

## WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

“This book reimagines the professional learning community as a dynamic space where educators leverage their collective expertise to brainstorm possibilities and generate innovative ideas. This book is grounded in the belief that educators are professionals in their field and empowers them to transform insights into actionable initiatives that drive meaningful change.”

—**Sarah D. Ortega**, Instructional Coach,  
Chula Vista Elementary School District

“PLC+ is a game changer for professional learning communities. Fisher and Frey provide a research-driven, equity-centered framework that empowers educators to collaborate with clarity and purpose. This book is an essential guide for teams looking to enhance student learning through collective efficacy and actionable strategies.”

—**Aida Allen-Rotell**, Learning Technician and Co-Author of  
*PLC+: A Playbook for Instructional Leaders*

“*Your Introduction to PLC+: Building Collaborative Teams That Drive Student Success* by Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey is a fantastic resource that enhances the work around teacher collective efficacy by providing collaborative structures to improve student learning. It also strengthens teacher and leader capacity through reflective practices and data-driven decision-making, making it an essential guide for professional learning communities at any level.”

—**Kim West**, Corwin Faculty Member, former Kramer IB World  
School Coordinator and Math Instructional Coach, Dallas ISD

“Finally, a PLC book that doesn’t just rehash old ideas but actually makes them better. *Your Introduction to PLC+* bridges research and reality, delivering actionable strategies with an unwavering focus on equity. This book empowers teams, drives real impact, and elevates student success.”

—**Tyler Gilbert**, Academic Coach, Calwa Elementary School,  
Fresno Unified School District

“A must-read for all educators committed to continuous growth, impactful collaboration, and lasting impact in education. This book provides the essential strategies every team needs to collaborate effectively, maximize their impact, and drive meaningful student success.”

—**Olivia Amador-Valerio**, Corwin Professional Learning Consultant and Author, Bilingual  
Educator, Reading and Language Arts Specialist, Instructional Coach and Leader

“Believing in continuous improvement and improving are two different things. Closing this gap is exactly what this book does for teaching and learning. This groundbreaking resource reimagines how professional learning communities can drive meaningful change in our schools and classrooms. Fisher and Frey have beautifully designed a practical guide that goes beyond theory to deliver actionable strategies for implementation—boosting the collective efficacy of our communities. What sets this work apart is how it centers equity throughout the PLC process, ensuring that all students benefit from our collective efforts. This isn’t just another education book to add to your shelf; it’s a vital companion that will accelerate the

impact by enhancing how your team approaches collaborative work. If you're seeking to build a more responsive, equitable, and effective learning community, Fisher and Frey's work is absolutely essential."

—**John Almarode**, Professor of Education, James Madison University

"This book is a transformative approach to professional learning communities, grounded in liberatory design principles that remove barriers to learning and elevate teacher agency. By centering collaboration, inquiry, and collective responsibility, Fisher and Frey honor the expertise of educators as the key drivers of meaningful change. PLC+ isn't just another framework—it's a movement toward more just, informed, and impactful teaching that empowers both teachers and students to thrive."

—**Kierstan Barbee**, Professional Learning Consultant

"*Your Introduction to PLC+: Building Collaborative Teams That Drive Student Success—An Illustrated Playbook* is a must-have for schools that are seeking to experience immediate transformation of their teacher teams! The content of this playbook is designed to equip educators with the tools to foster growth and achievement for every learner, regardless of background or circumstance! Educators are given the opportunity to know how to measure the impact of their collective collaboration in real time with the multitude of job-embedded experiences and tools that are included throughout this publication. What has always been evident in the PLC+ model within this uniquely designed playbook format is HOW the authors provide teams the knowledge and skills to engage with each other to overcome challenges and produce intended outcomes through a commitment of unified ACTIONS! Another key feature of this book is the use of the *Liberatory Design approach* created by the National Equity Project. This approach is a cornerstone to elevating processes that guide the decision-making techniques of PLC+ teams through a dynamic cycle of improvement efforts that meet the diverse and evolving needs of schools. Since the inception of the PLC+ model six years ago, many educational communities have been transformed throughout the world and are embracing the results of growth in student and educator learning. With confidence, I know that the tools and experiences in this publication are sure to create many more school cultures that generate success for all!"

—**Sonja Hollins-Alexander**, Content Advisor and Scholar

"*Your Introduction to PLC+: Building Collaborative Teams That Drive Student Success* is an essential guide for educators looking to strengthen professional learning communities and improve student outcomes. Using a clear framework and practical strategies, this book empowers teachers and leaders to collaborate effectively to drive meaningful change in their schools. A must-read for anyone committed to fostering a culture of continuous learning and student success!"

—**Toni Faddis**, Former Principal and Corwin Author

YOUR INTRODUCTION TO

**PLC+**





YOUR INTRODUCTION TO

# PLC+

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE TEAMS  
THAT DRIVE STUDENT SUCCESS

An  
Illustrated  
Playbook with  
40+ Videos

**DOUGLAS FISHER**  
**NANCY FREY**

Illustrations by TARYL HANSEN

**CORWIN**

Copyrighted Material, [www.corwin.com](http://www.corwin.com). Not intended for distribution.

For promotional review or evaluation purposes only. Do not distribute, share, or upload to any large language model or data repository.



FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin  
A Sage Company  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320  
(800) 233-9936  
www.corwin.com

Sage Publications Ltd.  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP  
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.  
Unit No 323-333, Third Floor, F-Block  
International Trade Tower Nehru Place  
New Delhi 110 019  
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.  
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12  
China Square Central  
Singapore 048423

---

Vice President and  
Editorial Director: Monica Eckman  
Senior Director and Publisher, Content and  
Product: Lisa Luedeke  
Content Development Editor: Sarah Ross  
Product Associate: Zachary Vann  
Production Editor: Nicole Burns-Ascue  
Copy Editor: Beth Ginter  
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.  
Proofreader: Sarah Duffy  
Indexer: Integra  
Graphic Designer: Gail Buschman  
Marketing Manager: Megan Naidl

Copyright © 2025 by Corwin Press, Inc.

---

All rights reserved. Except as permitted by U.S. copyright law, no part of this work may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

When forms and sample documents appearing in this work are intended for reproduction, they will be marked as such. Reproduction of their use is authorized for educational use by educators, local school sites, and/or noncommercial or nonprofit entities that have purchased the book.

All third-party trademarks referenced or depicted herein are included solely for the purpose of illustration and are the property of their respective owners. Reference to these trademarks in no way indicates any relationship with, or endorsement by, the trademark owner.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-0718-7117-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025935540

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

25 26 27 28 29 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DISCLAIMER: This book may direct you to access third-party content via web links, QR codes, or other scannable technologies, which are provided for your reference by the author(s). Corwin makes no guarantee that such third-party content will be available for your use and encourages you to review the terms and conditions of such third-party content. Corwin takes no responsibility and assumes no liability for your use of any third-party content, nor does Corwin approve, sponsor, endorse, verify, or certify such third-party content.

# CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>ix</b>
Introduction	1
Module 1: Where Are We Going?	49
Module 2: Where Are We Now?	75
Module 3: How Do We Move Learning Forward?	101
Module 4: What Did We Learn Today?	131
Module 5: Who Benefited and Who Did Not?	165
Module 6: PLC+ Planning, Progress Monitoring, and Success Tools	197
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>237</b>



Visit the companion website at  
<https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC>  
for downloadable resources.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## PLC+ ADVISORY GROUP



**Aida Allen-Rotell, MA**  
Bilingual Teacher  
and Leader,  
San Diego, CA



**Oscar Corrigan, EdD**  
Administator,  
San Diego, CA



**John Almarode, PhD**  
Professor of Education,  
Richmond, VA



**Sarah Ortega, EdD**  
Bilingual Teacher  
and Leader,  
San Diego, CA



**James Marshall, PhD**  
Professor of  
Educational  
Leadership,  
San Diego, CA



**Toni Faddis, EdD**  
Teacher and Leader,  
San Diego, CA



**Dominique Smith, EdD**  
Principal,  
San Diego, CA



**Nicole Law, PhD**  
Teacher and Leader,  
Indianapolis, IN



**Marnitta George, PhD**  
National Board  
Certified Teacher,  
San Diego, CA



**Sonja Hollins-  
Alexander, EdD**  
Teacher and Leader,  
Atlanta, GA



**Tyler Gilbert, MA**  
Academic Coach,  
Fresno, CA



**Kierstan Barbee, EdD**  
Teacher and Coach,  
Dallas, TX



**Olivia Amador, EdD**  
Bilingual Teacher  
and Leader,  
San Diego, CA



**Woo Williams-Zou,  
MA, JD**  
Senior Equity  
Leadership Consultant,  
National Equity Project  
Oakland, CA



**Kim West, MA**  
Teacher,  
Dallas, TX



**Tom Malarkey, MA**  
Director,  
National Equity Project  
Oakland, CA





# INTRODUCTION

A professional learning community (PLC) is a structured, collaborative approach to professional learning in which educators come together regularly as a team to discuss and reflect on the evidence they collect from students and about their teaching practices with the goal of improving student outcomes. Unlike traditional, top-down professional development models, PLCs are driven by the teachers, who share a commitment to ongoing learning, mutual accountability, and the belief that every student can succeed. Effective PLCs give teachers the autonomy they desire and the level of professionalism they have earned.

