

An Illustrated Guide to the 5 Questions for PLC+

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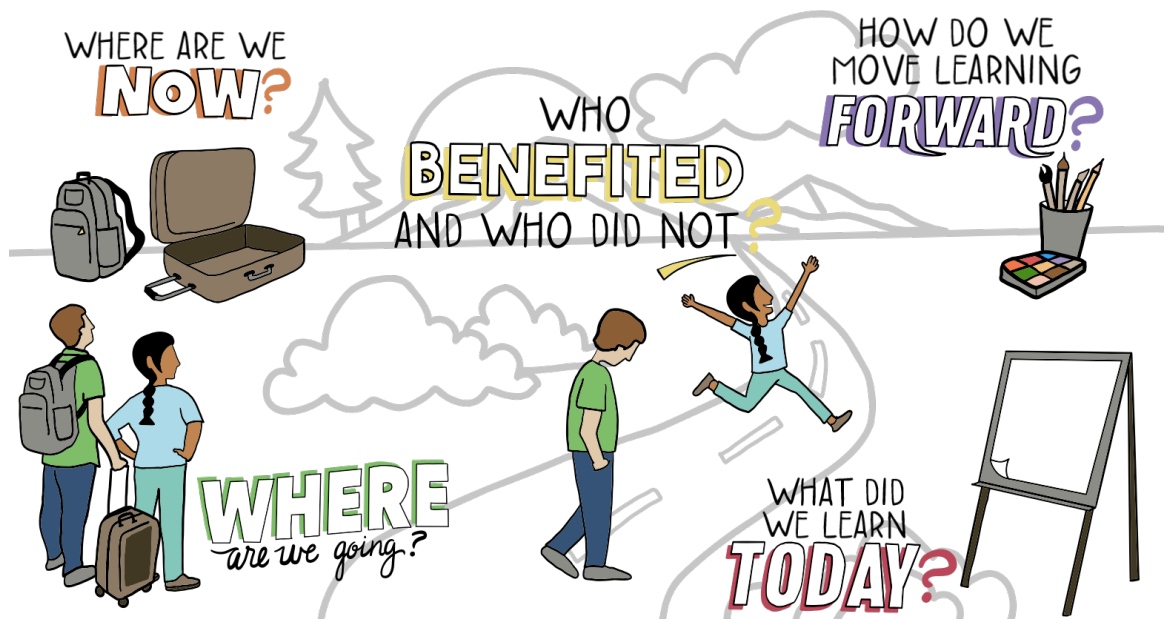
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LETTER FROM THE AUTHORS

We know how busy educators are. Every day you're balancing lessons, student needs, parent communication, and a dozen other responsibilities. This guide was created to make the work of PLCs feel clearer, simpler, and more doable.

At its heart, PLC+ is about helping teachers and teams do what matters most: improve learning for students and for ourselves as educators. This guide takes the big ideas of the PLC+ framework—a framework built around 5 Essential Questions—and brings them to life with visuals, examples, and tools you can use right away.

Think of it as a roadmap you can flip open when you need direction, clarity, or inspiration in your PLC work.



The five questions are these, and you will find a section of this book devoted to each:

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?

Inside, you'll find illustrations and prompts designed to spark reflection and conversation. Whether you're reviewing student work, planning instruction, or tackling tough questions with colleagues, these visuals are here to help you see connections and make your next steps clearer.

Our hope is that this guide feels like a companion. We hope that it's something that sits alongside your daily practice, offering support, encouragement, and a reminder that you don't have to figure this out alone. Together, we can make the complex work of continuous improvement not only achievable but also deeply rewarding.

With appreciation for all you do,



- Nancy, Doug, and John

WHERE
ARE WE
GOING ?

WHERE
ARE WE
NOW ?

HOW DO
WE MOVE
LEARNING
FORWARD ?

WHAT DID
WE LEARN
TODAY ?

WHO
BENEFITED
& WHO
DID NOT ?



THE
"WHY"
BEHIND PLC+

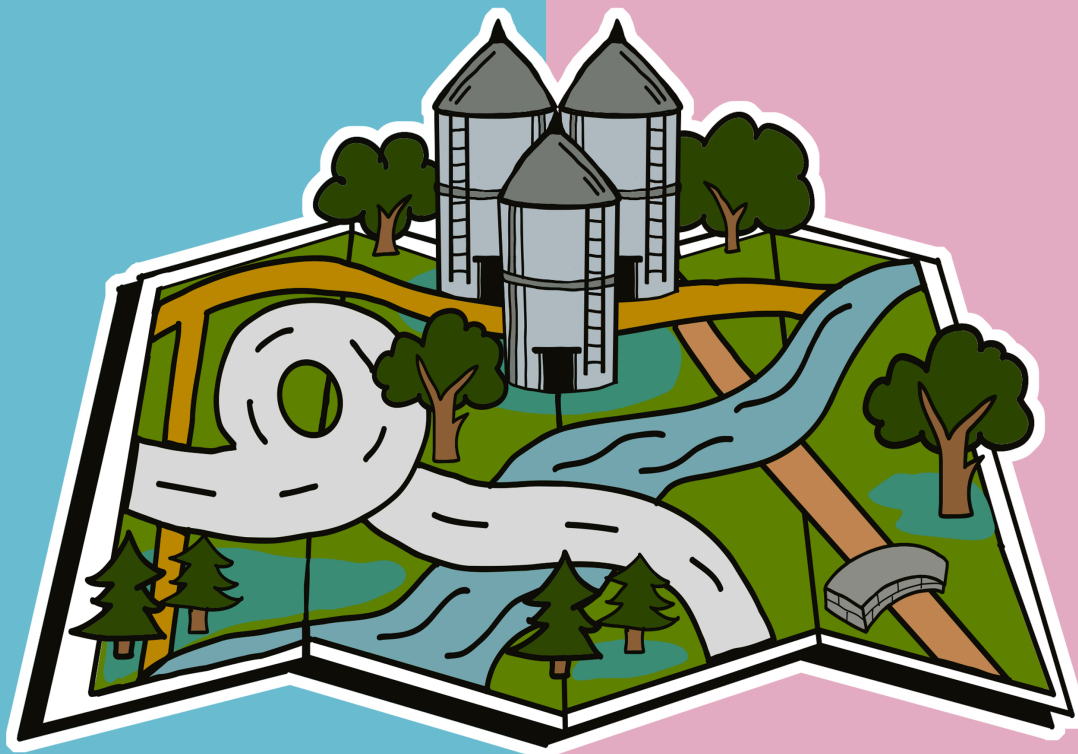
A LOOK BACK: A ROADMAP FOR MOVING FORWARD IN PLCs

