

Professional Learning Communities at Work: Bringing the Big Ideas to Life

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Conference Summary:

Although the phrase “Professional Learning Community” (PLC) has become widely popular in schools and districts across the country, it has seldom been used in the New York metropolitan area, and few, if any, true PLC’s exist in school districts especially in Westchester County. It is evident however, while the phrase is used extensively, the practices and concepts of PLC’s are not. This two-day workshop was designed to be highly interactive and Blind Brook sent a team of members representing the various constituencies to learn and share ideas and information about the details of PLC’s and how they can be implemented in a school district with minimal impact on teacher schedule and student instruction. After periods of brief presentations, participants were called upon to engage in reflection and dialogue with their colleagues. The workshop focused on the following topics.

Conference / Workshop Highlights:

- *PLC Research* on the value of collaborative teams in raising student achievement:
 1. The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is building capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community. The path to change in the classroom lies within and through professional learning communities. Milbrey McLaughlin, 1995
 2. Effective schools require more than competent individual teachers. The task for schools is to organize human resources into an effective collective effort. Newman and Wehlage, 1995

➤ *Clarifying the underlying concepts and essential practices of PLC's*

1. Educators are committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry in order to achieve better results for the students they serve.
2. PLC's operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006

➤ *The Big Ideas of PLC's*

1. We accept learning as the fundamental purpose of our school and therefore are willing to examine all practices in light of their impact on learning.
2. We are committed to working together to achieve our collective purpose. We cultivate a collaborative culture through development of high-performing teams.
3. We assess our effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions. Individuals, teams, and schools seek relevant data and information and use that information to promote continuous improvement.

➤ PLC's must have simultaneous **tight** and **loose** cultures and controls.

➤ Develop Team Norms- There is a two hour recommended workshop for PLC's to establish and develop norms for the teams or groups. This must be one of the very first activities in newly created PLC's.

➤ *Assess your current reality* (We need to do this in Blind Brook, regardless of whether or not we proceed with the PLC plan.)

1. Establish clarity on what students must know and be able to do (in each grade level and subject area).
2. Assess student learning on the essential curriculum (establish both common and formative assessments).
3. What happens when kids don't learn?
4. How will we respond when students already know it?

➤ *Establish S.M.A.R.T. team goals* - Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time Bound

- *Focus on Results* - PLC must focus on results in two ways:
 1. To identify students who need more time and support for learning.
 2. To identify strategies to improve upon both our individual and collective ability to teach each essential skill and concept.

- *Consider practices that district PLC's should initiate (or eliminate)* in order to bring about increased student achievement, including:
 1. Create the essential core curriculum and integrate 21st Century skills into every subject area.
 2. Establish common and formative assessments.
 3. Provide teams with frequent access to relevant information – get the students data in an easy to follow format so teams can make decisions on instruction based on results.
 4. Analyze data – to inform and impact professional practice, ensure all teachers:
 - a. Receive timely and frequent information on the achievement of their students
 - b. Agree upon a standard
 - c. Use valid assessments
 - d. Use the data in comparison to others

- *PLC Structure and School Schedules* – Elementary and Secondary models of how PLC's can be organized were discussed. Changes in teacher and student schedules to accommodate common planning and meeting times is essential to effective PLC's. Although the time could be before or after school, time can also be carved out of the school day. Listed below are examples which are not meant to be comprehensive. These can be discussed in detail during an informational meeting with members of the school community.
 1. Common Preparation Time (daily common prep periods)
 2. Parallel Scheduling (Assign special to a specific time each day for each grade level, and possibly schedule 2 back to back specials on each teams' meeting day.)
 3. Adjust start and end time of Contractual Day (This is the model that was proposed at the first PLC BOE meeting.)
 4. Shared Classes (Teachers combine students into one class so that the other teacher can go to their PLC meeting.)