Professional learning communities, which have existed for several decades, were originally designed to combat the teacher isolation that was common in the 1950s and 1960s. The idea was that teachers, working together, could positively impact students' learning; the groups would help ensure that the individuals working so hard to make that impact were connected with like-minded colleagues. This turned out to be a good idea, and today the evidence strongly suggests that professional learning communities can positively impact both teacher practice and student achievement.<sup>1</sup>

But—and this is important—these groups work only when done right. Over the decades, researchers and practitioners have learned more about what it means to implement effective professional learning communities. As the evidence has been assembled, processes, procedures, and protocols have been updated and revised. As needed, older practices were abandoned as newer practices were identified.

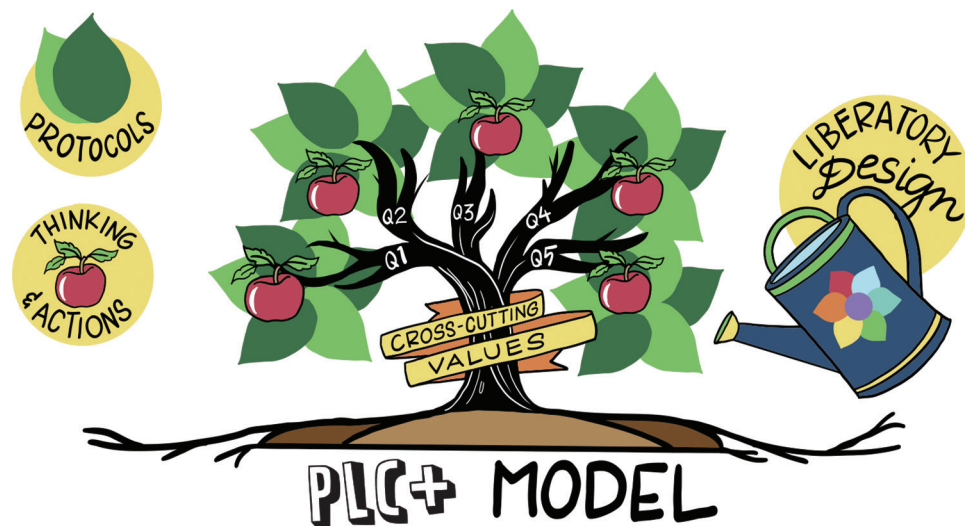
Enter PLC+, the next-generation professional learning community model designed to ensure that educators are connected with their peers and are impacting student learning in positive ways. This framework stands on the shoulders of the giants who went before us, yet it also reflects new evidence about learning communities that has been collected over the past decade. This book provides an introduction to PLCs in general and then takes a deep dive into an updated structure and system for ensuring that teacher teams are successful—an approach that we call PLC+.

As a high-level overview, PLC+ is fed by Liberatory Design.<sup>2</sup> Liberatory Design, originally developed by the National Equity Project and the K–12 Lab at the Stanford Design School (d.school), is both a process and a practice to address persistent inequities in complex systems in order to foster transformative change. In the PLC+ process, four crosscutting values serve as a foundation for the work that the PLC+ teams do: equity and fairness, high expectations, individual and collective efficacy, and activation. These values give rise to five guiding questions:

1. Where are we going?
2. Where are we now?
3. How do we move learning forward?
4. What did we learn today?
5. Who benefited and who did not?

Each of these questions also serves as the focus of a module in this book; the final module offers guidelines for how teams can work most effectively.

The questions explored in each of the first five modules inspire actions, and teams use protocols to accomplish their work. In other words, as PLC+ teams work together to seek answers to these questions, they generate a complex web of thinking and actions that improve the experience of schooling. A visual representation of this model is included below.



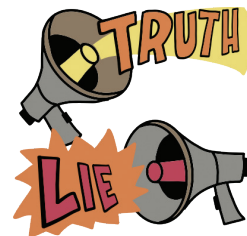
# FEATURES OF THIS ILLUSTRATED PLAYBOOK

There are several design features, in addition to the illustrations, that are intended to increase your interaction with the contents. These features are consistent in each of the modules to allow you to develop habits as you interact with the information.

- An **Essential Question** frames each module to help build an organizational framework for processing the information.



- **Two Truths and a Lie** near the beginning of each module allows you to consider several statements and then determine which ones are supported by the research and which one captures a common misconception. We invite you to return to these after reading the module to see if your thinking has been validated or extended.



- **The Story Behind the Question** provides information about why the key question is valuable to teams and the evidence that was used to develop and test it. Understanding the history of PLCs and the continued efforts to improve them, including ideas from the past that have not worked, is important for teams who want to take their work to the next level.

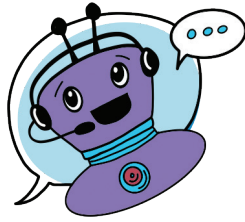


- **Liberatory Design**, an approach to transforming inequity in complex systems, grounds the PLC+ process and helps educators develop authentic and collaborative relationships that support redesigning negative systems, structures, and approaches that are reproducing oppression and contributing to inequitable outcomes and experiences. It builds on systems thinking and design thinking to ensure that discussions and decisions result in improved outcomes for all students.



- **Protocols** are included throughout this book to help teams engage in collaborative conversations. Protocols create structure, facilitate collaboration, and improve communication within teams. Over time, teams can adapt and revise the protocols to fit their specific needs.





- **Ask a Bot** provides advice on using generative AI as a teaching assistant or thought partner, saving teachers and teams time to focus on the needs of their students. The output from AI should always be reviewed for accuracy and usefulness. Remember, AI systems are biased due to the fact that they scrub content that was created by humans who have implicit biases.



- **Quick Starts** provide opportunities to reflect on the content, prioritize actions, and identify resources you may need. These sections are designed to help you and your team decide which steps can be taken immediately and which ones require additional thought, planning, or time.



- The **Case in Point** in each module offers a scenario and an opportunity to see educators working together to resolve a dilemma. These cases are designed to allow you to practice and apply what you are learning by considering the challenges in the related **What's Your Advice?** feature, which allows you to make recommendations based on what you have learned and experienced. You can also share your advice with your own team members and collectively determine the next steps you believe would appropriately support the people profiled in the case.



- A **Crosscutting Values Check** reminds you of the four values that are integrated into the PLC+ framework: equity and fairness, high expectations, individual and collective efficacy, and activation. In this section, we present some questions aligned with each of the values that encourage reflection and integration into your practices.



- **Self-Assessment** tools allow you to determine the strengths of your team and where you may want to focus additional efforts. Remember, teams are always on a journey, increasing their ability to work together to impact students' learning. As teams become more efficient, the impact that they have on students' learning will increase.

- **Notice and Reflect** appears at the end of every module and invites you to reflect on your learning and take actions of your own: What will you start, stop, and continue? It allows you space to scale your level of understanding so that you can keep learning after finishing the module. It also allows you to interact with colleagues and build your collective efficacy. As we have noted many times: The plus is YOU! You are a valued contributor to your students' learning, your own learning, and your team members' learning.



## STRUCTURE OF THIS ILLUSTRATED PLAYBOOK

Following this introduction, we provide an overview module that is intended to build your background knowledge about professional learning communities. We review the history of this idea and its many iterations. In addition, we provide some distinguishing features of the next-generation PLC model: PLC+. Following the introduction, we turn our attention to the PLC+ framework guiding questions:

- **Module 1** focuses on the question *Where are we going?* This module provides information about analyzing standards to identify what students need to learn and be able to do. It includes information about organizing instruction in blocks of standards and how to ensure that students understand their learning journey.
- **Module 2** focuses on the question *Where are we now?* In this module, we argue that teams should pay attention to students' strengths and assets. They should collect evidence from students to identify what they already know so that they can design the learning journey.
- **Module 3** focuses on the question *How do we move learning forward?* This includes attention to instruction, which has been neglected in professional learning community conversations. Further, we note the value of teachers visiting peers' classrooms and talking about the evidence they collect to determine if their instructional moves are making a difference.
- **Module 4** focuses on the question *What did we learn today?* This is the assessment module and includes a number of tools educators can use to determine student progress toward competency. In addition, we focus on the learning of adults and how we can reflect on our efforts to ensure students' learning.
- **Module 5** focuses on the question *Who benefited and who did not?* This requires that we carefully consider the differential impact on students' learning and how we can address those differences. In addition, we note the value of removing barriers to students' learning and identifying needs for supplemental and intensive interventions.



## OVERVIEW

### WHAT DOES A “PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY” MEAN, ANYWAY?

Teams of educators are powerful. When educators band together, work toward a shared goal, and collect evidence to determine their impact—even when faced with challenges—the results for students are spectacular. In fact, teams of educators are unstoppable whenever they believe they can accomplish each of the following:

- Change the trajectory of students’ learning
- Collect and interpret evidence aligned with their goals
- Assume collective responsibility for their own learning and for the learning of their students

In the research world, this is called *collective teacher efficacy*, and it is one of the most powerful things educators can do to accelerate students’ learning.<sup>3</sup>

Bandura invented the term *collective efficacy* based on his observation that a group’s confidence in its abilities seemed to be associated with greater success.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the assurances people place on their team affects the team’s overall performance. In Bandura’s words, “Perceived collective efficacy will influence what people choose to do as a group, how much effort they put into it, and their staying power when group efforts fail to produce results.”

When a team of individuals share the belief that through their unified efforts, they can overcome challenges and produce intended results, groups *are* more effective. For example, when neighbors share the belief that they can unite to overcome crime, there is significantly less violence.<sup>5</sup> In business, when team members hold positive beliefs about the team’s capabilities, creativity and productivity increase.<sup>6</sup>

There are three core attributes necessary to develop collective efficacy:<sup>7</sup>

1. Each person needs to have confidence about their ability and disposition to successfully contribute to a task or accomplish an activity as part of a team (individual efficacy in contributing to the group).
2. Each person needs to have skills in working for themselves and working with everyone in a team (individual efficacy in the skills to work in a team).
3. Each person needs to have confidence or a shared belief in the team’s collective capabilities to organize and execute the optimal course of action (individual confidence and skills in the potency power of them working in a group).