For a long time, teaching was a solo act. The common mindset was, *What happens in my classroom is my business, and what happens in yours is yours.* With our doors closed, both literally and figuratively, we planned, taught, and assessed on our own. Although many educators developed deep expertise this way, it also meant that important decisions about lessons, assessments, and responding to student needs were made in isolation.

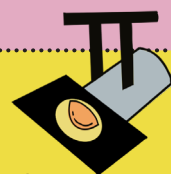
The result? Inconsistent experiences for students and missed opportunities to learn from one another.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) began showing up in research in the 1960s as a way to push back against this isolation. Instead of leaving student success up to chance, PLCs offered teachers a way for educators to collaborate, share expertise, and work together to improve curriculum, instruction, and outcomes for all learners.





SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH



In a study of more than 1,200 teachers across 78 schools, researchers found something powerful: When teachers worked together in a culture of collaboration, both teaching and learning improved. Schools that embraced this kind of teamwork were described as *learning-enriched* or places where teachers supported one another and stayed deeply committed to student success. On the other hand, schools without collaboration were considered *learning-impo*verished,^{1,2,3} where isolation limited growth for both teachers and students. The idea that professional collaboration fuels stronger learning remains a central focus in schools today, from Pre-K through 12th grade.

Simply providing time for professional learning communities is not enough to ensure a learning-enriched school.

Teachers benefit from the collaborative work of PLCs when they examine different perspectives, create dissonance, and raise curiosity.⁴

However, simply putting teachers together and telling them to collaborate does not produce the desired outcomes for the teachers.

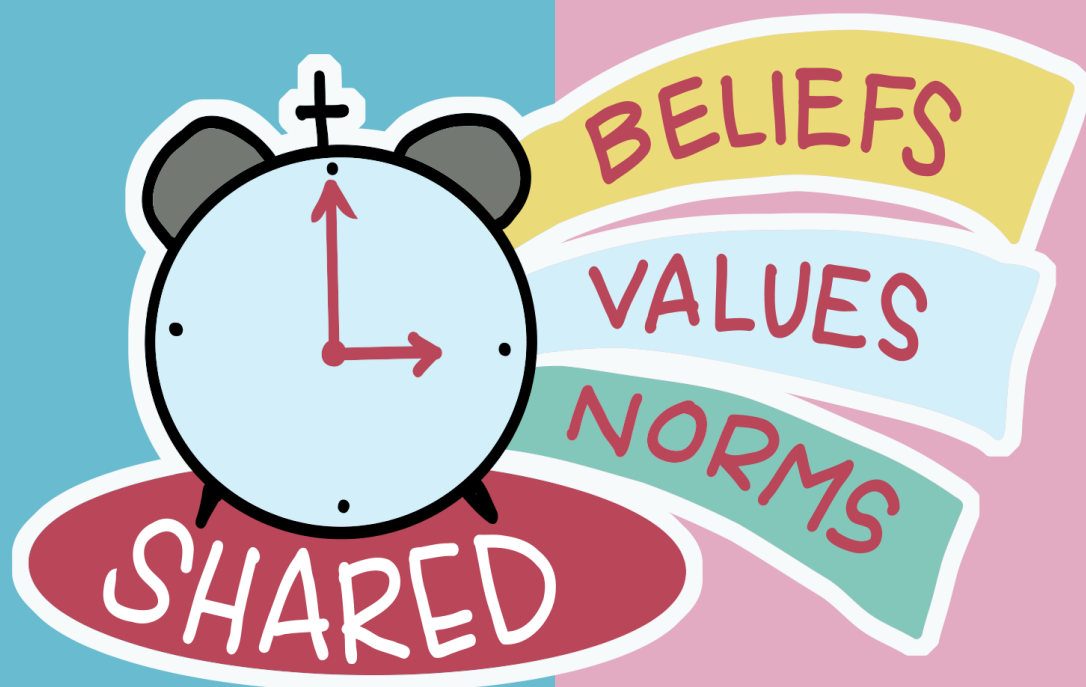
Instead, there must be shared beliefs, values, and norms that promote positive professional relationships among professional learning community members.



There also must be a culture of collaboration that engages members in reflective practice and inquiry leading to professional growth supported by mutual support.⁵

Productive collaboration is characterized by several fundamental elements that create the conditions for meaningful professional learning. These prerequisites for effective collaboration include a shared mission, vision, values, and goals.⁶

When team members align around common purposes and collective commitments, their collaborative efforts become focused and purposeful rather than fragmented or superficial. They aren't just sitting in the room; they're engaged in meaningful work.



Trust and psychological safety represent another critical characteristic of productive collaboration.

Relational trust among educators enables the honest examination of practice, open discussion of student data, and willingness to be vulnerable about instructional challenges.⁷ Without this foundation of trust, collaborative efforts remain at surface levels, limiting their impact on teaching and learning.



Collective responsibility for student learning distinguishes productive collaboration from mere coordination of activities.

High-impact collaborative teams operate from the belief that all students can learn and that team members share accountability for ensuring this outcome.⁸ This collective ownership drives teams to examine their practices critically and make necessary adjustments to improve student results.



