Utopia.
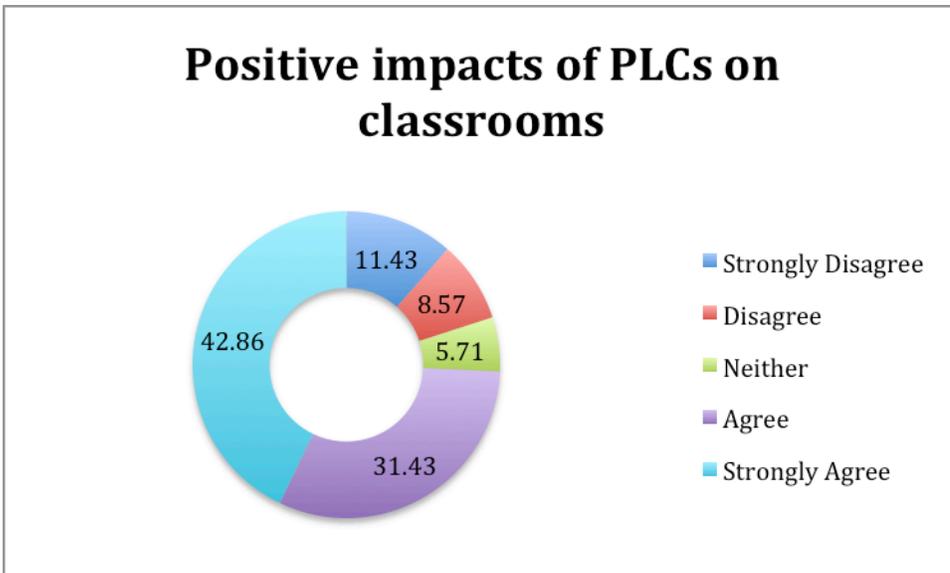
When asked whether administrative support played a large role in the effectiveness PLCs, all three of the teachers interviewed felt that administrative support was beneficial but not truly necessary. Teacher #1 stated, "We meet all the time without our building administration. I am sure they have an idea of what we are doing but they are not around for the day in and day out decisions, they have school to run." Teacher #2 had a similar stance, "I know that my administrator stands behind PLCs because they ensure common planning each year even though our school-wide schedule has changed tremendously over the past four years. But, other than that I don't really think they have to support us by attending meetings." Teacher #2 further reported that she feels supported without having someone hold her hand through a process as she has experience working with both teachers and students. Teacher #3 said, "The role of support is going to be different between every teacher, every content area, every year. Your PLC may need more support if it is comprised of new teachers or less support if they are already moving in a solid direction."

All three teachers interviewed felt that being dedicated to collective commitments was imperative to the success of a PLC. Teacher 1 reported, "Collective commitments are the glue that hold everyone in our PLC accountable. If I say that I am going to bring the updated data sheet to the next meeting, I have to do it. If I don't our meeting will not be productive." Teacher #2 echoed the same sentiment, "I can only remember a handful of times when someone in our PLC has not held up their end of the bargain. It doesn't happen often because everyone is motivated and focused on the same thing, we have to support one another in order for our

students to find success." Teacher #3 stated, "We try to switch up our collective commitments every so often so that everyone has a hand in running the scantrons, entering the data onto the spreadsheet, and making a million copies, etc. We are in this together and we have to know how and why things are done incase the members of the PLC change from year to year."

According to the teachers that were interviewed, intervention plays a huge role in their PLCs. By using data via formative and summative assessments, each teacher interviewed is able to identify students who are not meeting the bar. Teacher #1 shared, "Intervention can be tricky, sometimes a student does not understand how fractions work and therefore struggle on almost every fraction question. Other times, they understand the function but they struggle to apply a concept like multiplication or division." Teacher #2 reported, "I would say a good 60% of our discussion each week centers around who needs intervention or remediation and how we are going to get it done; intervention is priceless as not all students learn at the same rate." Teacher #3 connected the importance her PLC places on intervention and collective commitments when she stated, "Intervention works as a collective commitment for my PLC. In order to be truly focused on student learning all teachers have to be committed to intervention. I have never taught a single lesson in 35 years that every student understood perfectly the first time around. My PLC works together to figure out how to reach each student through both better teaching and intervention."