Collective efficacy can influence a group's behavior in several ways, including these:

- What they choose to focus on
- How much effort they put in
- Their staying power in the face of extended challenges

This is where professional learning communities came in, transforming isolated teaching practices of the 1960s and earlier years into collaborative, growth-oriented environments. PLCs are intended to empower educators to work together and share insights, strategies, and supports to address the specific assets and needs of their students. Importantly, teams of educators working in PLCs should foster a culture of continuous improvement in which teachers learn from each other, reflect on their practices, and make decisions to enhance student learning. PLCs offer a powerful, research-backed approach for building professional expertise and achieving meaningful, sustained impact in schools.



Video 0.2

Doug explores collective efficacy  
[qrs.ly/mlghoa7](https://qrs.ly/mlghoa7)



### Essential Question

HOW CAN WE REFINE WHAT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ARE AND HOW THEY IMPACT ADULT AND STUDENT LEARNING?

## TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

***Two of these statements are true; one is false.  
Can you spot the lie?***

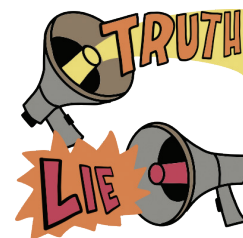
1. Professional learning communities have been around for such a long time that there is widespread agreement on what a PLC is.
2. Professional learning communities have the potential to raise student learning and student achievement.
3. Although professional learning communities are widely used in schools, teacher preparation programs rarely teach about them or make use of them.

Professional learning communities have been around a long time. However, an overreliance on passed-down traditions has resulted in a patchwork of practices that often do not result in the intended impact. In fact, one research group who conducted a systematic review of the literature on PLCs called it “a meaningless label” because of the lack of a universally understood definition of what it means to function as a learning community.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the first statement is the lie.

The second statement, which is true, raises an important point: PLCs have the potential to positively impact student learning—but it is not a given.<sup>9</sup> Teams can be hampered by vagueness in their purpose, their goals, and the processes they use to achieve those goals.

Unfortunately, the third statement is also true. Nearly fifty years after PLCs were first introduced to the field, much of what they are and do still seems to rely more on local customs based on the school’s culture (i.e., *this is the way we have always done things*) than on actual research, which is what should actually shape a school’s professional culture. Further, it is uncommon for teacher preparation programs to discuss collaboration or host PLCs of preservice teachers.<sup>10</sup>

With all of this in mind, it is important to recognize that there is a growing body of evidence about effective structures and protocols that increase the impact PLCs have on students. Returning to the teacher isolation days of the 1950s and 1960s is not desirable, nor is attending useless meetings. Instead, we need to identify and implement what is known about effective PLCs to ensure that they have the intended impact.



## WHAT DEFINES AN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY?



In an effective PLC, educators work together to analyze data, examine student work, and share effective teaching strategies, which creates a culture of continuous improvement within the school. The structure promotes open communication, fosters trust among colleagues, and encourages collective problem-solving, allowing teachers to grow professionally in a supportive and reflective environment. We love the following definition, which beautifully sums up the work of high-functioning, high-impact professional learning communities: “knowledge sharing, knowledge creation, the development of new practices and the joint trial and refinement of these practices.”<sup>11</sup> Thus PLCs have two complementary purposes:

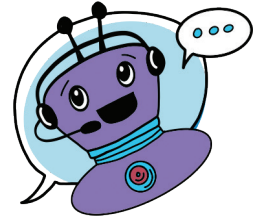
- Enhancing educators’ skills and effectiveness
- Improving student learning outcomes

At the heart of every PLC is a focus on student learning. Team members work together to identify and address the specific needs of their students. PLCs often follow a cycle of inquiry, where teachers set learning goals, collect and analyze data, and implement targeted strategies based on their findings. Importantly, the adults also learn as part of this iterative process; educators continually assess and adjust their approaches based on the evidence gathered. Beyond improving student learning, PLCs aim to create a shared vision and set of values within a school, establishing norms for collaboration and accountability that strengthen the school’s professional culture. In doing so, the PLC becomes a mechanism for aligning individual teachers’ goals with the broader mission of the school, ensuring that everyone is working in unison toward the same high standards for students.

## ASK A BOT

To help align the PLC goals to your school's goals, you might seek assistance from generative AI by using the following frame:

Here are my school's goals for this year: **[INSERT SCHOOL GOALS]**. Do the goals for our PLC align with these school goals and reflect our core values, such as **[INSERT VALUES, SUCH AS HIGH STANDARDS FOR ALL STUDENTS]**? Provide suggestions on how we can ensure alignment and strengthen the connection between our PLC goals and the broader school vision.



For teachers, the benefits of participating in a PLC are numerous and impactful. PLCs provide a space for educators to collaborate and learn from one another, breaking down the traditional isolation that often comes with teaching. By engaging in meaningful discussions and examining real classroom data, teachers develop a deeper understanding of effective instructional practices and gain new insights they might not have discovered alone. This collaborative approach also helps reduce isolation, as teachers feel supported by their peers and motivated by shared successes. Additionally, PLCs allow teachers to grow professionally by engaging in reflective practices that improve both their skills and their confidence. In a well-functioning PLC, teachers are empowered to take ownership of their professional growth and are better equipped to adapt to the challenges of a diverse, dynamic educational landscape, ultimately leading to a more engaged and effective teaching workforce. In fact, one of the major benefits of professional learning communities is that they can foster teacher agency.<sup>12</sup>

This last point is an especially important one. *Teacher agency* refers to the capacity of teachers to make intentional, autonomous decisions about their practice to best support their students' learning. It involves the ability to adapt, innovate, and take ownership of instructional choices, grounded in professional expertise and knowledge of students' needs. When teachers have agency, they feel empowered to contribute to school decisions, continuously improve their practice, and drive positive change in their classrooms and beyond.

Investigation cycles are essential because they serve as the drivers of professional learning communities. They provide a structured, continuous process for examining and improving teaching practices to enhance student learning. Through these cycles of inquiry, teachers collaboratively set focused goals, collect and analyze data, implement instructional strategies, and reflect on the outcomes. This iterative process allows educators to make data-driven decisions and adapt their approaches based on what is working or what needs adjustment.





## QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Ask others about the history of professional learning communities in your school or district.				
Reflect on any previous experiences you have had in professional learning communities. When were they effective and when were they not useful?				
Identify the ways that data and evidence of student learning are used in professional learning communities.				
Make a list of the “passed-down traditions” in your PLC and evaluate whether they align with the purpose and goals of a professional learning community.				

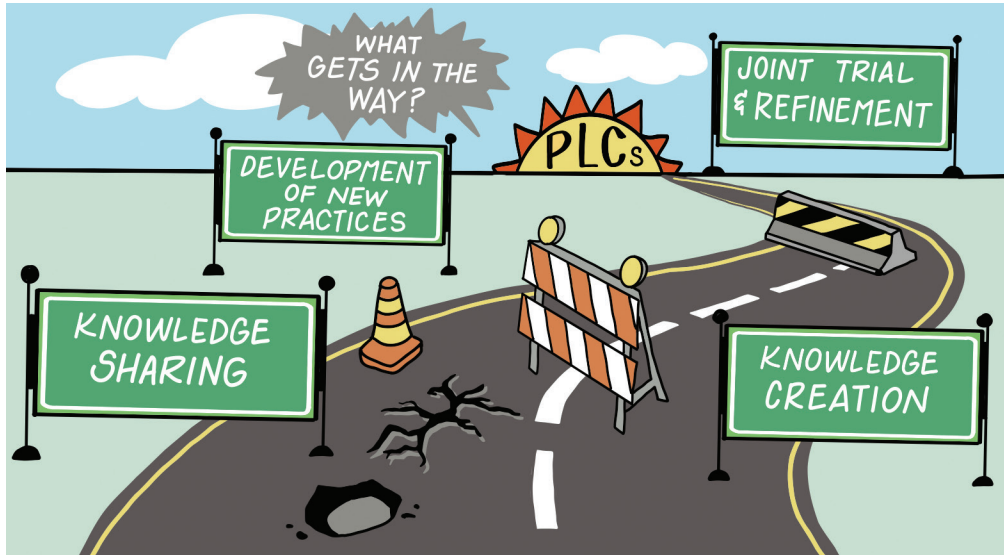
(Continued)

(Continued)

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
As a team, read the section “What Defines an Effective Professional Learning Community?” and collaborate to establish a shared understanding of what a PLC should and should not be.				
Review the core attributes necessary to develop collective efficacy. Identify specific ways you can contribute to fostering it with your team. For example, you might modify your language to emphasize team success (e.g., “We can solve this together”) or encourage collaborative problem-solving when challenges arise.				
Take time to reflect on the collective success of your PLC team. Collectively acknowledge wins, such as implementing an instructional practice or using data to inform practice.				
Discuss examples of successful collaboration and analyze what made those moments effective.				

 Available for download at <https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC>

# WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?



Conventional practices regarding professional learning communities often stray far from what they were intended to do:

- Knowledge sharing
- Knowledge creation
- Development of new practices
- Joint trial and refinement of these practices

Instead, PLCs often operate as isolated teams, rarely (if ever) interacting or learning from other teams in their school. Even more rare are teams that operate among schools. Unfortunately, this silo approach prevents the formation of productive networks, which effective professional learning communities can actually foster. Before we continue, let's briefly examine some of the barriers that can prevent PLCs from working together as high-performing teams.