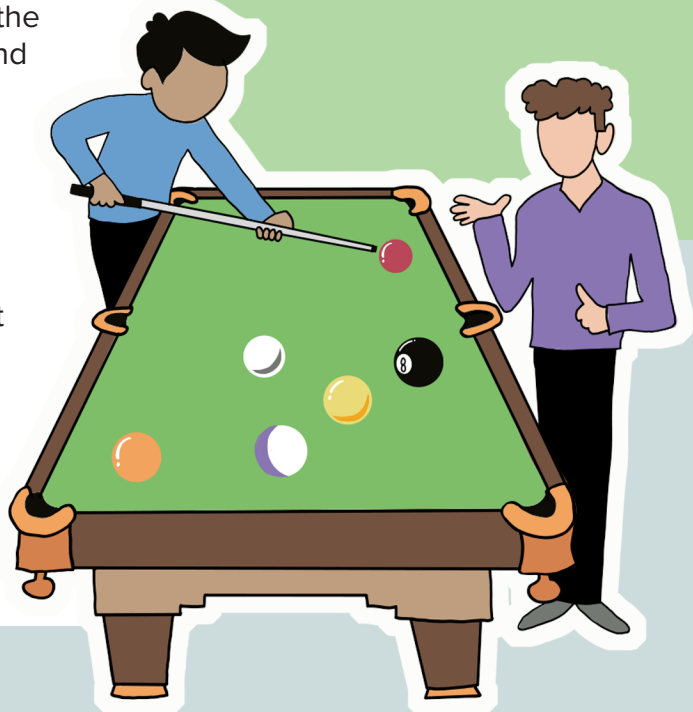
WHAT ARE PLCS ANYWAY?



For some educators, PLCs feel like just another item on the schedule. For others, they're the highlight of the week. At their best, PLCs are more than meetings: They're a way of working together that makes teaching stronger and learning deeper. To understand what PLCs really are, it helps to look at four big ideas.

1. PLCs Are About Collective Problem Solving

At their heart, PLCs give teachers a structured space to solve the real problems of teaching and learning. Instead of working alone to figure out why students struggled on an assessment or how to teach a tricky concept, PLCs bring educators together to pool their expertise. This isn't just "sharing" or "meeting," but rather purposeful dialogue focused on finding solutions that make a difference in classrooms.



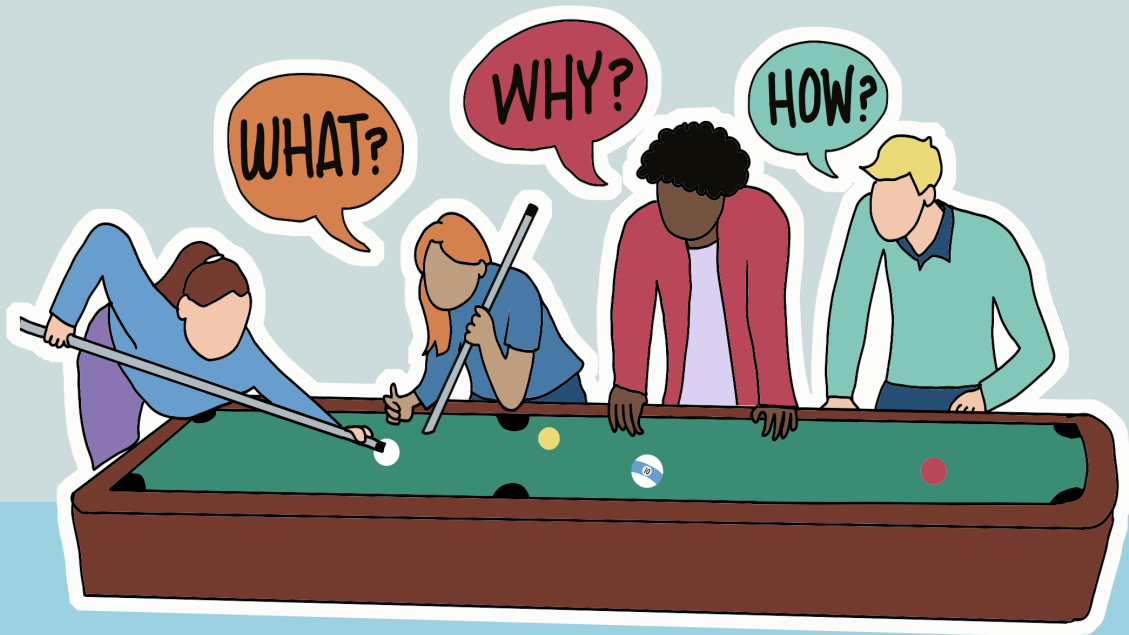
2. PLCs Focus on Student Learning

The ultimate purpose of a PLC is simple: to improve student learning. Instead of leaving success to chance, PLCs help educators use evidence, including student work, assessments, and observations, to understand how students are doing. When teachers analyze this evidence together, they can adjust instruction, close learning gaps, and build on what's working. In other words, PLCs keep the focus where it belongs: on every student's growth.



