

Blair Community Schools

Professional Learning Community (PLC) Model

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the need?

A lot of things have changed over time - the way people communicate, the job market, the weather patterns - and along with those, K-12 education has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. These changes can be traced back to an evolving, diverse society and to requirements placed on schools by government at both the federal and state level. At the federal level, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which have now morphed into the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), have increased overall accountability and set strict mandates for performance by all students. At the state level, the Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA), Nebraska AquESTT (Accountability for a Quality Education System Today and Tomorrow), and state accreditation add more requirements on schools for the alignment of State Standards into curriculum, assessment and reporting of student performance, and a focus on continued school improvement processes for yearly compliance and school accreditation requirements.

The bulk of the work associated with a changing educational landscape lands on teachers through their role as the primary drivers of teaching and learning. It has become increasingly difficult for school districts to provide sufficient support for teachers within an in-service schedule and staff development models that have remained relatively static over time. A Professional Learning Community (PLC) structure is a more efficient and ongoing method to provide time to meet the external mandates and, more importantly, to focus on improvement of instruction to support the learning of all students.

What is a PLC?

A PLC is 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. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators. The PLC process is not a program. It cannot be purchased, nor can it be implemented by anyone other than the staff itself. Most importantly, it is ongoing - a continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it. There is no ambiguity or hedging regarding this commitment to learning. Whereas many schools operate as if their primary purpose is to ensure that children are taught, PLCs are dedicated to the idea that their organization exists to ensure that all students learn essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

What will this additional time be used for?

This structure will provide teachers with sustained and ongoing staff development and collaborative time to focus on improving instruction and increasing student learning. The professional learning community is based on a single, simple premise: ***To be effective, teachers must change their focus from how children are taught to what a child is learning.*** In a PLC, teachers have three goals:

1. **A Focus on Learning:** The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it. In order to achieve this purpose, the members of a PLC create and are guided by a clear and compelling vision of what the organization must become in order to help all students learn. Members work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, provide systematic interventions that ensure students receive additional support for learning when they struggle, and extend and enrich learning when students have already mastered the intended outcomes.
2. **A Collaborative Culture With a Focus on Learning for All:** Collaboration is a means to an end, not the end itself. In a PLC, collaboration represents a systematic process in which teachers work together in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school. The teams in a PLC engage in collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning. They also inquire about their current reality including their present practices and the levels of achievement of their students. Collective inquiry enables team members to develop new skills and capabilities that in turn lead to new experiences and awareness. Working together to build shared knowledge on the best way to achieve goals and meet the needs of clients is exactly what professionals in any field are expected to do, whether it is curing the patient, winning the lawsuit, or helping all students learn.
3. **Results Orientation:** Members of a PLC realize that all of their efforts in these areas must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions. This focus on results leads each team to develop and pursue measurable improvement goals that are aligned to school and district goals for learning. It also drives teams to create a series of common formative assessments that are administered to students multiple times throughout the year to gather ongoing evidence of student learning. They examine the results to discover strengths and weaknesses in their individual teaching in order to learn from one another. Most importantly, the assessments are used to identify students who need additional support for learning. Teams of teachers will look at students' achievement to see if they are performing at their grade level. The teams will focus on the answers to these essential questions based on the goals above:
 - What do we want each student to learn?
 - How will we know when each student has learned it?
 - How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning or when a student has already learned essential knowledge and skills?

What are the benefits?

Benefits of the PLC model include:

- Getting everyone “rowing the boat” in the same direction - staff members work together toward a common purpose. Research shows a clear correlation between clarity of purpose, effective schools, and student achievement.
- A collaborative structure for team members in order to help one another clarify what students need to learn, plan more effective lessons, assess student work and solve the common problems of teaching and learning. These conversations result in more effective student learning.
- Allowing teachers to plan for and participate in professional development that is highly relevant to their day-to-day work.
- Offering shared leadership by inviting staff input in decision-making, participation in consistent professional development, and more collaboration to remove the walls of isolation between teachers.
- A structure and consistent time to discuss, review and implement State Standards, state-mandated instructional frameworks model and strategies, develop aligned lessons and common assessments, analyze student data, and discuss assessment and grading practices. These things dovetail with district, building, and individual goals that align with continuous school improvement initiatives.
- More time to gather, analyze, and use data to guide instructional decisions to help all learners.
- The PLC allows more creative responses and teaching adaptations for students, and changes for learners are made more quickly than in traditional schools.
- PLC teams exhibit an increased commitment to the mission and goals of their school and are more eager to help fulfill those goals.
- Shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success.
- Higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students.
- Commitment to making significant and lasting changes and higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental, systemic change.