## A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING ABOUT WHAT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ARE

In short, the professional learning community is the school: teams of teachers and leaders working synergistically. Teams operate within the school and contribute to the collective knowledge and practices of the entire community. Yet far too often the team acts as an isolated unit of analysis, not as a cohesive unit across the school. And, unfortunately, when teams are isolated from one another, innovation is thwarted, and the system is structured to maintain silos of excellence.

When teachers work together, they can reduce or eliminate the within-school differences in students' learning. An international study of science performance in sixty-eight countries reported that the variance (the spread between the highest- and lowest-achieving students) is far larger within a school than between schools. Of all the countries studied, the variance in US schools was among the highest, accounting for 80 percent of the differences (the international average was 69 percent).<sup>13</sup> Imagine the impact that this has on students' learning, especially those unlucky enough to be assigned teachers who have no peer support and who are trying their best to implement effective practices. This variation is simply not fair, and it results in differential impacts on student learning.

Marc Tucker, former president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, attributed this wide variation within schools partially to how schools are structured, with little opportunity for teachers to spend time in each other's classrooms working together in teams to solve problems, and with limited chances for new teachers to learn from experts in their own schools.<sup>14</sup> Without regularly scheduled events such as learning walks, without investigation cycles focused on joint trial and refinement of practices, and without school networks to share findings across the school community, change is left to chance.

## A LACK OF CLARITY AND SHARED PURPOSE

When team members aren't aligned on goals or lack a clear vision for what they want to accomplish, their efforts often become fragmented. Without a common understanding of the purpose, each member may interpret the work differently, leading to varied priorities and a diluted focus. This lack of alignment can make it challenging to achieve a collective impact on student progress, as members pull in different directions or struggle to prioritize effectively. Schools that mandate a particular focus for the professional learning community, but fail to build a strong rationale for that focus, risk leaving teams in the unenviable position of going through the motions without true intention. Even worse, when the focus is vague and repetitive (e.g., "Our focus this year is on raising test scores in reading and math"), a hodgepodge of strategies is likely to emerge. And don't even get us started about the utter waste of waiting until the fall of the following school year to determine whether your actions resulted in a positive impact.

## A LACK OF SUFFICIENT COLLABORATION TIME AND STRUCTURE

Teachers are already stretched thin with daily responsibilities, and without dedicated time for collaborative planning, analyzing data, and discussing instructional strategies, time use can devolve into a series of hurried check-ins rather than productive, reflective meetings. Additionally, without clear agendas or norms for collaboration, meetings may lack focus, leading to frustration among members who feel their time is not used effectively. A high-performing team requires dedicated time with purposeful structures in place to keep the work meaningful and aligned to shared goals.

## CONFUSION ABOUT COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION

Shirley Hord's research highlights a critical distinction between teams that work cooperatively and those that work collaboratively. She uses this metaphor: "Dating is a cooperative venture, while marriage is a collaborative one."<sup>15</sup> Cooperative teams can be less successful than collaborative teams because their members may divide tasks and work independently, each responsible for a specific piece of the whole. Although they might come together periodically to share progress, cooperative teams often lack a deep, collective commitment to shared goals about student learning (versus simply getting some required tasks done). Members may focus on their individual successes and struggles, which are eventually combined, but their work remains largely isolated.

In contrast, truly collaborative teams engage in ongoing, interdependent work toward a common challenge. They build shared knowledge, examine data together, and engage in reflective dialogue, continuously adjusting their strategies based on insights from the group. Collaborative teams are committed to shared accountability for results, which means every member is invested not only in their own success but also in the success of the entire group. This level of collaboration fosters a stronger, more unified approach to improving student outcomes, as each member's expertise and insights contribute to collective progress.

### NOTES

---

---

---

---



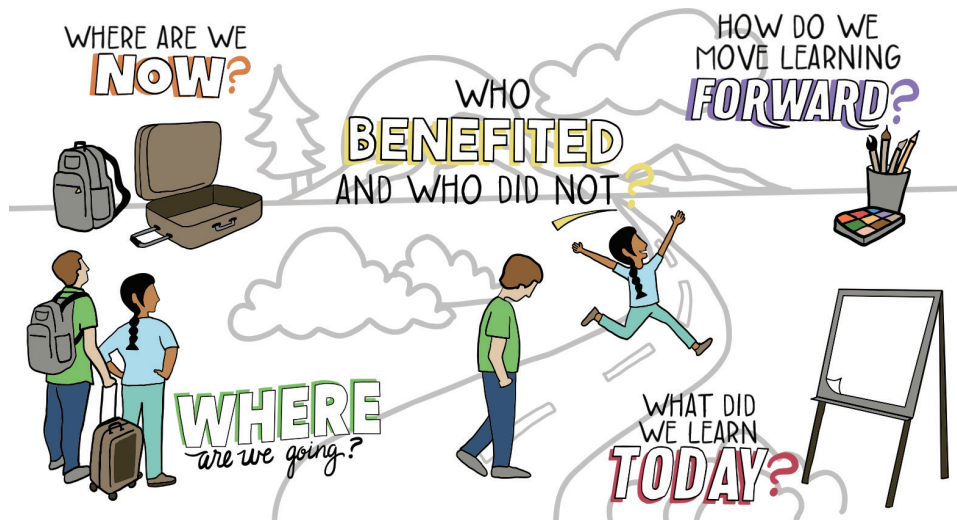
## QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Talk with colleagues to learn their perspectives about what gets in the way of a productive professional learning community. Does their feedback align with barriers discussed in this section?				
Identify the existing schedule for PLC team meetings. Name the current focus of your PLC team.				
Identify ways to optimize the use of collaboration time, such as using clear agendas and establishing norms for meetings.				
Reflect on your team's interactions with other teams in your school. Are there any opportunities to collaborate with other teams? Brainstorm ways to engage in cross-team sharing sessions.				
Review your current PLC goals and discuss how they directly align with student success. Are your goals clear enough to drive collective action? Consider revising them if necessary to focus on tangible student outcomes.				



Available for download at <https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC>

# WHAT SETS PLC+ APART? INVESTIGATION CYCLES



Investigation cycles, which are a systematic process for collecting, analyzing, and sharing evidence to help organizations improve, drive the PLC+ school. You may have noticed that we used the plural—investigation *cycles*—because effective professional learning communities are nimble and responsive. The common challenge your team chooses to pursue will influence how long a cycle should occur, but we recommend cycles of six to twelve weeks so that teams can learn, innovate, and replicate success quickly.<sup>16</sup> As we have suggested, waiting an entire school year to view state test scores to see whether the professional learning community is having an impact is simply too long. We don't have time for that. We teach with a sense of urgency, and we should collaborate with a sense of urgency, too.

As we have noted earlier, there are five iterative questions that propel each investigation cycle:<sup>17</sup>

1. Where are we going?
2. Where are we now?
3. How do we move learning forward?
4. What did we learn today?
5. Who benefited and who did not?

These questions—and the modules that explore them in this book—are nonlinear in the sense that they *do not* need to be completed in a lockstep fashion, with the first week devoted to the first question, the second week

devoted to the second question, and so on. In practice, elements of one or more of these questions emerge as teams move through the cycles. Each question encourages educators to focus on purposeful collaboration, adult-informed and student-centered learning, and evidence-based improvement strategies. These questions serve as a structured approach for teams to assess, reflect on, and refine their instructional practices in a way that directly supports student achievement. By using these questions thoughtfully, the entire professional learning community can stay aligned with their goals and ensure that their actions are data informed and responsive to students' needs. Let's briefly examine each question in more detail.

## WHERE ARE WE GOING?

This question invites educators to focus on teacher clarity and establish clear learning intentions and success criteria for students. It emphasizes the importance of having a shared understanding of the intended learning outcomes for students, ensuring that everyone is moving toward a common target. By defining where students should go, the PLC creates a foundation for setting high expectations and aligning teaching strategies. This step also involves identifying key standards, skills, and knowledge that students are expected to develop, which allows educators to plan their lessons and assessments around a unified vision. Further, it prompts teams to calibrate their expectations, such that the activities, assignments, and assessments contain an appropriate level of academic rigor.

## WHERE ARE WE NOW?

This question reminds PLCs to assess and reflect on the current state of student learning by analyzing data and student work. As a team, educators determine the students' starting points, strengths, and learning goals so that they can best make use of the learners' strengths and teach in the spaces between what students already know and what they need to know. Through data analysis, educators gain insight into individual and collective progress, allowing them to design future instruction and assessment to meet students' specific needs. Reflecting on current performance also helps teachers recognize any barriers to learning that may hinder students' progress, such as skill gaps or misconceptions, making this a crucial step in shaping effective interventions.

## HOW DO WE MOVE LEARNING FORWARD?

Based on data from the previous question, educators select instructional strategies and interventions to bridge the gap between students' current abilities and the desired outcomes. This question encourages teams to explore, select, and implement evidence-based practices that have been shown to accelerate learning. It also provides a unique focus, especially compared to conventional models that overemphasize talk about curriculum and assessment,

leaving any discussion of instruction conspicuously absent. By focusing on actionable steps, members collaboratively identify instructional approaches that will provide enrichment, targeted support, and scaffolding. This phase includes implementing learning walks to share best practices and adjusting instructional plans based on ongoing formative assessments to ensure all students continue progressing.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN TODAY?