3. PLCs Help Teachers Learn, Too

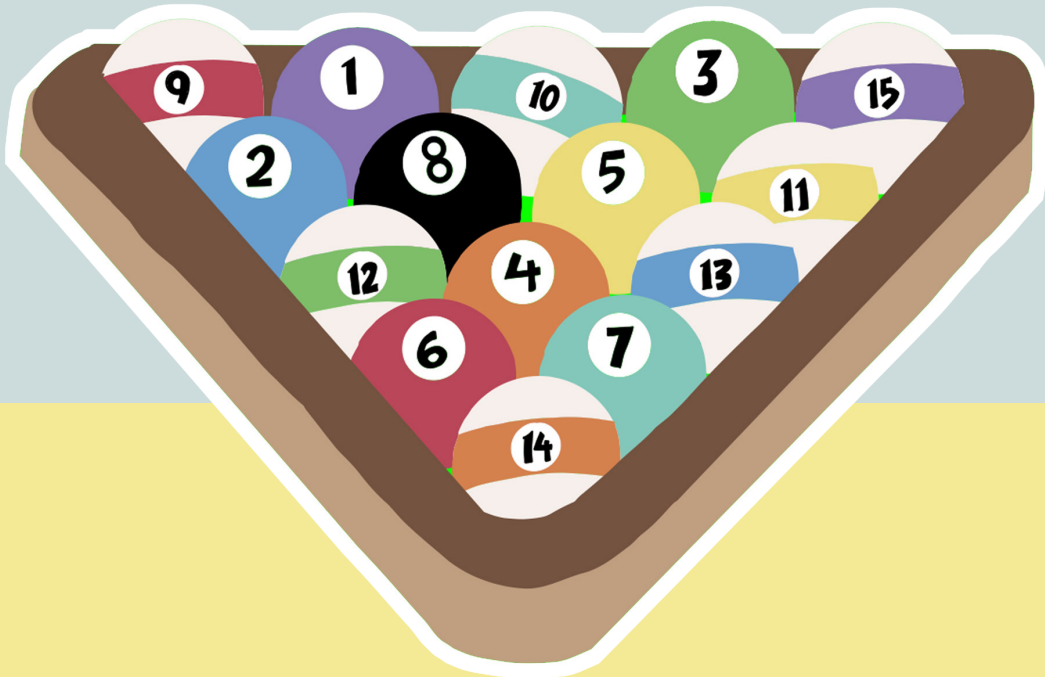
Strong PLCs aren't just about students. They're also about teachers learning as professionals. By working together, educators grow their knowledge of both what they teach (content knowledge) and how they teach it (pedagogical knowledge). PLCs create space to share strategies, test ideas, and refine lessons. This kind of collective professional learning makes teachers stronger and, in turn, benefits students.



4. PLCs Build a Culture of Shared Responsibility

When done well, PLCs go beyond meetings and data. They also shape the culture of a school. Teachers develop a sense of collective efficacy, the belief that together we can make a difference for every student.

This shared responsibility shifts mindsets and builds trust. Rather than “my students” and “your students,” PLCs encourage us to think in terms of “our students.” That cultural shift is what makes PLCs transformative, not just another meeting on the calendar.



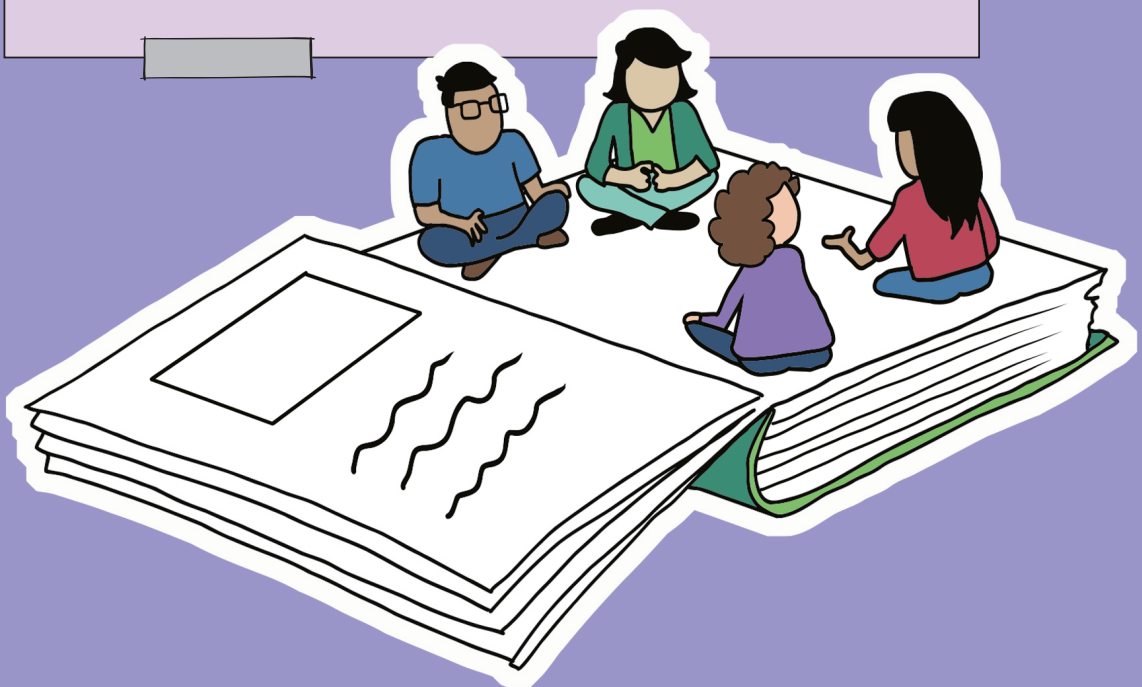
ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR PLCs

There are six essential characteristics that distinguish authentic collaboration from traditional school structures.⁹ These dimensions provide a framework for building cultures that strengthen teaching and improve student learning across all educational contexts.

Shared Beliefs and Values

At the heart of PLCs are shared commitments that guide daily practice. Educators move beyond surface-level mission statements to articulate core beliefs about learning, teaching, and collective responsibility.

For example, elementary teams may agree all students can read with differentiated support, while middle school teachers prioritize conceptual understanding over rote memorization. High school teams often unify around college and career readiness. These shared values provide coherence, ensuring students experience consistent support across classrooms.