When will PLCs take place?

Friday mornings from 8:00am to 9:15am. Teachers will then report to buildings for before school duty by 9:30am. Students will begin their day with a 90 minute late start. Student start times will be:

K-2.....9:55am

3-5.....9:55am

6-8.....9:47am

9-12....9:50am

Why Friday morning?

When reviewing the entire list of activities, classes, and other conflicts across all grade levels, it was clear that the option that affected the smallest number of students and staff was Friday morning.

Is this just another teacher meeting?

No - this perception of a PLC is inaccurate on two counts. First, while collaborative teams are an essential part of the PLC process, the sum is greater than the individual parts - the PLC is about the larger organization and the students it serves. Much of the work requires a schoolwide or districtwide effort. Second, the PLC process has an ongoing positive impact on the structure and culture of the school. Educators commit time to meet with peers on a regular basis and are accountable to the team to make instructional changes to improve student learning and achievement - so the PLC process is much more than just a meeting.

Why not schedule collaboration time after school or during the summer?

Scheduling professional collaboration time during non-contracted hours (after school and summer) would mean additional costs to the district. In addition, some individuals would not be able to participate because of other time commitments to the district. By implementing PLCs as a job-embedded and ongoing opportunity for teachers, the district can ensure the highest participation in the most cost-effective manner.

Don't teachers already have planning time?

Teachers do have plan time, but that time is commonly devoted to preparing class activities and lessons, grading, returning phone calls and e-mails, meeting with students, and many other tasks associated with daily operations of their classrooms.

How would students get to school on late start Fridays?

Parents would have several options:

- Students could continue to walk to school.
- Students could continue to take the school bus on Fridays, the pick-up time would be approximately 90 minutes later.
- Parents could drop the student off at the later start time.
- Parents could arrange for a carpool with other families.
- Parents could utilize Blair Kids Academy for students in grades K-5.
- Parents could utilize other local childcare options.

When would this change be implemented?

This model is proposed to begin in August 2017, coinciding with the beginning of the 2017-18 school year.

Will this affect the calendar or instructional time?

One all-day inservice day will be eliminated, but other than this, there will be no impact to the school calendar. While the PLC time will cause a small overall decrease in total hours for the school year, the district will continue to offer an instructional calendar and educational programming that is above minimum requirements for instructional hours as mandated by the state.

Do other districts use a PLC model with a late start or early release?

Many other schools already implement a PLC model. Here is a sample from our area and similar sized schools:

Washington County Schools	
Arlington	PLC weekly: Friday late start
Ft. Calhoun	PLC weekly: Friday early out
Area Schools	
Millard	PLC weekly: elementary - Wednesday early out; secondary - Monday late start
Bennington	Five early release days throughout the year, plus 9 in-service days
Elkhorn	PLC during common plan and 10 in-service days
Westside	PLC weekly: early out Wednesday
Bellevue	In planning phase: proposing late start - day TBD
Weeping Water	PLC weekly: late start Tuesdays
Springfield Platteview	PLC weekly: late start Mondays
Ralston	PLC twice a month: K-6 early out; 7-12 late start
Papillion	PLC during common plan and 1 inservice day per month
Class B Schools	
Waverly	14 in-service days
Beatrice	PLC weekly: early out Wednesday, plus 6 professional development days
Norris	8 professional development days
York	PLC weekly: early out Wednesday, plus 6 professional development days
Seward	PLC during common plan, plus 9 professional development days
South Sioux City	PLC weekly: early out Mondays

Is there research behind this process?

PLCs have been commonplace in Nebraska schools for over 15 years. Research shows that, *“Teacher collaboration in strong professional learning communities improves the*

quality and equity of student learning, promotes discussion that are grounded in evidence and analysis rather than opinion, and fosters collective responsibility for student success.” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). With the increasing demands on educators at the local, state, and national levels, we can't afford NOT to do this for our students and staff.

More online resources/research about PLCs:

<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/change34/plc-cha34.pdf>

<http://www.allthingsplc.info/about/aboutPLC.php>

<https://www.edutopia.org/teacher-development-research-keys-success>

<https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/jsd-october-2015/high-quality-collaboration-benefits-teachers-and-students.pdf>

<http://www.k12.wa.us/Compensation/pubdocs/Vescio2008PLC-paper.pdf>

www.breakthroughcollaborative.org/sites/default/files/May%202012%20PLC%20research%20brief.pdf

<http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3752271>

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may04/vol61/num08/What-Is-a-Professional-Learning-Community%2%A2.aspx>

Sources Cited:

- Iron County Schools: <http://irondistrict.org/>
- Mason Public Schools: <http://www.masonk12.net>
- All Things PLC, DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*

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