This question encourages teams to reflect on the effectiveness of their actions and to adjust practices as needed. It allows teachers to reflect on their learning from peers during team meetings and from students as they collect and analyze evidence. Reflection is crucial for educators to examine the immediate impact of their instruction on student learning. By discussing what went well and where improvements are needed, teachers can make data-informed decisions to refine their teaching. Continuous reflection strengthens the professional analysis skills of experienced and novice educators and is another unique element of the PLC+ model.<sup>18</sup> Reflection enables teams to be more adaptable and responsive, ensuring that instructional practices are not static but evolve based on students' progress and feedback from the learning environment.

## WHO BENEFITED AND WHO DID NOT?

This final question focuses attention on the differential attainment of students within the learning process. Keep in mind the evidence we mentioned earlier: Variance *within* a school is often greater than the variance *between* schools.<sup>19</sup> This question encourages teachers to examine the distribution of learning outcomes and to consider whether all students, particularly those from marginalized or underperforming groups, are advancing. By identifying which students may have been left behind, teams can identify barriers that hindered progress and prioritize interventions that support equitable learning opportunities. This focus helps educators to ensure that all students benefit from high-quality instruction and fosters both individual and collective efficacy for all members of the professional learning community.



Video 0.4  
Doug highlights the  
investigation cycle  
[qrs.ly/fkghoaf](https://qrs.ly/fkghoaf)

### NOTES

---

---

---

---

---



## QUICK START

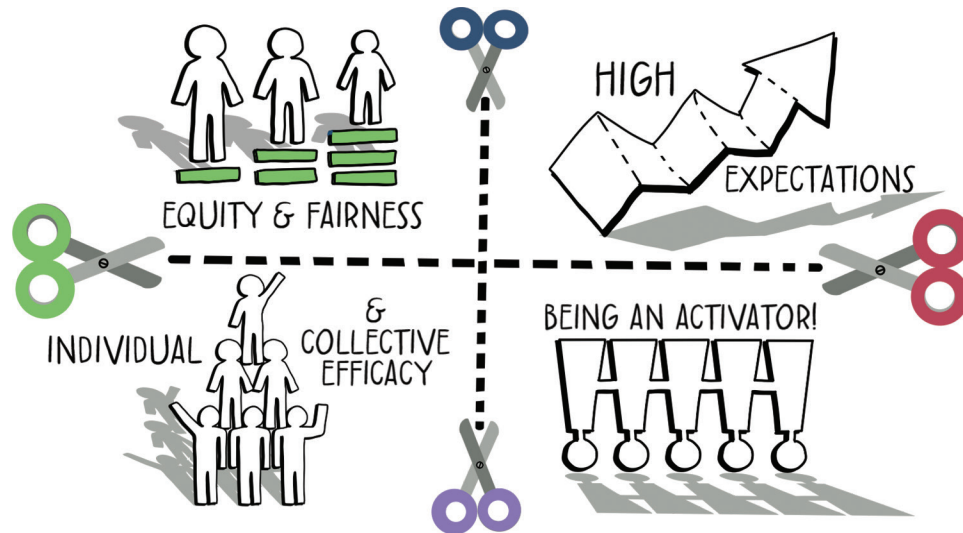
	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
List the questions you currently use to drive your PLC investigation cycles and compare them to the five guiding questions used in PLC+.				
Consider how conversations about instruction are incorporated into your current PLC processes. Do teams discussed evidence-based practices?				
Ask your administrator about variance in test scores within your school. You may consider the variance within your grade level or school with others in the state or country.				
Consider dedicating PLC time to collectively writing or analyzing intended learning outcomes for students.				

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Discuss any identified barriers to student progress, such as gaps in foundational skills or lack of engagement, and brainstorm strategies for addressing them.				
Analyze recent assessments and student work to determine current student performance. Identify trends, strengths, and areas needing improvement across the group.				
Reflect on the common instructional strategies your team has developed to support student learning. What shared research-based instructional moves are consistently used across PLC member classrooms? How do individual teaching styles shape the implementation of these strategies while still maintaining their research-based integrity?				



Available for download at <https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC>

## WHAT SETS PLC+ APART? FOUR CROSSCUTTING VALUES



Crosscutting values are essential throughout the investigation cycle because they provide a consistent foundation that guides every stage of collaborative inquiry and decision-making. These values—equity and fairness, individual and collective efficacy, high expectations, and activation—shape how PLC+ teams approach their work, ensuring that their efforts remain purposeful, inclusive, and focused on impactful outcomes for all students. By embedding these values into each step of the cycle, from analyzing data to implementing strategies, teams are more likely to create a unified culture that supports sustained improvement. These guiding principles not only influence what actions are taken but also inform the mindset and commitment each member brings to the table, fostering a supportive, results-driven environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed. Let’s examine each crosscutting value in more detail.

### EQUITY AND FAIRNESS

The value of equity and fairness is foundational in the PLC+ model, emphasizing the need for fair and just opportunities for every student. This value calls for teams to continuously examine and address disparities in educational access and outcomes. *Equity* is about acknowledging and removing systemic barriers, adapting teaching methods, and ensuring that every student—regardless of background or current level of performance—has the support they need to succeed. *Fairness* requires impartial and just treatment without favoritism. In other words, we have unconditional positive regard for all our students. Fairness does not mean giving everyone the same thing, but rather making decisions about what individual students need. By embedding equity and Liberatory Design into their practices, PLC+ teams are better equipped to make

fair decisions and engage in decision-driven data collection that prioritize all students' growth and learning needs.

## HIGH EXPECTATIONS

High expectations are essential in establishing a culture of rigorous academic standards and mutual accountability. In the PLC+ model, high expectations extend to both teachers and students, with educators setting ambitious goals for student learning and maintaining confidence in students' ability to reach them. This value also drives team members to push one another toward growth, encouraging reflection and strengthening instructional practices. By holding high expectations, PLC+ teams create an environment where each student is challenged to excel and where teachers are committed to continually raising the bar. Importantly, high expectations paired with high support create an equitable learning environment and serve as the recipe for motivating young people.<sup>20</sup>

## INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

This third crosscutting value refers to the shared belief, supported by evidence of impact, that together teachers have the skills to positively influence student outcomes.<sup>21</sup> When educators have a strong sense of collective efficacy, they feel empowered to overcome obstacles and work toward meaningful change. This value encourages teachers to support one another in both challenges and successes, fostering a strong, unified approach to teaching. Collective efficacy strengthens the team's resilience, as teachers understand that their combined efforts have the potential to significantly impact students, bolstering their motivation and commitment to achieving shared goals.

## ACTIVATORS

This last crosscutting value focuses on taking proactive steps to influence and drive collaborative practices among adults that improve student outcomes. Activators within a PLC+ setting actively seek out and implement strategies that help the team arrive at agreements, propose approaches, monitor progress, and adjust methods based on data and student needs. Each member of the team is an activator of each other's thinking, regardless of experience or expertise. By acting as activators, members support one another not only in making evidence-based instructional decisions but also in spreading innovation across the professional learning community.



Video 0.5

Nancy highlights  
the crosscutting  
values  
[qrs.ly/cfghoah](https://qrs.ly/cfghoah)



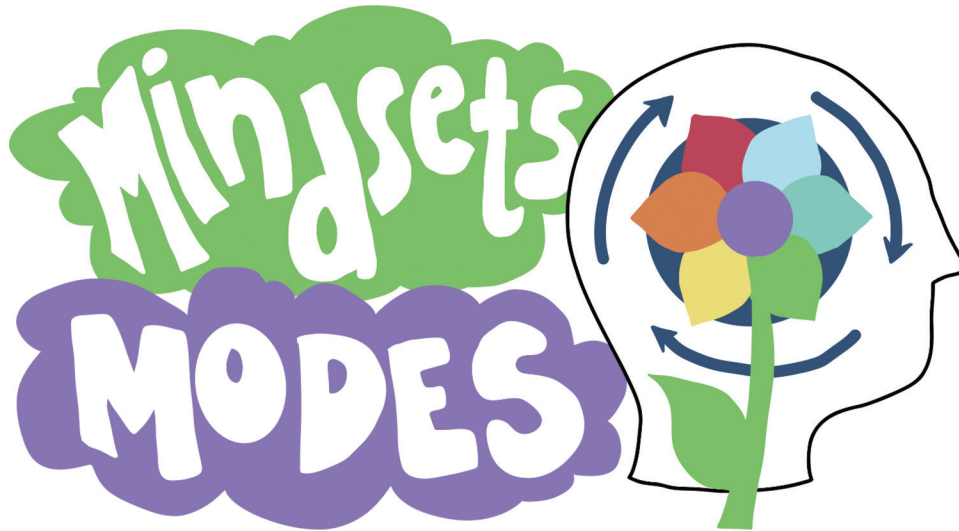
## QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Consider the ways in which your PLC delivers on the promise of equity.				
Discuss how high expectations are conveyed in the classroom.				
Describe the efficacy of team members and the collective.				
Explore the role of the activator and how team meetings are facilitated and monitored.				
Examine student data for disparities based on race, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, and other factors.				
Collaborate with a colleague with the intention of examining lessons for cultural responsiveness.				
Acknowledge and celebrate the progress made toward high expectations, both for students and for team members.				
Create a shared definition for what equity means at your site or in your PLC.				
Reflect on your role as an activator within your PLC. Think about the tools in your toolkit that you use to support collaboration and innovation. For example, consider what strategies you use to help your team arrive at agreements, even when perspectives differ. How do you encourage the team to explore and embrace new approaches? What approaches do you use to respectfully question long-standing practices or assumptions?				



