

Professional Learning Communities:
source materials for school leaders and
other leaders of professional learning

What is a professional learning community?

A summary

Louise Stoll, Ray Bolam, Agnes McMahon, Sally Thomas, Mike Wallace,
Angela Greenwood and Kate Hawkey

An effective professional learning community (PLC) has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning¹.

A professional learning community is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning.

Characteristics of a PLC

1. Shared values and vision

- There is a shared focus on pupil learning and engagement.
- A jointly developed values statement exists and is understood by all.
- Staff have high expectations of pupils.
- A culture of improvement is evident.

2. Collective responsibility for pupils' learning

- Staff take joint responsibility for all pupils' learning.
- There is peer pressure on those who don't do their fair share.

3. Collaboration focused on learning

- Team planning and teamwork are common features.
- Team teaching takes place.
- Collaboration occurs across roles (teachers with support staff), not just within roles.
- There is collaboration across the whole school, centre or college and cross-curricular collaboration where relevant.

4. Group as well as individual professional learning

- All staff, including support staff, are involved in and value professional learning.
- A range of professional learning and continuing professional development activities take place, eg peer coaching, demonstration lessons, whole staff days, learning forums, workshops, research and development projects, moderating pupils' learning etc.
- People learn individually, and with and from each other.
- Staff take collective responsibility for promoting and supporting each other's learning.

5. Reflective professional enquiry

- Reflective practice is valued.
- Research and enquiry inform teaching and learning, eg mutual observation, self-evaluation and action research.
- Data is analysed and used for reflection and improvement, eg assessment results, value-added and assessment for learning.
- Input from pupils is valued.

6. *Openness, networks and partnerships*

- External initiatives are used to analyse what is going on internally.
- People are open to change.
- Staff actively engage in external partnerships and learning networks with other schools, centres or colleges, higher education institutions and other agencies.
- Risk-taking, creativity and innovative thinking are encouraged.

7. *Inclusive membership*

- Support staff are valued and contributing members of the PLC.
- Governors or school council members are involved in the PLC.
- There is one large community involving staff across the school, centre or college, not just lots of small communities.

8. *Mutual trust, respect and support*

- Working relationships are positive.
- There is mutual trust and respect.
- Teachers' and support staff's best efforts are valued.
- Staff feel competent.

Processes to develop a PLC

1. *Optimising resources and structures to promote the PLC*

- Time, space and funding are found to support the development of the PLC.
- The idea of the PLC is included in policy documents and development plans.
- Staffrooms, staff work rooms and learning spaces are used for community building and learning.
- ICT is used to promote effective communication.

2. *Promoting professional learning*

- Professional development is co-ordinated to promote the learning of all staff.
- Performance management or appraisal, induction, professional development profiles and mentoring are consistent with the values of developing a PLC.
- Sharing practice and creating common understanding is emphasised.
- Support is given to help develop learning and teaching strategies and skills.

3. *Evaluating and sustaining the PLC*

- The development and progress of the PLC is regularly monitored.
- There is explicit discussion of the PLC, its purpose and development.
- PLC values are considered when choices are made about hiring and deploying staff.
- Attention is paid to dealing with issues that get in the way of PLC development.
- Critical friends are invited to provide an external view.

4. *Leading and managing to promote the PLC*

- Leaders are focused on learning for all.
- Trust-building and celebrating success are prioritised.
- Leaders are enquiry-minded and encourage this in others.
- Leaders model learning and coach colleagues.
- Leadership of learning is distributed throughout the school, centre or college.

Three ways to determine the effectiveness of a PLC

- It has an impact on pupil learning and social development.
- It has an impact on staff morale and practice, with potential for developing leadership capacity.
- The characteristics are in place and processes are operating smoothly – it is part of 'the way we do things'.