When asked if you were to work in a Utopia what would the function of PLCs be and how would that affect students and teachers, all three teachers expressed excitement in both their verbal and nonverbal response. Teacher #1 stated, "If everyone felt has passionate about working in an effective PLC as I do, students and teachers would benefit immensely! Not only would students be more successful, teachers would be incredibly gifted at their craft because they are

learning the best strategies from the best teachers!" Teacher #2 echoed the same excitement, "Working would truly be a dream. Imagine what would happen if everyone in the school wanted the same thing and was willing to do whatever it took to get there!"

Discussion

Teachers' opinions concerning what a PLC is, it's focus and purpose, how often they should meet, and what drives decision-making in a PLC according to a survey of 35 middle school teachers aligns well with existing literature regarding PLC practices. The majority of teachers surveyed believe that utilizing the structure outlined by DuFour, DuFour & Eaker (2008) supports the functionality of their PLC as it provides structure and purpose to their meetings. The structure, according to 74% of survey respondents, has a positive impact on their classroom practices. This is echoed by all three of the interviews who have had notable growth in their SOL pass percentage over the past three years in which they have utilized the PLC structure and protocols outlined by DuFour, DuFour Eaker, & Many (2010).

Based on the analysis of the open-ended questions in the survey, teachers have a number of different definitions regarding what a PLC is but all of the definitions showcase an understanding related to how a PLC is defined by DuFour, et al. (2010). Ideas such as collaboration, using data to inform decision-making, and remaining focused on student learning were echoed throughout every survey answer. Based upon the consistency of the survey answers one can conclude that professional development regarding PLC practices has been provided. However, it can also be surmised that not all PLCs are provided with equitable time to meet during their planning periods. Teachers, who indicated that they teach elective courses and are the only person in the building who teach their course, find it difficult to practice the structures outlined for a PLC as they have struggle to maintain consistency in their meetings, their

collective commitments, and digging through the enormous amount of data on their own to truly reap the benefits of working in a PLC.

The amount of meetings required for successful PLCs also varied amongst survey respondents. One might conclude that due to the array of content teachers and elective teachers surveyed the consistency and necessity may vary from subject to subject. Subject areas that utilize a significant amount of data and are SOL courses, such as English and math, may need to meet of a regular basis in order to analyze their data and remediate students as needed. Whereas elective courses, and sixth grade history and science teachers who are practicing project-based learning may only need to meet in certain intervals throughout a school year. In my experience, students tend to do well in elective, history, and science classes because they are high interest subjects where their deficits in reading and/or math do not have a negative impact on their learning each day and therefore limited, in any, remediation and intervention are required, thus resulting in less overall data.

Through further analysis of the Likert scale questions on the survey, one can conclude that the teachers who utilize PLC norms and protocols outlined by the DuFour et al., (2010) and *All Things PLC* (2015) reap the benefits associated with their usage through a positive impact on their classroom performance. However, based on the scaled responses one can surmise that teachers who do not utilize norms and protocols to structure their meetings do not reap the benefits found in both literature and practice (DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour et al,. 2010), such as those showcased as evidence of PLCs bringing student success to their buildings on *All Things PLC,* as well as the success of the teachers who were interviewed.

Based on the analysis of the interviews, teachers who maintain active participation in their PLC utilizing collective commitments, working collaboratively, and remaining focused on

student learning note success not only for themselves and their teaching craft but also for their students. The collaborative culture that each of the teachers interviewed work in allows them the opportunity to work in an interdependent manner impacting not only their classroom practice in ways that have lead to better results for their students, but also benefiting their content and grade level team of teachers, and their overall organization (DuFour, et al., 2010). Collaboration leads to a greater understanding of curriculum, student development, and ultimately teaching because teachers are challenged to be reflective and apply change to their philosophy.

Combining the results of the survey with the results of the interviews yields a number of connections to the literature regarding the effective components of PLCs. The survey and the interview, however, also highlight teacher perceptions and definitions that could be misaligned due to judgments made during the analysis process and/or the manner in which the perceptions and definitions of effective PLCs were provided to teachers during professional development.