Shared and Supportive Leadership

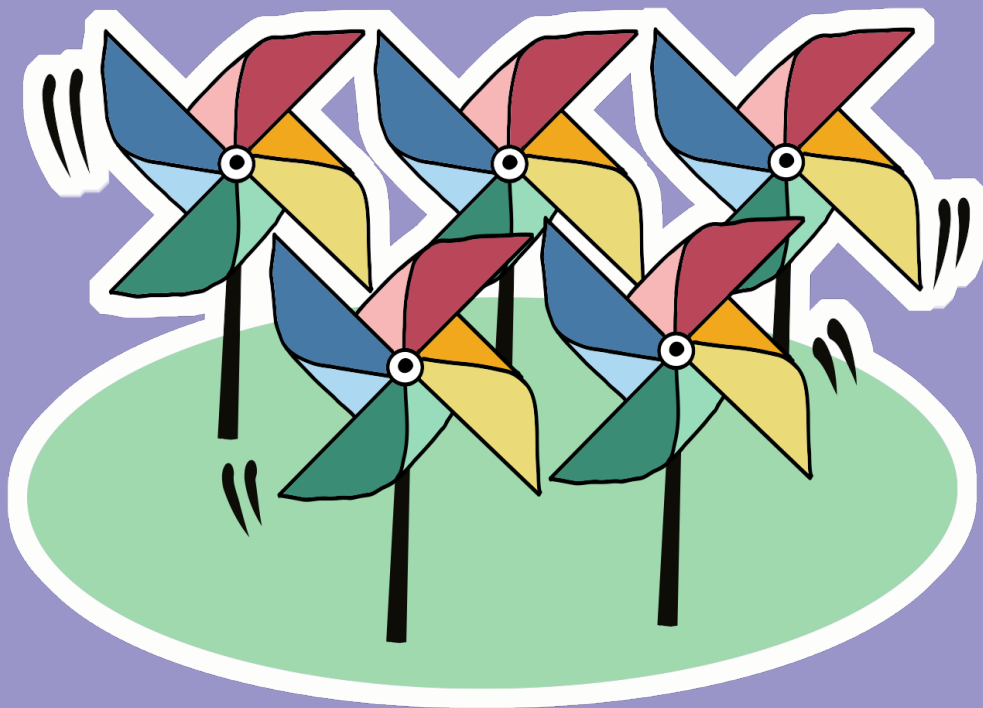
Effective PLCs require distributed leadership where multiple stakeholders share responsibility. Principals play a supportive role, fostering collaborative decision making rather than top-down control. In elementary schools, grade-level teams may rotate facilitation of data discussions.

Middle school departments collaborate on schoolwide initiatives with teacher leaders guiding implementation. High schools often rely on student support teams and vertical alignment groups, leadership is shared among administrators, counselors, and teachers. This model builds collective capacity and sustainability.



Collective Learning and Application

PLCs engage in structured professional learning that connects directly to classroom practice. Rather than working in isolation, teachers study research, test new strategies, and share results. This cycle ensures that professional learning is collaborative, coordinated, and focused on improving outcomes for students.



Shared Personal Practice

Collaboration deepens when teachers open their classrooms and practice to colleagues. This requires trust, as educators observe, provide feedback, and examine student work together. Elementary teams may engage in peer observations of differentiated instruction.

Middle schools often use lesson study cycles to refine teaching approaches. High school departments might calibrate grading by jointly analyzing student work. Shared personal practice builds collective expertise while fostering a culture of transparency and continuous instructional improvement.



Supportive Conditions

For PLCs to thrive, both structural and relational conditions must be in place. Schools need dedicated time to meet, access to resources, and supportive scheduling structures. Just as important are norms of trust, respect, and open dialogue. Elementary teams may benefit from weekly collaboration periods, middle schools from flexible scheduling for cross-curricular planning, and high schools from department spaces equipped with technology.

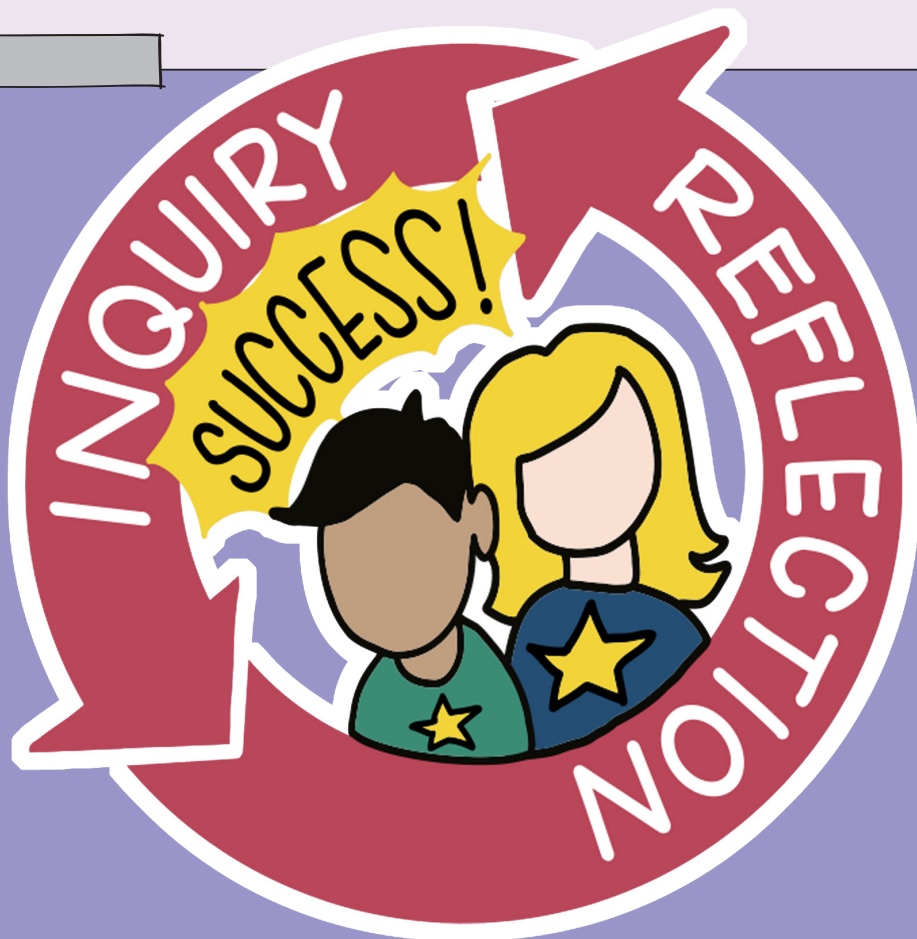
Supportive conditions provide the infrastructure and climate that make sustained collaboration possible.



