

## **Preparing for Alignment Discussions**

Use articles like the ones below along with a text protocol to have an in-depth discussion about characteristics of collaborative teams. It is important to use and follow a protocol for this work. By using more than one text, the participants get different perspectives. What I like about these texts is the succinct, yet dense content.

Text protocol options: Four As Protocol or Text Based Seminar

If you are not familiar with using protocols to guide discussions, please find more information at <https://nsrfharmony.org/whatareprotocols/>

Plan for this activity to take at least an hour. Do not rush the process.

Follow this with a planning session using *What? Why? How?* And the *Back to the Future* protocol, also available for download.

## **6 Essential Characteristics of a PLC (adapted from Learning by Doing)**

Kim Bailey - Learning by Doing  
Solution Tree, 2010

1. *Shared mission, vision, values, goals* Educators in a PLC benefit from clarity regarding their shared purpose, a common understanding of the school they are trying to create, collective communities to help move the school in the desired direction, and specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound (SMART) goals to mark their progress.
2. *Collaborative teams focused on learning in a PLC*, educators work together interdependently in collaborative teams to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable. The structure of the school is aligned to ensure teams are provided the time and support essential to adult learning. “Collaboration is a systematic process in which we work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results.”
3. *Collective inquiry Teams* in a PLC relentlessly question the status quo, seek new methods of teaching and learning, test the methods, and then reflect on the results. Building shared knowledge of both current reality and best practice is an essential part of each team’s decision-making process.
4. *Action orientation and experimentation* Members of a PLC constantly turn their learning and insights into action. They recognize the importance of engagement and experience in learning and in testing new ideas. They learn by doing.
5. *Commitment to Continuous improvement* Not content with the status quo, members of a PLC constantly seek better ways to achieve mutual goals and accomplish their fundamental purpose of learning for all. All teams engage in an ongoing cycle of:
  - Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
  - Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
  - Implementing the strategies and ideas
  - Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
  - Applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement
6. *Results orientation* educators in a PLC assess their efforts on the basis of tangible results. They are hungry for evidence of student learning and use that evidence to inform and improve their practice. “The success of the PLC concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the commitment and persistence of the educators within it.” —Richard DuFour

## What Are Professional Learning Communities?

It has been interesting to observe the growing popularity of the term [\*professional learning community\*](#). In fact, the term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning. This lack of precision is an obstacle to implementing PLC processes because, as Mike Schmoker observes, “clarity precedes competence” (2004a, p. 85). Thus, we begin with an attempt to clarify our meaning of the term. To those familiar with our past work, this step may seem redundant, but we are convinced that redundancy can be a powerful tool in effective communication, and we prefer redundancy to ambiguity.

We have seen many instances in which educators assume that a PLC is a program. For example, one faculty told us that each year they implemented a new program in their school. In the previous year it had been PLC, the year prior to that it had been “understanding by design,” and the current year it was “differentiated instruction.” They had converted the names of the various programs into verbs, and the joke on the faculty was that they had been “UBDed, PLCed, and DIed.” The PLC process is not a program. It cannot be purchased, nor can it be implemented by anyone other than the staff itself. Most importantly, it is ongoing—a continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it.

We have seen other instances in which educators assume that a PLC is a meeting—an occasional event when they meet with colleagues to complete a task. It is not uncommon for us to hear, “My PLC meets Wednesdays from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.” This perception of a PLC is wrong on two counts. First, the PLC is the larger organization and not the individual teams that comprise it. While collaborative teams are an essential part of the PLC process, the sum is greater than the individual parts. Much of the work of a PLC cannot be done by a team but instead requires a schoolwide or districtwide effort. So we believe it is helpful to think of the school or district as the PLC and the various collaborative teams as the building blocks of the PLC. Second, once again, the PLC process has a pervasive and ongoing impact on the structure and culture of the

school. If educators meet with peers on a regular basis only to return to business as usual, they are not functioning as a PLC. So the PLC process is much more than a meeting.

So, what is a PLC? We argue that it 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*. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators.

From: All Things PLC website; DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). [\*Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work™\*](#), pp. 2-4.