# Best Practices for Professional Learning Communities

You've no doubt heard the term professional learning community (PLC) used in educator circles. Every school serious about improvement should have one, say experts.

So what is a PLC? And how can schools get the most "bang for the buck" from this proven approach to school improvement?

A professional learning community (PLC) involves much more than a staff meeting or group of teachers getting together to discuss a book they've read. Instead, a PLC represents the institutionalization of a focus on continuous improvement in staff performance as well as student learning. Called "the most powerful professional development and change strategy available," PLCs, when done well, lead to reliable growth in student learning.

In a nutshell, PLCs entail whole-staff involvement in a process of intensive reflection upon instructional practices and desired student benchmarks, as well as monitoring of outcomes to ensure success. PLCs enable teachers to continually learn from one another via shared visioning and planning, as well as in-depth critical examination of what *does* and *doesn't* work to enhance student achievement.

*Read More*:  [AMLE Research Summary - Professional Learning Communities](#) (2012). Association for Middle Level Education.

The focus of PLCs is ongoing "job-embedded learning," rather than one-shot professional development sessions facilitated by outsiders, who have little accountability regarding whether staff learning is successfully applied. In addition, PLCs emphasize teacher leadership, along with their active involvement and deep commitment to school improvement efforts. PLCs therefore benefit teachers just as much as they do students.

*Read More*:  [Professional Learning Communities](#) (2009). The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement.

How does this process of intensive reflection and job-embedded learning unfold? Typically it includes six steps —**study, select, plan, implement, analyze,** and **adjust.** Prior to beginning the process, teachers review student achievement data to identify a specific standard or standards on which many students are not meeting goal.

- Teachers work in collaborative planning teams to examine critically and discuss standards-based learning expectations for students.
- These teams select evidence-based instructional strategies for meeting the standards.
- Teams develop a common lesson plan incorporating the selected strategies and identify the type of student work each teacher will use to demonstrate learning.
- Teachers implement the planned lesson, record successes and challenges, and gather evidence of student learning.
- Teams review student work and discuss student understanding of the standards.
- Teams reflect on the implications of the analysis of student work and discuss potential modifications to instructional strategies.

The PLC approach is a long-term proposition, taking three to six years to fully incorporate into a school's routine practices. Staff teams need to have time to meet during the workday throughout the year. They also need to focus their efforts on essential questions about learning and generate products such as lists of key student outcomes, methods of assessment and strategies for meeting goals.

During the first year of implementation, staff teams usually need to complete several cycles of the six steps in order to master the process. For the next few years, most schools and districts also benefit from the support of an external facilitator.

*Read More*:  [The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle: Introduction](#) (2008). Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

The process sounds straightforward enough. Yet without paying attention to best practices, schools may fail to reap the benefits of PLCs. Consider the following best practices—PLCs work best when schools have:

1. A culture that supports collaboration;
2. The ability to take an objective/macro view of school efforts; and
3. Shared beliefs and behaviors.

*Read More*:  [Professional Learning Communities](#) (retrieved 2012). Public Schools of North Carolina – State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction.

Let's explore each of these best practices in more detail.

**A Collaboration-Friendly Culture**

Collaboration cannot be forced. Instead, school leaders should help all members of the school community feel attached and committed to the work. Some ways to do this including articulating a clear, specific and compelling vision; matching tasks and roles to staff members who are personally invested in them; expanding leadership roles; and making coordination easy.

Consider facilitating coordination through online tools such as [Basecamp](#) (a project-coordination platform) and [Blackboard](#) (an online learning platform).

*Read More*:  [5 Ways to Build a Culture of Collaboration With Staff, Teachers and Parents](#) (retrieved 2012). Kruse, Sharon D., for American Association of School Administrators.

Viewed a different way, several things must *stop* happening in order to enable meaningful collaboration. Schools must stop pretending that merely presenting teachers with standards is sufficient for ensuring that all students receive a common curriculum. Districts also need to make sure that the *intended* curriculum matches what teachers are actually teaching.

In addition, educators must stop making excuses for failing to collaborate. For example, is it true that staff really can't find the time, or is it that they find operating in isolation preferable to the hard work of collaboration?

*Read More*:  [What Is a Professional Learning Community?](#) (2004). DuFour, Richard, for Educational Leadership.

**An Objective View of School Efforts**

An external facilitator's work with a school PLC involves getting familiar with staff and assessing their way of operating as it relates to school improvement goals. Facilitators also can help bring a school's fragmented efforts into alignment, especially at the beginning of the process.

Change facilitators are able to take a "balcony" or macro-centric view of the situations and contexts facing school staff. Recognizing the leadership qualities of the principal and the extent to which leadership is dispersed in the school, facilitators can provide appropriate support to staff in meeting their goals.

*Read More*:  [Professional Learning Communities - An Ongoing Exploration](#) (2000). Morrissey, Melanie S., for Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

**Shared Beliefs and Behaviors**

Staff-wide beliefs and behaviors that support successful PLCs include:

- Failure, mistakes and uncertainty in work are openly shared and discussed;
- Colleagues agree on broad educational values, but accept disagreements that foster new dialogue;
- Teachers receive respect and consideration as people; and
- Administrators support "dispersed leadership," where teachers develop the confidence to select and adapt strategies that drive improvement.

*Read More*:  [NCREL Monograph: Building Collaborative Cultures - Seeking Ways to Reshape Urban Schools](#) (1994). Peterson, Kent, for North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.

Additional key beliefs and practices include:

- A relentless commitment to improvement;
- A view of improvement as a team effort for which everyone is responsible;
- An acknowledgement that teacher behavior is key to enhancing student learning;
- A belief that knowledge is constructed from day-to-day experiences, along with the ability to share those experiences; and
- A value placed on ongoing learning (continuous inquiry).

*Read More*:  [Professional Learning Communities](#) (2009). The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement.

Another core belief of effective PLCs is that all students can learn. Schools embracing this belief motivate teachers to share a vision for promoting student learning.

Further, in successful PLCs, high expectations of teachers and students emerge within a set of priorities that benefits the whole school as well as teachers' personal ambitions.

Finally, effective PLCs address the interpersonal skills of trust, collaboration and communication.

*Read More*:  [Professional Learning Communities - Characteristics, Principals, and Teachers](#) (2009). Cormier, Ron and Olivier, Dianne, for the Annual Meeting of the Louisiana Education Research Association.