Continuous Improvement

Authentic PLCs are characterized by ongoing cycles of inquiry and reflection. Teams set goals, implement strategies, monitor progress, and adjust based on evidence. Elementary teachers might track reading achievement using formative assessments, while middle schools focus on schoolwide initiatives such as mathematical reasoning.

High school departments often align improvement efforts with broader school goals, systematically analyzing student work and refining practice. Continuous improvement ensures that PLCs remain dynamic, responsive, and focused on long-term student success.



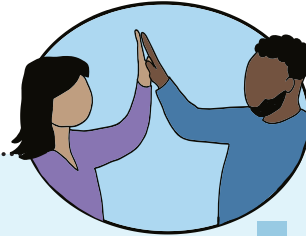
PLC Characteristics: Team Checklist

1. Shared Beliefs and Values



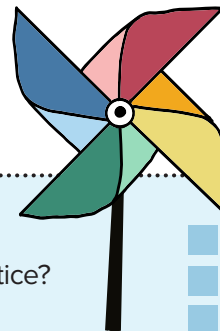
- Have we clearly stated our shared beliefs about learning and teaching?
- Do our actions and decisions align with these beliefs?
- Are our beliefs inclusive of all students, not just most?
- Can every team member articulate the commitments we've agreed to?

2. Shared and Supportive Leadership



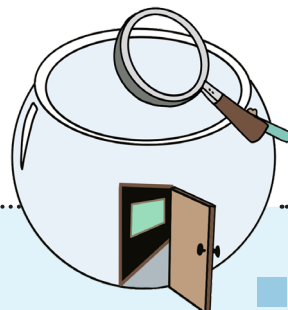
- Do we share leadership responsibilities across the team?
- Is the principal supporting collaboration rather than directing it?
- Do teachers have a voice in decisions that affect instruction?
- Are leadership roles (such as facilitating or note-taking) rotated?

3. Collective Learning and Application



- Are we learning together rather than working in isolation?
- Do we connect professional learning directly to classroom practice?
- Are we testing new strategies and sharing results as a team?
- Do our conversations lead to changes that improve student outcomes?

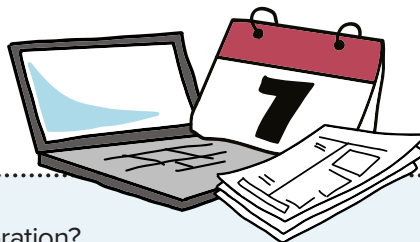
4. Shared Personal Practice



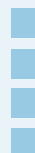
- Do we regularly look at student work together?
- Are teachers comfortable opening their classrooms for peer observation?
- Do we provide one another with constructive, respectful feedback?
- Are we using what we see and hear to refine our instruction?



5. Supportive Conditions



- Do we have dedicated time set aside for collaboration?
- Are resources (materials, data, technology) accessible to support our work?
- Do we have norms that promote trust, respect, and open dialogue?
- Is scheduling flexible enough to allow meaningful collaboration?



6. Continuous Improvement



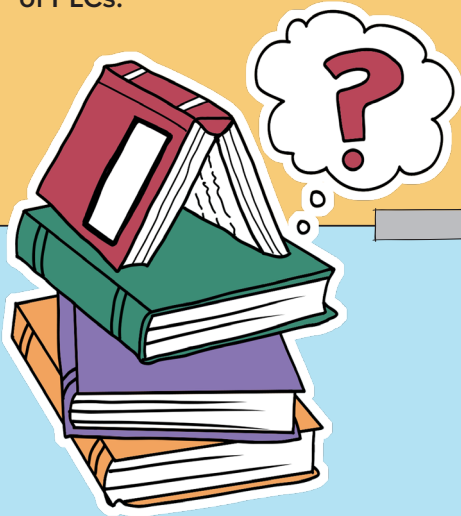
- Do we set specific, measurable goals as a team?
- Are we monitoring progress with evidence, not just impressions?
- Do we adjust our practices when strategies aren't working?
- Are we focused on long-term growth, not just short-term fixes?



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WHAT PLC+ IS NOT!

One of the biggest hindrances to the impact the PLC can have on teaching and learning is the misconception about the intention and implementation of PLCs.

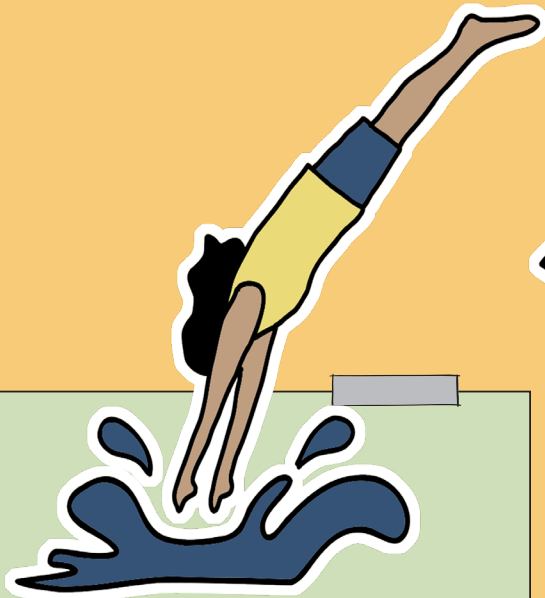


The PLC Book Club. Reading a book or article together as a staff can be a fun and even enlightening experience, but it's not a PLC. Groups of teachers may choose to learn more and read something in common, but that occurs only when they are in search of an answer to a specific question (what we call a common challenge) they have crafted about moving the learning of their students forward. Unfortunately, too many teachers have been assigned a book in the absence of a common challenge and were told it was PLC work.

