Major Improvement Strategy Guide
Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

Introduction of Strategy

For this guide, a PLC is defined as "…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" (DuFour, 2006).

Research has shown that the following components are necessary for PLCs to be effective. It is important to note that while there is evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of each component (see research following each component), these components are most effective when implemented together. For instance, if a school or district decides to provide time for PLCs but does not ensure that PLCs are focused on student learning, implementing PLCs will likely yield limited results because this is only one part of the work of PLCs. The following components are derived from various articles and research that articulate what PLCs should include:

1. **Focus on advancing student learning.**
2. **Meet and collaborate on a regular basis.**
3. **Promote a spirit of collaboration, inquiry, and reflection within PLCs.**
4. **Analyze student work and student data.**
5. **Intentionally support PLC meetings.**
   a. **Provide school-wide guidance on how to effectively facilitate a PLC.**
   b. **Monitor the effectiveness of each PLC.**

Evidence Base

The research on PLCs that is cited here meets the definition of Level 1 research. The research cited focused on the impact on changing teacher practices when all PLC components were implemented. In addition, substantial research meeting levels 1-4 have been completed; they found that when implemented to a high level, PLCs had an impact on teachers' instructional practices and student achievement. *Full research list to be found at the bottom of this strategy guide.*

Considerations

Possible Root Causes include inadequate, inconsistent or ineffective...

- Teacher collaboration
- Adult culture and beliefs
- Professional Development and Coaching
- Program implementation

Is this strategy a good fit for your district/school?

- Does this major improvement strategy focus on a priority performance challenge and associated root cause(s)?
- Are the expected outcomes of this major improvement strategy highly valued?
- Do key leaders support this major improvement strategy? Do key leaders have the capacity to lead the strategy ongoing?
- What are the skills and competencies needed to implement this major improvement strategy with fidelity? What support/professional development do staff members need to implement this strategy effectively?
- Are the time, effort and resources needed for implementation feasible for the staff involved?

Considerations for Strategy Implementation

- Is there strong leadership support that can help build a climate of openness and trust in the school, empower teams to make decisions based on student needs, and apply appropriate pressure to perform?
- Is there a collaborative culture that is open to educators learning from each other for the purpose of creating momentum that drives improvement?
- Is there a commitment to continuous improvement?
- Is there a culture of authentic assessment by which teachers hold themselves collectively accountable for improving student achievement?

Implementation Guide

Core Component 1: Define Purpose and Structures

Action Steps	Description
Define and communicate purpose of PLC	Effective PLCs are founded on the shared vision and values of improving learning outcomes for students. All PLC participants should understand that the purpose of the PLC is to determine what changes educators can make to improve student achievement.
Build time into staff schedules to collaborate consistently	Staff need uninterrupted blocks of time to engage in meaningful conversations that delve beyond superficial questions about instruction and toward questions that will advance student learning (e.g., How will we teach the content? How will we know if students have learned the content? How will we respond to students who have not learned?) Staff should also have ongoing, consistent meeting times for PLCs such that they are able to respond to students' needs in a timely manner.
Provide school-wide guidance on how to effectively facilitate a PLC.	Provide clear expectations regarding the outcome of each meeting. Additionally, school leaders may provide agenda outlines, guiding questions, and/or protocols for teachers to use in order to effectively implement PLCs.

Core Component 2: Implement and Monitor Effective PLC practices

Action Steps	Description
Establish norms and promote a spirit of collaboration, inquiry, and reflection within PLCs.	Effective PLCs work collaboratively, with a specific focus on student learning. Members of effective PLCs are driven by inquiry and willing to engage in honest discussions about their practice and students' progress. Furthermore, PLC members must be open to reflection and willing to make changes to their approach in the interest of improving student outcomes.
Ensure PLCs look at student work and/or student data.	In order to be truly focused on student outcomes, PLCs should frequently look at student results. Sometimes, this may take the form of looking at individual pieces of student work, while at other times, this may mean reviewing spreadsheets of student assessment results. Additionally, PLCs should assess their own effectiveness based on these results, making changes to their practice based on student progress (or lack thereof).
Monitor the effectiveness of each PLC.	Ask PLCs to provide meeting minutes, planning documents (e.g., instructional plans), data analysis, or other evidence of their work in order to determine whether each group is focused on school priorities and meeting expectations. Additionally, consider having a member of the leadership team work with each PLC in person on a regular basis to ensure that teams are progressing toward their goals and have the support they need.

Academic Studies Leading to ESSA Rating

Archibald, Sarah, et al. High-Quality Professional Development for all Teachers: Effectively Allocating Resources. Washington, D.C.: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, February 2011. Print.

Bambrick-Santoyo, Paul. Driven by Data: Driven by Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Berry, Barnett, Alesha Daughtrey, and Alan Wieder. Collaboration: Closing the Effective Teaching Gap. Carrboro, NC: Center for Teaching Quality, 2009. Print.

Bolam, R., et al. Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities. 637 Vol. England: Universities of Bristol, 2005. Print.

Cromey, A., and M. Hanson. An Exploratory Analysis of School-Based Student Assessment Systems. North Central Regional Educational Laboratory: Learning Point Associates, February 2000. Print.

Datnow, A., V. Park, and P. Wohlstetter. Achieving with Data: How High Performing School Systems use Data to Improve Instruction for Elementary Students. University of Southern California: Center on Educational Governance, 2007. Web.

DuFour, Richard, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker and Thomas Many. Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press, 2006. Print.

Halverson, R. "School Formative Feedback Systems." Peabody Journal of Education 85.2 (2010): 130-146. Print.

Jimerson, J. B., and J. C. Wayman. "Helping Educators "do" Data: Toward a Framework for Data-Related Professional Learning". University Council for Educational Administration. New Orleans, LA. 2010. Print.

Lachat, M. A., and S. Smith. "Practices that Support Data use in Urban High Schools." Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk 10.3 (July 2005): 333-349. Print.

Louis, K. S., H. M. Marks, and S. D. Kruse. "Teachers' Professional Community in Restructuring Schools." American Educational Research Journal 33 (1996): 757-98. Print.

Vescio, Vicki, Dorene Ross, and Alyson Adams. "A Review of Research on the Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Teaching Practice and Student Learning." Teaching and Teacher Education 24.1 (2008): 80-91. Print.