Available for download at <https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC>

## WHAT SETS PLC+ APART? A LIBERATORY DESIGN APPROACH



Liberatory Design is both a process and a practice to address persistent inequities in complex systems in order to foster transformative change.<sup>22</sup> By merging the principles of human-centered design thinking with the principles of equity, this approach seeks to elevate empathy, creativity, and iterative experimentation to shift persistent patterns of inequitable outcomes and experiences. Its practice is grounded in a set of key mindsets intended to achieve the following:

- Support practitioners to explicitly and intentionally attend to trust and relationship building
- Attend to and shift power dynamics
- Recognize the ways that systemic oppression is operating in complex ways to produce inequitable outcomes

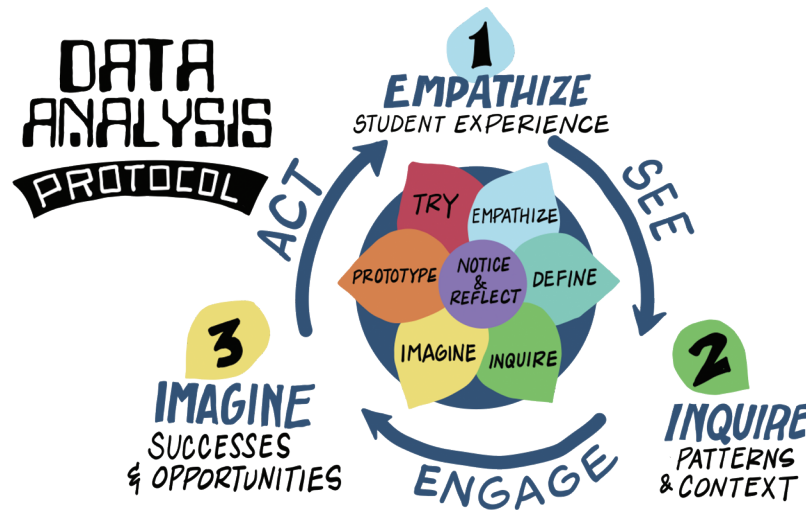
In centering liberation, PLC+ encourages educators not only to imagine new solutions but also to identify barriers that impede equitable access, participation, and outcomes—and then design approaches to overcome those barriers. The critical stances and process guidance offered by the Liberatory Design approach support PLC+ participants to (1) learn through doing, (2) partner with each other as well as with students and other community members, and (3) ultimately create the conditions necessary for collective liberation and create sustainable improvements.

There are three major components that comprise the Liberatory Design approach:

1. *Liberatory Design mindsets* offer stances and values that individuals and groups can invoke individually and collectively in their design, leadership, and collaboration to work toward liberatory outcomes.
2. *Liberatory Design modes*, depicted in the flower graphic on the next page, offer a variety of ways to guide and structure your group's design process.

It's important to note that even though the petals of the flower suggest a cycle, Liberatory Design is nonlinear and iterative. Your team can use these modes as needed in the context of your investigation cycle.

3. The *National Equity Project's (2024) Leading for Equity Framework*<sup>23</sup>, which guides Liberatory Design, equips educational leaders to address complex, systemic inequities and take purposeful action to foster youth and community thriving.



Adapted from "Liberatory Design for Equity" by the National Equity Project. Derived from Anaissie, T., Cary, V., Clifford, D., Malarkey, T. & Wise, S. (2021). *Liberatory Design*. [www.liberatorydesign.com](http://www.liberatorydesign.com).

At the heart of Liberatory Design are the modes of Notice and Reflect, which appear at the center of the flower. These modes provide an anchor for teams to recenter themselves throughout their work and to build greater self-awareness along with a capacity to shift how they're working.

Specifically, *Notice* helps PLC+ team members practice self-awareness and situational awareness:

- **Self-awareness:** Who are we as team (e.g., identities, experiences, history)? How are we doing (e.g., emotions, relationships)? What intentions do we want to bring to this next part of our work together? How might we need to shift how we're working together?
- **Situational awareness:** What is our context now? What has shifted? What feels important to anticipate?

*Reflect* helps PLC+ team members pause and adjust:

- **Pause:** Teams pause to reflect on our actions and equity impact, as well as our emotions and relationships.
- **Adjust:** Teams adjust our direction, our strategy, and/or how we're working together.

As shown in the figure, a key element of Liberatory Design is its emphasis on *empathize* and *define* practices. These practices prioritize relationship building and inquiry approaches designed to result in a deep understanding of the lived experiences of the people most affected by inequities—as well as the people who unwittingly contribute to the conditions and practices holding those inequities in place. Unlike traditional design thinking, which often centers on end users or clients, Liberatory Design emphasizes authentic engagement with communities. This approach requires teams to do the following:

- Actively listen
- Validate personal and collective experiences
- Ensure that the perspectives of those most impacted guide the process

Because this empathetic grounding allows for a more comprehensive and accurate identification of challenges, it helps your team develop solutions that genuinely address root causes rather than symptoms.

Another significant aspect of Liberatory Design is its iterative process, which combines creative ideation with critical reflection to ensure that your team's progress is in continuous alignment with equity goals. This reflection prompts your team to examine assumptions, question dominant narratives, and refine solutions based on learning with and from the impacted communities. The iterative nature of this model allows teams to remain adaptable, learning together and correcting course as needed. Adaptability is crucial for advancing student and adult learning because it encourages students and teachers to treat challenges as learning opportunities, and it encourages teams to refine their strategies to better serve the communities they aim to support.

In a PLC+ community, there may be imbalances of power between new and veteran teachers, BIPOC teachers and white teachers, and department leads and those without formal leadership positions. These imbalances impact who feels agency to speak up, who is listened to, which ideas get considered, and which ideas are disregarded. Liberatory Design's emphasis on cocreation and shared leadership further advances the PLC+ community efforts by encouraging groups to prioritize time and intention to create an inclusive environment where power imbalances and challenging dynamics are named and tended; this helps ensure that many voices have the opportunity to actively shape decision-making.

By decentralizing power in order to value contributions from all, the Liberatory Design approach promotes shared leadership and amplifies the voices of those who might otherwise be sidelined in traditional design processes. As a result, the outcomes are more representative, more innovative, and more effective as they draw from a broader range of insights and experiences, especially those of the people who are most impacted by the challenges being addressed. This collaborative framework ultimately empowers teams to address complex challenges in ways that are both empathetic and impactful.

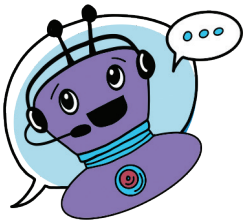
Consider this example of a high school PLC using the Liberatory Design framework to guide their conversations after they observe unequal patterns of

participation during group projects in social studies classes. The team uses the Liberatory Design framework to take the following steps:



Video 0.6  
Overview of  
Liberatory Design  
[qrs.ly/coghoaj](https://qrs.ly/coghoaj)

- 1. Empathize Mode:** The PLC conducts empathy interviews with students, especially students who are most impacted by the challenges the PLC intends to address, asking them to share their experiences with group projects. They discover that some students feel their ideas are dismissed or overshadowed by peers, while others express a lack of confidence in participating due to language barriers or limited prior knowledge.
- 2. Define Mode:** The team defines the problem as “unequal participation in group projects, caused by inequitable group dynamics and insufficient scaffolding.”
- 3. Ideation and Implementation:** The team decides to take action, discussing equitable participation goals with students and restructuring group tasks to include individual accountability.



## ASK A BOT

Sometimes, despite our best intentions, we may overlook our own areas of unawareness. This can lead us to observe situations and unintentionally phrase things in ways that aren't constructive or that may cause harm. To approach challenges with greater empathy and understanding, consider using AI to help reform your group's observation. AI can help your team express issues in a way that avoids stereotypes and seeks deeper understanding. To begin, try using this prompt:

We are observing [**INSERT ISSUE HERE, E.G., PARTICULAR GROUPS OF STUDENTS ARE NOT APPLYING THEMSELVES OR ENGAGED IN LEARNING**]. Can you help us rephrase this issue in a more empathetic and solution-focused way? Additionally, suggest strategies or questions we can use to better understand the underlying causes from the students' perspectives.

## NOTES

---

---

---

---

---



## QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
How do the PLC teams at your school see, engage, and act? Identify processes that are used to accomplish each of these.				
Consider the impact of systems thinking, through a Liberatory Design lens, on your colleagues and your students.				
Create opportunities for all voices to provide feedback during key decision-making moments. Use anonymous surveys, independent writing before sharing, or rotating leadership roles to encourage participation from all voices.				
Create a space for both individual and group reflection on how inclusivity and shared leadership are being practiced.				

(Continued)

(Continued)

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Pay attention to the power dynamics that play out in your team meeting. Ask yourself questions like these: What patterns do I see with regard to who speaks and who doesn't? How do our meeting structures, locations, and processes support shared power or reinforce imbalances of power? Are all perspectives valued? Are we living up to our commitment for shared decision-making?				
During family conferences or other family engagement opportunities, ask family members these questions: What are your values? How do these values connect to the goals you have for your child this year? What is the most important thing you hope they achieve during this phase of their schooling? What is happening at school that is supporting accomplishing this? What is happening at school that is blocking this?				
Commit to listening to diverse voices—including students and families—when making key decisions about teaching, learning, and equity initiatives. Incorporate structures and processes that cultivate conditions for those from nondominant cultures to authentically participate and collaborate on key decisions.				
Work collaboratively to identify and list the groups whose perspectives should be included to ensure equitable and informed decision-making.				