Conclusions

This project will conclude with several remaining questions and recommendations for further research. One significant question that remains after conducting this study is how teachers define professional learning communities. The varied results could mean a number of things such as teachers have been working in PLCs for some time now and do not innately remember each characteristic individually but instead combine a few of the characteristics together such as remaining focused on student learning and working within the mission, vision, goals, and values of the school. They may ultimately keep the mission, vision, goals, and values in mind while also focusing on what students are truly learning. However, perhaps the reason they are neglecting to mention the school's mission, vision, goals, and values is because they are not aware of them or recall them off-hand.

Another question raised by this study is the amount of time a PLC meeting should take and how often they should meet. The survey respondents provided a spread of one day per week for an hour to one day per month for thirty minutes. This is a significant gap that could potentially be impacted by content area or building requirements. Based on the interviews, the success that their PLCs have found has required them to meet multiple times per week in order to effectively collaborate, analyze, and respond to data to meet student needs.

Should there be more consistency in expectations regarding PLCs for elective teachers? I found it unsettling that elective teachers and others who are the sole representation of their content area feel neglected when all staff members within an organization should utilize PLCs to not only better their teaching craft but also the learning of their students. In the end, we are all working towards the same mission, vision, goals, and values and if there are staff members who feel left out, disregarded, isolated, or are unable to meet within their planning time as they are spread amongst a number of different building within the county then there is a major hurdle that needs to be rectified.

The amount of county-level support is another significant question raised while conducting this study. Content areas who currently have and who have maintained county-level support via a curriculum specialists versus those content areas who have had significant changes in their county-level representation each of the past three years and/or the position as been cut as a result of budget constraints is a concern. Each content area should have equal representation and support. Teacher #2 who was interviewed was concerned with the amount of "nit-picking" she feels that the county representative for math dictates to all math teachers at the middle school level. Teacher #2 stated, "At times the turn-around wanted for data is completely unrealistic when we are also teaching. I know other subjects, like history and science, do not have to deal

with this kind of managerial leadership." Support from the county level may have both a positive and a negative impact on the vision of what a PLC is and does within a building and county.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research in this study are as follows. This study could be expanded to include to all middle school teachers within a county in order to establish countywide correlations and group outliers. Within the research collection, one should make note to identify where each respondent works and the content in which they teach. These distinctions will yield strong conclusions based on both building and content practices. Utilizing Likert scale questions instead of primarily open-ended responses would strengthen the results of the study. The degree to what defines an answer as complete when utilizing open-ended responses is questionable; some respondents in this study answered open-ended questions in as few as five words, others wrote three to four compound complex sentence responses. Using a survey along with observations of PLCs at work and encouraging teachers to reflect on their PLC practice perhaps through journaling would give more in-depth information about the function and components necessary for successful PLCs.

It is also recommended that principals and building leaders survey their staff in order to obtain a baseline of understandings and usage of the PLC model within their schools. To assume PLC structures and protocols are being utilized is unreliable, as it does not support using data to manage decision-making within an organization. Principals should also plan to observe and play an active role within PLC meetings on a regular basis to not only offer support but also make teachers accountable for utilizing the PLC structure consistently across an organization.

Furthermore, principals and building leaders should be equipped to offer scaffolded professional development for their teachers in staff regarding PLCs. A professional development

plan is outlined at the end of this research (see Appendix E) to support leaders in the beginning

stages of initiating PLCs within their organization. A timeline of reminders and meeting focus

points is also provided in this research (see Appendix F) to support teachers in maintaining a

process of the data and content that should be discussed throughout various intervals within a

school year.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Release for Survey

Dear Colleague:

My name is Christy Cheek, and I am a graduate student at the University of Mary Washington. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Please know that participation is completely voluntary, so you may choose to participate or decline this offer. Please feel free to ask any questions that you may have about the research; I will be happy to explain anything in greater detail.