The PLC Data “Admiring” Group.

Data is important fodder for the work that a professional learning community needs to do, but it's not the only work. Too often, teams get bogged down in the data analysis that doesn't go beyond what might be described as observing, remarking, and wondering aloud. In short, admiring the data in all its surprising detail and the complex stories it contains without taking the next step toward action is insufficient. Sometimes this happens because the data admiring takes too long and other times it's because the team is unaware of its ability to impact learning. Instead, the data analysis often devolves into a discussion about the characteristics of the student body and the seemingly intractable factors that can't be directly influenced by the team, such as poverty. The team remains oblivious to (or perhaps even intimidated by) what they can control. Effective PLC groups are action oriented. Evidence is fuel for the team. They use evidence to make decisions and then monitor those decisions for their impact on learning.





The PLC PD Meeting. There are times in all our lives when we need to learn new things. Those things might be skills or concepts related to teaching and learning. Members attend workshops and conferences or participate in professional learning opportunities to address a need. But that's not a PLC. PLCs do hard work. They utilize what they have learned to ask hard questions and apply ideas in their classrooms. They dive into evidence and make decisions that impact learning.



The “Siloed” PLC Meeting.

This is perhaps the most common error of all—a perception that a professional learning community exists only on Wednesday afternoons when teams meet. A PLC is a vibrant and iterative mechanism for engaging in inquiry across space and time. PLCs should operate in the hallways of the school, in the classrooms where we teach, and in the parking lot when we linger to continue a conversation with a colleague. Consider this—you belong to many communities whose membership is defined by shared interests, affiliations, and causes. Your family unit is one such community, and one that exists even when you are not in face-to-face interactions. You don't suddenly become a family when you share a meal together, only to dissolve again when you are apart. A true PLC similarly maintains its shared interests even when its members are apart from one another.

WHERE *are we going?*



QUESTION #1:

WHERE ARE WE GOING?



Essential Question:

How can teacher teams identify the learning journeys of their students?

PURPOSE DRIVES THE QUESTION

The question “Where are we going?” is the launching point of the investigation cycle. This question focuses attention on our intentions for learning. It challenges us to make clear-eyed decisions about the learning path we will blaze and allows us to always keep the end in mind. As PLC+ teams engage in this first question, they clearly define the learning intentions, success criteria, and learning progressions that are rooted in the standards for learning established by their state or province.

WHERE
are we going?



Plan Backward, Teach Forward

Planning backward to teach forward ensures that instruction, learning activities, and assessments are intentionally aligned with desired outcomes.¹ By first identifying the knowledge and skills students should master, teachers can design meaningful assessments and then select instructional strategies that build toward those goals. This process promotes coherence, prevents fragmented teaching, and increases the likelihood that students achieve deep, transferable understanding.

Backward planning provides teams with the ability to generate answers to three questions:

- What are the desired results we are seeking?
- How will we generate evidence to gauge progress?
- What are the design features of the meaningful learning experiences we will deliver?

What Are the Desired Results We Are Seeking?

We aim for students to achieve deep, transferable understanding of key concepts and skills identified in the standards. Desired results include not only mastery of content but also the ability to apply knowledge across contexts, demonstrate critical thinking, and communicate effectively.

These outcomes establish clarity of purpose and provide the foundation for aligning instruction, activities, and assessments in a coherent and intentional sequence.

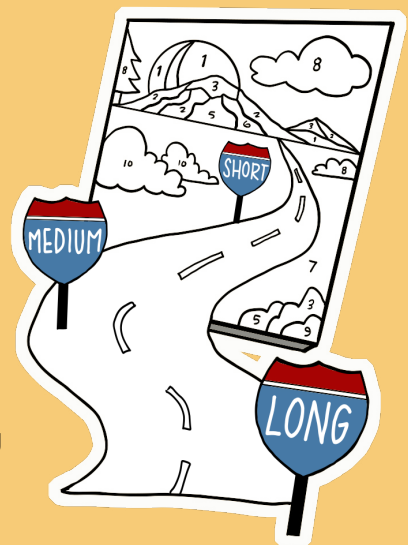


How Will We Generate Evidence to Gauge Progress?

Evidence of progress will come from varied assessments intentionally planned along the learning pathway.

These come from thoughtful construction of short-, medium-, and long-cycle assessments, allowing us and our students to monitor progress toward competency.²

Collectively, these evidence sources ensure that instructional decisions are informed, timely, and responsive to student needs. These outcomes establish clarity of purpose and provide the foundation for aligning instruction, activities, and assessments in a coherent and intentional sequence.



What Are the Design Features of the Meaningful Learning Experiences We Will Deliver?

Learning experiences will be anchored by clear learning intentions and explicit success criteria, key elements of teacher clarity.

These elements provide students with a transparent understanding of what they are expected to learn and how they will demonstrate that learning. Instruction will be structured so students can monitor their progress against these criteria, promoting ownership, self-regulation, and alignment between teaching, assessment, and outcomes.