Available for download at <https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC>

## WHAT SETS PLC+ APART? THE COMMON CHALLENGE

Shared goals drive the actions any team takes, whether it is competitive (e.g., winning the soccer match) or collaborative (e.g., gaining market share in the third quarter). In education, the shared goal, broadly, is to improve and accelerate student learning. But without fully understanding existing barriers and strengths, it is nearly impossible for teams to determine what actions will remove those barriers and leverage those strengths. Liberatory Design offers process guidance to help teams identify common challenges and envision new, liberatory realities to work toward.

Specifically, the Liberatory Design mode labeled *define* helps teams develop a point of view about the needs of the community and the common challenges that must be addressed to meet those needs. PLC+ teams identify a common challenge by creating a statement about the community's current status, which serves to clarify exactly what problem the team will address. These statements are often the product of the first two questions in the investigation cycle: *Where are we going?* and *Where are we now?* Here are some examples of effective common challenges:

- Multilingual learners at our school tend to excel on the speaking and listening portions of the state's language assessment, but they often struggle with the reading and writing portions.
- Students' skills and habits in terms of study skills can be expanded.
- We want to strengthen our innovative technology usage in our teaching.

Notice all these common challenges are phrased as statements rather than as questions, and they are voiced in a way that identifies the present level of performance. Further, they are easy to remember, which improves clarity and commitment to the common challenge. Also note that these challenges aren't SMART goals, which often require several meetings to agree on and are frequently *given to* teachers rather than *developed by* teachers. SMART goals may also be created to cover an entire year, whereas common challenges focus on the current issue the team is facing.

When teams define a common challenge, they help ensure that discussions remain focused on student-centered outcomes rather than veering into general teaching practices or administrative tasks. This focus is essential because the primary goal of PLC+ is to improve student learning by analyzing and responding to data on student performance. When educators center their





## QUICK START

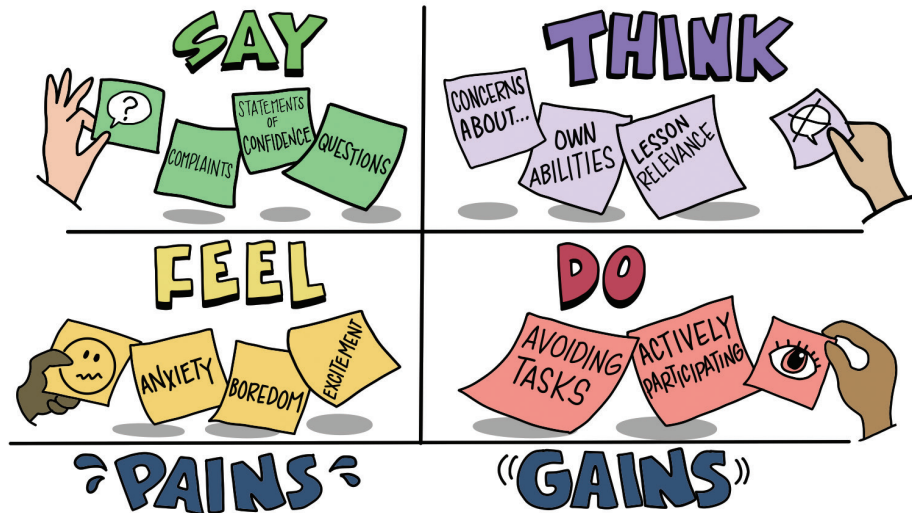
	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Identify a common challenge that may serve to unite your team.				
Consider the difference between framing this as a SMART goal versus a common challenge.				
Practice rephrasing challenges as statements and not questions. Use concise, focused statements that clearly outline the current status of student performance.				
Review the shared common challenge your PLC has developed. Reflect on the clarity of the common challenge and whether or not the challenge provides a focused direction for your team's collaborative efforts.				
Bring relevant data to your next PLC meeting. Collaboratively analyze the data and identify the progress made toward meeting the common challenge.				
Reflect on how a student's entire school experience impacts academic outcomes. What are the factors that contribute to students' social and emotional well-being?				



Available for download at <https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC>



# EMPATHY MAPPING



The call for teachers to *empathize*, which is also one of the modes of Liberatory Design, asks educators to understand the experiences, emotions, and motivations of those who are most impacted by the challenges that educators are hoping to address. Engaging in empathy work allows educators to gain a rich understanding of the students and communities they serve. When done with intention and from a place of love, respect, and curiosity, empathy work can support educators, students, and other stakeholders to develop deeper levels of relational trust. While there are many different ways to empathize, we will highlight empathy mapping as an effective approach to help the school community gain a deeper understanding of their students' perspectives, emotions, and needs, which makes it especially valuable for professional learning communities who are working to improve instructional practices.

An empathy map is a tool developed at the Stanford d.school that visually represents what students say, think, feel, and do, allowing educators to step outside of their own assumptions and view learning challenges through the students' eyes. Empathy maps can highlight areas where students might be experiencing obstacles or frustrations, and they can uncover potential motivations and aspirations that can guide more student-centered instruction.

Using empathy maps in a PLC+ allows teachers to create a collective picture of their students' experiences, which is invaluable when interpreting data and planning interventions. Rather than only focusing on numbers and scores, an empathy map brings in qualitative insights that provide deeper context to quantitative data. These insights enable the team to identify and discuss strategies that respond to students' emotional and motivational needs, not just their academic ones.

To create an empathy map, team members first gather information from students, including informal interviews, about a particular topic that the professional learning community is interested in improving. Here are some examples of topic ideas:

- Ask students about a time when they felt success or when something was challenging. Ask them how they felt, what they did, and what they wished would have happened.
- Ask students about a sense of belonging in school. Ask them what it means to feel like you belong at school, and what the best and worst parts of that are. Ask them what suggestions they would offer to new teachers to help all students feel like they belong.
- Ask students what advice they would give to younger students.

Note that when empathy work is done poorly, it can feel extractive, tokenizing, and transactional. To avoid stumbling onto this negative path, teams should remain attentive to the power dynamics that can play out between teachers and students, which can be amplified when differences in race, gender, class, or sexual orientation are present. In particular, it is important for teams to take time to set intentions about how the educators doing the empathy mapping hope to be experienced by students and to generate ideas about actions that will support these intentions. When done well, empathy mapping and other empathy work will strengthen relationships and deepen understanding.

During the process of empathy mapping, the professional learning community gathers to share what students say, think, feel, and do in relation to the topic. They create a blank, four-quadrant map using the headings shown in the previous illustration and then they fill in the quadrants based on the students' responses to the empathy-based questions. For instance, in the quadrant with the heading "Say," teachers would share what students verbally express, such as complaints, questions, or statements of confidence. In the quadrants marked "Think" and "Feel," teachers explore what students might be thinking but not saying—perhaps concerns about their own abilities or the relevance of the lesson—as well as emotions such as anxiety, boredom, or excitement are documented. Then, in the section marked "Do," the team would document visible behaviors, like avoiding tasks or actively participating. The "Pains" and "Gains" categories on the map invite participants to note voiced or unvoiced concerns and hopes.

It is also a best practice for educators to circle back to the students who participated to share what the team learned from them. This inclusive approach invites students to also make sense of the data gathered, and it helps the team to check that their synthesis of students' perspectives feels accurate and in alignment with what the students hoped the teachers would take away. This is what it means to design *with*, rather than *for*, students.

Empathy mapping is a powerful step toward creating a more responsive, supportive learning environment. By actively considering students' thoughts,





## COMMON CHALLENGE PROTOCOL

The common challenge protocol provides teams with a process to identify their why, or the reason that they spend time together. The common challenge helps teams

find purpose in their work together, which is especially important for teams that have members teaching different age groups or content areas.

**Purpose:** To collaboratively understand and frame a common challenge based on community-defined needs, values, and a comprehensive view of student experiences.

**Suggested Time:** 45 minutes

### STEP 1: Define the Common Challenge (20 minutes)

#### 1. Share and Reflect on Data (5 minutes)

- **Data Presentation:** Present both quantitative data (e.g., assessment results) and qualitative data (e.g., student feedback, observations).
- **Contextual Inquiry:** Discuss the factors contributing to current outcomes, focusing on student engagement, inclusion, and system-wide patterns that impact learning.

#### 2. Collaborative Sense Making (10 minutes)

- **Identify Needs and Patterns:**
  - Use storytelling and perspective sharing to identify patterns in data and uncover root causes.
  - **Guiding Question:** “What core needs or challenges do students express, and how might these reflect broader patterns in our system?”

- **Expand the Problem Definition:**

- Discuss how the challenge might impact different student groups, and frame it to capture diverse needs.

- **Guiding Questions:**

- “How has this challenge been shaped by our current structures?”
- “Who benefits or is disadvantaged by this system, and what are their experiences?”

- **Document Reflections:** Summarize insights from the discussion to capture a holistic view of the challenge, prioritizing needs that reflect both shared and unique student experiences.

### 3. Formulate the Challenge Statement (5 minutes)

- Draft a concise challenge statement that reflects the team’s understanding of student needs and includes perspectives on accessibility, engagement, and growth.
- **Example:** “Students generally are not feeling engaged or inspired by the work they are assigned, and they want more opportunities to interact with peers in their learning.”

### STEP 2: Inquiry Into the Challenge (25 minutes)

#### 1. Identify Gaps in Understanding (5 minutes)

- **Map Out Uncertainties:** Each team member reflects on aspects of the challenge they feel uncertain about or wish to explore further.

- **Guiding Questions:**
  - “What do we still need to understand about the student experience regarding this challenge?”
  - “Are there any assumptions about student needs we should examine?”