5. Group activities, Events, or Testing – Teams of teachers schedule activities which require supervision by non-instructional staff.
6. Banking Time – Over a designated period of days, instructional minutes are extended beyond the normal school day. After banking a desired number of minutes, teachers meet on a shortened instructional day. Students remain on campus to participate in clubs, enrichment activities; assemblies (sponsored by parent/ community partners and co-supervised by the school's non-teaching staff).
7. In-service / faculty meeting time – extend time for teams to meet and work together on staff development days and during faculty meeting times.

➤ *Celebrate and actively promote a climate of achievement.*

PLC Generalizations:

The summary above represents the highlights of the workshop. These 12 hours of information were well received by everyone in attendance and we did have time to reflect on the process of establishing the PLC's in Blind Brook. Here were some generalizations gleaned from the conference.

1. The Blind Brook school district should continue its effort to create PLC's in the district. It needs to re-examine the before school model proposed earlier.
2. The focus should continue with a K-12 ELA PLC. In addition, the character education and technology integration focus should continue, but under a different format. Instead, the district should consider grade level and subject area PLC's, with a focus on establishing 8-10 essential outcomes for each grade level or course offered. We need to focus on the basic core content and skills for each and every student, incorporating character education, technology and 21st century teaching and skills into the instructional program.
3. Administrators are facilitators of the PLC's but do not need to be at every meeting. Instead, it is their responsibility to provide all the essential materials and the time for the PLC's to operate, and make effective decisions.
4. Once this is completed, we need to examine and create common and formative assessments for each of the essential learning outcomes identified above.
5. We then need to examine the data produced by the assessments to make instructional decisions on what is working, what is not effective, and share

the information with colleagues. This will lead to sharing best practices to improve teaching and learning.

6. Blind Brook may need to alter the existing teaching schedule and student schedules in each of the three buildings in order to establish the necessary PLC time.
7. It may be necessary to have a mixed model of PLC's for the remainder of this year (starting perhaps in February) with the ultimate goal of building PLC time into the weekly schedule next year.

PLC Goals:

Outlined below are the critical issues which need to be addressed after the PLC's are established. Goals and timelines will need to be established for each.

1. Identify team norms and protocols to guide us in working together.
2. Establish core knowledge, skills, and dispositions (that is, the essential learning) that students will acquire as a result of (1) our course or grade level and (2) each unit within the course or grade level.
3. Identify course content and topics that can be eliminated so we can devote more time to the essential curriculum.
4. Align the essential learning with state and district standards and the summative assessments required of our students.
5. Agree on how to best sequence the content of the course and have established pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learning.
6. Identify the prerequisite knowledge and skills students need in order to master the essential learning of each unit of instruction.
7. Identify strategies and create instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills.
8. Develop strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking in those areas.
9. Develop frequent common formative assessments that help us to determine each student's mastery of essential learning.
10. Establish the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our common assessments.
11. Analyze student achievement data and establish SMART goals to improve the level of student achievement.

12. Use the results of our common assessments to assist each other in building on strengths and addressing weaknesses as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement designed to help students achieve at higher levels.
13. Use the results of our common assessments to identify students who need additional time and support to master essential learning, and work within the systems and processes of the school to ensure they receive that support.
14. Agree on the criteria we will use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learning of our course, and continually practice and apply those criteria to ensure we are consistent.
15. Teach students the criteria we will use in judging the quality of their work and provide them with examples.
16. Develop or utilize common summative assessments that help us assess the strengths and weaknesses of our program.
17. Established the proficiency standard we want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with our summative assessments.
18. Formally evaluate our adherence to PLC team norms and the effectiveness of our PLC team at least twice each year.

In order to move forward with the PLC initiative, we must continue to look for opportunities for collaboration during the school day as well as after or before school. The Blind Brook school district is in a better position now to refine and capitalize on the collective learning which took place during the DuFour workshop. We need to prioritize how we want to create the PLC's – the time commitment and schedule need to be established before anything else can be considered.