I am interested in learning more about the components of effective Professional Learning Communities. You will be asked to complete an eight-question survey that will take approximately five to seven minutes of your time. All of your survey responses will be kept anonymous. In this manner, your name and any personal information will NOT be disclosed to anyone.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. Respondents are invited to answer all questions, but are free to skip any questions they choose not to answer for any reason, and free to stop and not complete the survey for any reason whatsoever.

All responses are anonymous, and clicking the "DONE" button at the end of the survey signals consent that your responses can be used for the purposes described here. In any reports about this research, care will be taken to eliminate all information that could potentially enable identification of individual survey respondents. Only aggregated data will be presented or used in the research report.

There are minimal risks, and no direct benefits to taking this survey. The only possible risk of participating in this survey would be due to the discomfort you feel about answering particular questions, but since the survey is voluntary and anonymous, this risk is extremely minimal.

The benefit of your survey responses will be to provide me with real-life, local data on the role of PLCs in our schools. At the conclusion of my research, including the survey results, I will create a professional development plan with corresponding materials, and an action plan for PLC implementation for schools to use over three to five year period. The risks to you for participating in this survey is extremely minimal, as I will simply mention that I sent this survey to local educators. However, once again, your name and personal information will NOT be published in the findings of this study.

If you do not wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

Please feel free to ask any questions that you may have about the research, as I will be happy to explain anything in greater detail. My e-mail address: cwalk7cl@mail.umw.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

The research described above has been approved by the University of Mary Washington IRB, which is a committee responsible for ensuring that research is being conducted safely and that risks to participants are minimized. For information about the review of this research, contact the IRB chair, Dr. Jo Tyler at jtyler@umw.edu.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Release for Interview

Dear Colleague:

My name is Christy Cheek, and I am a graduate student at the University of Mary Washington. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Please know that participation is completely voluntary, so you may choose to participate or decline this offer. I am now going to explain the study to you. Please feel free to ask any questions that you may have about the research; I will be happy to explain anything in greater detail.

I am interested in learning more about the components of effective Professional Learning Communities. I am asking to interview you individually to learn more about your experiences and thoughts related to the PLC. I will take handwritten notes during the interviews and will not record your name or any identifying information about you, your department or your school.

All information obtained during the interview will be kept confidential meaning that your name and the name of your department and school will not appear anywhere and no one except me will know about your specific answers. In my notes and any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will use a made-up name for you, and I will not reveal details or I will change details in order to protect your identity.

The benefit of your interview will be to provide me with real-life, local data on the role of PLCs in your school. At the conclusion of my research including the interview notes, I will create a professional development plan with corresponding materials, and an action plan for PLC implementation for schools to use over three to five year period. The risks to you for participating in this interview are extremely minimal. Once again, your name and personal information will NOT be published in the findings of this study.

If you do not wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

Please feel free to ask any questions that you may have about the research, as I will be happy to explain anything in greater detail. My e-mail address: cwalk7cl@mail.umw.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

The research described above has been approved by the University of Mary Washington IRB, which is a committee responsible for ensuring that research is being conducted safely and that risks to participants are minimized. For information about the review of this research, contact the IRB chair, Dr. Jo Tyler at jtyler@umw.edu.

Participant:

All of my questions have been addressed. I choose, voluntarily, to participate in this research study. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

_____   _____
Printed name of participant   date

_____   _____
Signature of participant   date

_____   _____
Printed name of investigator   date

_____   _____
Signature of investigator   date

Appendix C

Survey Questions

1. In your opinion, how would you define a Professional Learning Community (PLC)?

2. In your opinion, what is the focus/purpose of a PLC?

3. What do you feel a PLC must possess in order to be successful?

4. How often do you feel a PLC should meet?

5. In your opinion, what are the strengths of your current vertical (building level, not county-level) PLC?

6. In your opinion, what are the strengths of your current horizontal (building level, not county-level) PLC?

7. What data currently drives your building level PLC's decision-making?

8. Please answer each of the following statements:

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree   Neither

     A. My PLC utilizes norms and/or protocols regularly at meetings

     B. The use of norms and/or protocols benefit the meeting

     C. Being a member of a PLC is having a positive impact on my classroom practice

9. Please feel free to add any additional thoughts and/or comments below:

Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. How often does your PLC meet?

