

Inclusionary Practices and Systems:

INCLUSIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLC'S)

WHAT IS IT?

A professional learning community (PLC) is best 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 et al., 2020, P. 10.) PLCs are often thought to be individual school education teams, but they are comprised of a much broader social network than that. PLCs are purposed to make a profound impact on schools’ structure and culture through continued action. A task that large requires a large organization, such as a school district, comprised of smaller collaborative teams, such as individual schools, administrators, and even educational legislatures. These communities operate on the assumption that the fundamental purpose of schooling is high level student learning and that job-embedded learning for educators yields improved student learning. Educators within a PLC share in a culture of collaboration and collective responsibility for the success of all students while working to ensure that all learners access the same curriculum (DuFour et al., 2020).

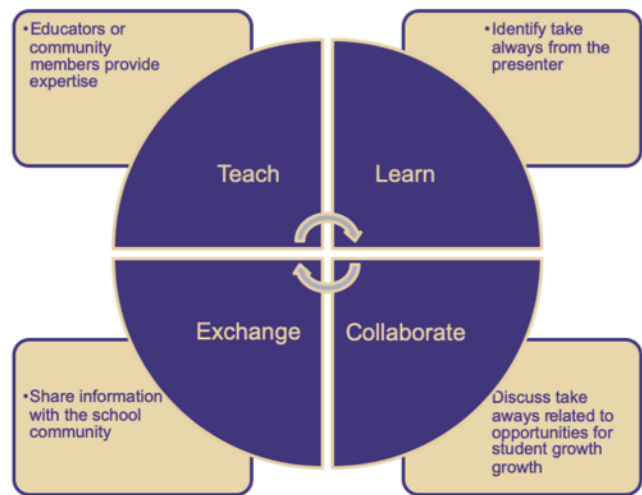
WHY ARE INCLUSIVE PLC'S IMPORTANT? WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES?

Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) are an opportunity for educators to share expertise through teaching and for individuals to learn from each other and foster a dialogue that leads to collaboration of new ideas. Building a collaborative culture through Professional Learning communities is a deliberate effort. Through the shared expertise of a professional learning community, lessons, assessments, and instruction can be designed to meet the needs of all students. Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) create a culture where educators exchange information with one another to promote student learning and more inclusive learning environments for all students. These Professional Learning communities are a call to action. When leveraged correctly, PLC's can be an excellent resource for growth and development and can create more equitable and inclusive schools.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER:

Professional Learning communities are important because are an opportunity for educators to:

- Develop clear protocols for collaboration
- Create accountability structures and create consistent expectations across a team
- Examine barriers within the curriculum and create solutions instead of taking a deficit approach to student learning
- Learn from each other and foster a dialogue that leads to collaboration of new ideas.



CASE STUDY: INCLUSIVE PLCS HIDDEN RIVER MIDDLE SCHOOL

In the beginning of their journey toward more inclusive practices, Hidden River started by creating a strong professional learning culture. A strong foundation of learning by doing supported the hard work to come. As one teacher shares, one of the most powerful documents that we created back in 2014 with the entire staff, during some pretty intense meetings was our foundational document or what we call our shared commitments. In this document it states we will meet student needs through unsurpassed collaboration. No one is big enough to work independently of others. The combined wisdom of one's peers is greater than any individual. This is foundational to our approach; we work as teams of teachers who teach the same subject in our PLC.

In order to accomplish this work of teaming and collaboration, our master schedule has been created to give us protected time. Our principal and assistant principal do not let anything interrupt this protected time. They have worked hard to make sure that our master schedule works this way. These PLC meetings often include all of the general ed teachers from that subject or that grade level and our special ed teachers. In language arts, we have both grade level and vertical PLC meetings and during these meetings we focus our collaboration on solution trees for PLC guiding questions. Question number one is, "what is it we want our students to be to know and to be able to do?" In order to answer this question, we took a hard look at the standards and determined which of the standards are essential or nonnegotiable. This doesn't mean that we don't address all the standards, but within each subject area we determine which of the standards are the ones that we're guaranteeing all students will know and be able to do by the end of the

year. These essentials are chosen by determining which standards have endurance, which means that they have value that goes beyond the single test date and which standards have leverage that these are skills that are a value in multiple disciplines and that knowledge and skills that are necessary for success in the next grade level and beyond. We break down the essential standards as a team, by looking at the knowledge and skills and what the students are expected to do. In those standards and then in order to guarantee that students will learn these essential standards we focus the next of the for guiding questions, which is "how will we know if they've learned it as a team we develop common formative assessments?" Only assess the standard or sometimes just one component of the standard. Then after the common assessment is given to all of the students in the grade level, we can analyze the data we have collected and then we ask the two final questions. Which are, "how will we respond when they haven't learned it?" and "How will we respond if they already know it?" This is important because we not only need to address the needs of the students who have not yet learned the information we need to address the needs of those who need extended learning opportunities as well. As part of our inclusion model, we have eliminated separate honors language arts classes. Therefore, it is imperative that we also meet the needs of our accelerated students. The only way to address these two questions is, as a team. One person cannot meet the diverse needs of all the students in a classroom, we have to continue to approach educating ALL of our students as a collective team and in learning by doing we experience collective efficacy.

RESOURCES

1. Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work™ (An Actionable Guide to Implementing the PLC Process and Effective Teaching Methods) by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, Thomas W. Many & Mike Mattos (2016)
2. Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever It Takes by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, et al. (2009).