## 2. Inquiry Planning (10 minutes)

- **Explore Safe-to-Fail Actions:**
  - Brainstorm small, low-risk activities that could reveal more information (e.g., piloting a survey, conducting empathy interviews).
  - Focus on methods that encourage student input and support team learning.
- **Design Questions for Investigation:**
  - **Example:** “What barriers do students identify as impacting their engagement in this area?”
  - **Example:** “How do students and families feel this issue affects their school experience?”
- **Document Inquiry Actions:** Create a list of specific inquiry steps, and assign roles, ensuring each team member’s perspective is valued in the discovery process.

## 3. Debrief and Reflect (10 minutes)

- **Sense-Making Discussion:** As a team, review findings, focusing on insights that reveal more about

the underlying dynamics of the common challenge.

- **Challenge Statement Reevaluation:** After discussing findings, revisit and refine the common challenge statement if needed.
- **Plus/Delta Feedback on Inquiry:** Gather reflections on what aspects of the inquiry process were helpful and what adjustments could improve future cycles.

### Quality Checklist for the Common Challenge

- Is the common challenge we developed consequential to students, teachers, and/or families? How do we know?
- Is it stated in observable and measurable terms?
- Do the members of the team have a shared understanding of the common challenge? Do those most impacted by this challenge agree with how we have defined the challenge?



Video 0.9  
A team works through the Common Challenge protocol  
[qrs.ly/lyghoau](https://qrs.ly/lyghoau)

## A COMMON CHALLENGE WITH LIBERATORY DESIGN MODES

As we've noted, the Liberatory Design mode labeled *define* helps teams identify the needs of the community and the key challenges they must address in order to meet those needs. This approach is used whenever teams have gathered sufficient data for their investigation to make decisions about where they will focus their efforts for the investigation cycle. This data are usually the product of the first two questions: *Where are we going?* and *Where are we now?*

This common challenge protocol is designed to aid teams in discussion and decision-making. As with all discussions, yours may vary a bit from the suggested protocol, and that's fine. Further, as your team tries on different strategies to address the challenge and learn from their implementation, you may find that you need to fine-tune the original challenge statement later in the cycle. The key is to always keep in mind the overall purpose of the common challenge: Clearly define the problem and work toward consensus.

Liberatory Design offers a mindset that is essential when discussing the quantitative and qualitative data used: "Share, don't sell." We all have perspectives we are especially passionate about, which means we can err by trying to convince others of the value, rather than inviting them into the process of being collaborators.<sup>24</sup> By staying open to others and avoiding becoming too attached to our ideas, we allow room for the refinement and incorporation of new ideas. As organizational productivity expert Edward Deming noted, "Every system is perfectly designed to get the result that it does."<sup>25</sup> If we want to change the trajectory of student learning, we must be open to multiple perspectives.

The common challenge protocol with Liberatory Design modes is intended to provide time and space for teams to do the hard intellectual and social/emotional work of ideation and creation. Far too often, schools take an all-too-common approach of "ready, fire, aim," which undermines school improvement efforts by rushing to action before the team can take time to consider what problem we are really trying to resolve. In contrast, the protocol offers a process that supports teams to thoughtfully define needs and challenges as well as identify areas that may necessitate deeper inquiry in order to surface the learning needed to effectively understand and address the challenges. The outline on the previous page is set up to show how teams might use the protocol to guide a forty-five-minute common challenge meeting.

## CASE IN POINT: A SHALLOW WADE INTO DATA WATERS



The eighth-grade PLC team at Pin Oak Junior High sat around a table in the library, stacks of student data sheets and notebooks scattered across the surface. Sarah Clarkson, the eighth-grade science teacher, sighed as she looked over her notes. Then she admitted, “It just feels like we’re always talking about the same things. We identify areas where students struggle, but we never seem to get anywhere. We gather data, but I’m not sure we’re really using it effectively.”

James Washington, the math teacher, nodded in agreement. “I know what you mean. We talk about proficiency scores and gaps, but we’re not really digging into why those gaps are there. It’s like we’re only scratching the surface. And we only seem to hear from a few of us in these meetings. I feel like we need a new approach if we’re really going to help our students.”

“Exactly,” replied Mia Rodriguez, the English teacher. “We keep saying we want to make things better for everyone, but we don’t even know what ‘better’ looks like for some of our students. I’ve been thinking about how to bring

in more of their voices, maybe get a better sense of their needs beyond test scores.” She paused, glancing around the room, and then added, “What if we tried to focus on understanding their experiences instead of just their performance?”

Sarah leaned forward, intrigued. “That might be exactly what we need. Maybe instead of just analyzing the numbers, we could try to understand more about what’s driving those numbers.”

### What’s Your Advice?

- How can this team move from simply reviewing data to understanding the root causes of student learning struggles?
- What steps could the team take to make their meetings feel more productive and less repetitive?
- How can the team balance the need to address proficiency gaps with a broader approach to understanding student needs?



Video 0.10  
An activator reflects on  
the case in point  
[qrs.ly/kqghoaz](https://qrs.ly/kqghoaz)



## CROSSCUTTING VALUES CHECK

What is the current status of the professional learning community in your school? Consider these reflective questions to spark discussion with colleagues.

### Equity and Fairness

- What processes do we have in place to understand who is benefiting and who is not benefiting from our instruction? How are these processes working for us?
- How do we learn about our impact on all students, including those with disabilities, multilingual learners, and advanced learners?
- How do we interrogate variance with regard to student performance and outcomes? What do we attribute to students' personal characteristics? Are these justified?

### High Expectations

- How strong are our practices in relation to adherence to grade-level content?
- In what ways do we demonstrate high expectations of all students, including those with disabilities, multilingual learners, and advanced learners?
- How do we support and encourage one another as colleagues? How do we encourage risk-taking in service of learning?

### Individual and Collective Efficacy

- How do we uphold high expectations for ourselves in terms of belief about our ability to positively impact the learning of all students?
- What supports are regularly utilized by all teachers (novice, experienced, and expert) to ensure continued professional growth?
- How do we make space to share our learnings with the broader school community and engage the work of other PLC teams?

### Activators

- How do we ensure that any and all members are encouraged and supported to be activators, not just the person with the most seniority or highest position?
- Does our team include a range of professionals, including special and general educators, so that we can benefit from different perspectives?
- How do we understand the difference between collaborating and cooperating? What indicators do we see of collaborating on our team? What indicators do we see of cooperation on our team?



## SELF-ASSESSMENT

Use the following five statements, one per essential question, for rapid assessment. Read the question and corresponding statement, and then discuss your current state with your PLC+ team. Come to a shared agreement about the current capacity and implementation for each statement.

### 1. Notice: Where Are We Going?

We define our expectations through learning intentions and success criteria, and these definitions involve learning progressions over time, moving to the point of equity of access and opportunity for learning for all students.

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

- Reflect: Who is “in the know” about our expectations? How have our processes made space for students, families, and educators to co-construct and/or understand these expectations? What do we believe about how much these groups should contribute to defining our expectations?

### 2. Notice: Where Are We Now?

We collect and analyze evidence to understand our students, identify equity gaps, challenge bias, and define common challenges that unite our efforts and support collective efficacy.

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

Reflect: What evidence do we collect? What does this evidence support us to see? What are the limitations of this evidence in supporting us to see the unique interests, skills, and talents that our students possess and opportunities to build from those assets in our work to support learners?

### 3. Notice: How Do We Move Learning Forward?

We match evidence-based instructional approaches to defined learning needs, assess and increase our own abilities to deliver instruction, and use learning walks and microteaching to move learning forward.

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

Reflect: How do we make decisions about instructional moves? In what ways do we learn from others about effective practices? How do we draw from Black, Indigenous, and other minoritized and marginalized communities to learn culturally responsive and relevant instructional approaches? Do we believe that we can benefit from these perspectives?

#### 4. Notice: What Did We Learn Today?

We regularly examine our practice, discuss expectations, identify and act on student needs, and seek to describe elements of our practice that yield, or do not yield, a measurable, positive impact.

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

Reflect: How do we understand student needs? What processes do we have that support students to articulate their needs and provide feedback about how our curriculum and pedagogy meet their needs? How do students know we've heard them?

#### 5. Notice: Who Benefitted and Who Did Not?

We intentionally seek to identify patterns that suggest barriers to learning, monitor progress and achievement for all students, and modify instruction using strategies that include tiered systems, new approaches to instruction, and heightening collective efficacy.

1	2	3	4	5
Not Begun or Not Initiated	Very Limited Evidence of Capacity	Some Evidence of Capacity	Evidence of Capacity and Limited Evidence of Effective Implementation	Evidence of Capacity and Demonstrated Effective Implementation

Reflect: Whose voices have been invited to seek patterns? What might we learn from engaging paraprofessionals, after-school staff, students, and families if we invited them to help identify patterns? What fears or reservations might we be holding in inviting these perspectives? What structural barriers need to be addressed in order to engage these groups authentically?



Available for download at <https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC>

# NOTICE AND REFLECT



## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can we refine what our professional learning communities are and how they impact adult and student learning?

## THINK ABOUT

- Are we satisfied with our current professional learning community scheme?
- Do we learn from each other as a professional learning community, or is wisdom siloed?
- Are our efforts fair and equitable?
- What are our current strengths, and where do we need to grow?

## START – STOP – KEEP

Based on what you learned in this module, answer the questions below.

Start: What practice(s) would you like to start doing?
Stop: What practice(s) would you like to stop doing?
Keep: What practice(s) would you like to keep doing?