2. Describe your experiences working in a PLC.

3. Do you feel that you have administrator support?

4. What kind/types of support do you receive from your school administrative team?

5. How does a typical PLC meeting in your department run?

6. What role does collaboration play in your PLC meeting?

7. What role do collective commitments play in your PLC?

8. Describe the types of assessments your PLC analyzes?

9. What do you do if a student is not achieving at a minimum level previously decided upon

    by the PLC?

    a. What types and how are interventions provided?

10. If you were to work in a Utopia what would the function of PLCs be and how would that

    affect students and teachers?

Appendix E

Sample PLC Professional Development Plan

Activity Title: *Effective PLCs To Support Quality Tier 1 Instruction*

Learner outcomes for this professional development workshop:

Learners will understand the components of an effective professional learning community (PLC) meeting cycle. This will include establishing norms and expectations, establishing a clear mission, vision, goals, and values in conjunction with the school administration, and building and implementing a common vocabulary. Participants will also identify, create, and utilize a variety of instructional strategies, resources, and tools to support all aspects of an effective PLC meeting cycle with the overall goal of increasing student and teaching learning. The final result will be that learners will have a clear expectation and plan for conducting a PLC meeting that supports quality instruction and reflection of data in order to drive decision making.

Collaboration:

Participants will be actively engaged as they complete cooperative activities, watch related videos, discuss relevant topics, and lesson plan together. A strong emphasis will be placed on the role of collaboration and therefore strategies that teachers can use to form and build on collaborative groups in both their PLC and in their classroom will be introduced and practiced. Forms from the DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many (2010) *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Communities at Work: Second Edition* and All Things PLC will be utilized in order to build a common vocabulary and systematic approach to PLCs in our organization.

Reflection:

Reflection is an integral part of learning for both students and teachers. As such participants will be provided reflection time after each activity. Both written and verbal reflection will be encouraged using a variety of instructional strategies such as post-it note responses, exit slips, and table summarizers. In addition, each activity will prompt participants to determine how to utilize the activity in their grade-level PLCs and ultimately in their classes.

Job-Embedded:

Participants will be required to attend this professional development course prior to the upcoming school year. The course will be held three days prior to the established workweek. Participants will then be expected to meet twice per week during their designated planning time to implement PLC framework in their grade-level content areas. Likert Scale surveys will be sent to participants on a regular basis to help monitor the progress of each PLC. The results and feedback provided will be discussed, if necessary, at the department level PLC which occurs once a month. Furthermore, administrators and department leads will attend grade-level PLCs in an observational manner on a regular, pre-determined basis.

Appendix F

Sample PLC Yearlong Expectation Plan for Teachers

September:

- Set group norms
- Review pacing guide and curriculum framework
- Create pre-test
- Review student SOL data
- Common planning
- Organize peer walkthrough #1

October:

- Review student pretest data
- Develop SMART Goal
- Common planning
- Develop common assessments
- Identify students in need of intervention based on SOL and pretest data
- Begin intervention round 1 (third week of October)

November:

- Common planning
- Calibrate and pace curriculum
- Create common intervention check points
- Analyze intervention check point data
- Analyze common assessments
- Reflect on walkthrough #1

December:

- Common planning
- Identify students in need of intervention based on common assessments and pretest data
- Create common intervention check points
- Analyze intervention check point data
- Analyze common assessments
- Plan walkthrough #2

January:

- Common planning
- Create common intervention check points
- Analyze intervention check point data

- Analyze common assessments

February:

- Calibrate and pace curriculum
- Review and analyze benchmark data
- SMART Goal mid-year data and goal reflection
- Reflect on walkthrough #2

March:

- Common planning
- Identify students in need of intervention based on common assessments and pretest data
- Create common intervention check points
- Analyze intervention check point data
- Analyze common assessments
- Plan walkthrough #3

April:

- Common planning
- Create common intervention check points
- Analyze intervention check point data
- Analyze common assessments
- Administer post-test
- Calibrate and pace curriculum

May:

- Analyze post-test data
- SMART Goal end-of-year data and reflection
- Common Planning
- Reflect on walkthrough #3

June:
- Review SOL Scores