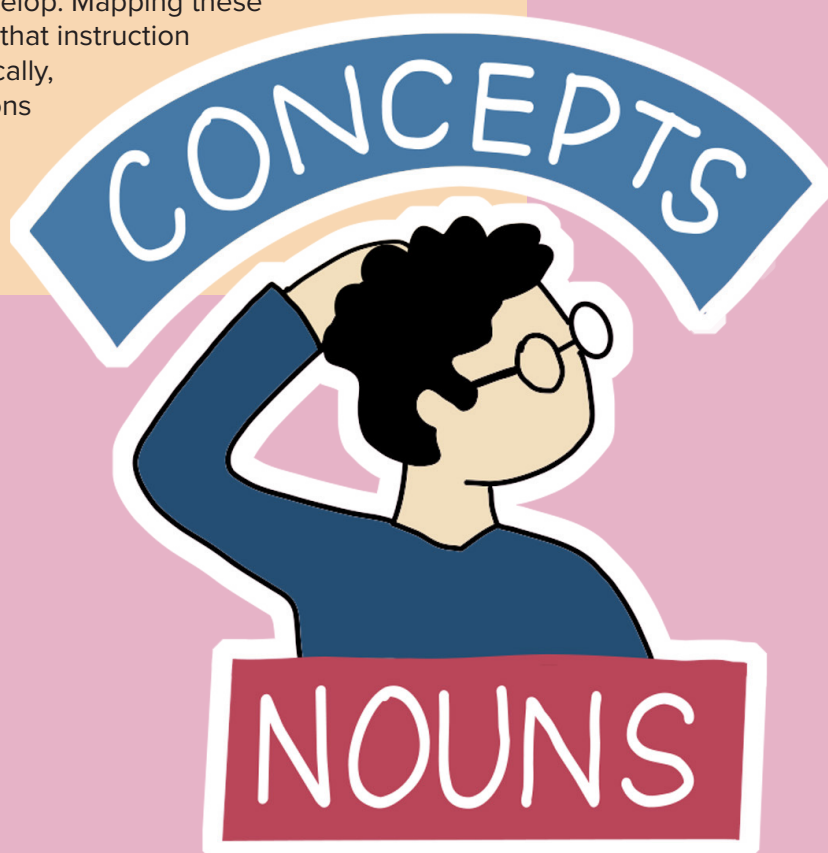


ANALYZE STANDARDS TO IDENTIFY DESIRED RESULTS

Analyzing standards is a crucial step in the process, as it allows teams to clarify knowledge, applications, and dispositions.

Concepts

At the unit level, analyzing standards for concepts helps identify the key ideas and understandings students need to grasp. These concepts, often found in the nouns and noun phrases of a standard, provide the content focus of instruction. For example, when a standard highlights elements such as place value or decimals, teachers can anticipate the foundational knowledge students must develop. Mapping these concepts ensures that instruction is sequenced logically, building connections across topics and setting the stage for deeper comprehension.



Skills

Examining standards for skills highlights the actions or cognitive processes students are expected to perform, which are generally expressed through verbs. Skills may range from simple applications to complex reasoning, and the same verb can demand different depths of knowledge at different grade levels. For instance, *use* or *analyze* can vary significantly in expectations depending on context. Clarifying these skills at the unit level ensures that instructional activities and assessments push students toward the appropriate level of rigor, reinforcing high expectations and meaningful practice.



Understand the Skills by Looking at the Concepts

A clear understanding of the skills embedded in standards is essential because the verbs signal not only what students must do but also the level of complexity required.

As the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework reminds us, the cognitive demand lies not in the verb alone but in what follows it: the object or context of the task.³ Carefully analyzing this relationship helps teachers distinguish between recall, application, strategic reasoning, and extended thinking, ensuring instruction meets the rigor intended by the standard.



Second-Grade Unit: Building Understanding of Numbers and Data

Concept (Nouns)	Standard	Skills (Verbs)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place value Properties of operations Within 1000 	Standing and properties of operations to add and subtract within 1000.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use Add Subtract
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Numbers 1000 5s, 10s, 100s 	Count within 1000; skip-count by 5s, 10s, and 100s.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Count Skip-count
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data Picture graphs Bar graphs 	Represent and interpret data with picture graphs and bar graphs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Represent Interpret

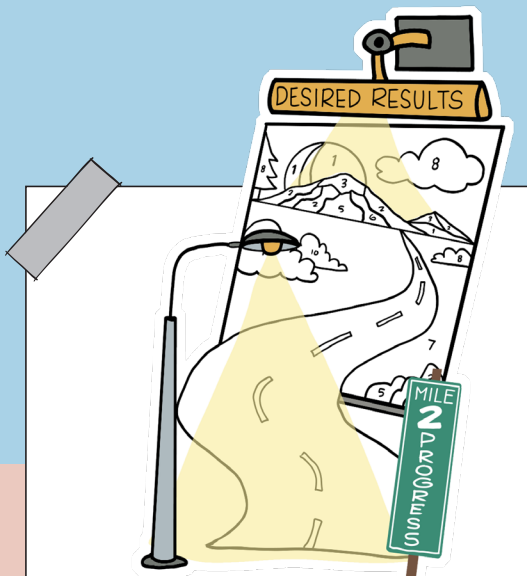
SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH



A study highlighted the central role of alignment in standards-based education, arguing that learning improves when standards, classroom instruction, and assessments are tightly connected.⁴ The evidence suggests that misalignment, such as teaching content not reflected in assessments or tests measuring skills absent from standards, undermines both instructional coherence and assessment validity. The systematic analysis of standards and alignment practices can help educators and policymakers strengthen instructional focus.

DETERMINING UNIT GOALS TOWARD DESIRED RESULTS: “I AM APPLYING ...”

Micro-level learning progressions break unit goals into manageable steps to further guide assessment. Teams develop a plan for how they will monitor growth and progress toward proficiency.



Progress Toward Competency

These “mile markers” ensure that the path toward the overarching standards of the unit are transparent and achievable. By chunking larger expectations into progressive goals, you and your team can design meaningful checkpoints, adjust instruction, and scaffold appropriately. This structure also makes the expectations visible for students, offering them a clear roadmap of their progress across a unit.



Designing Unit Goals

Identify key conceptual and skill-based steps that serve as markers along the way. Each step should reflect a meaningful cognitive move students must make, paired with assessment opportunities and instructional experiences that match the rigor of the intended outcome. When sequenced well, intermediate goals create coherence between unit standards, daily learning intentions and success criteria, and the way we use assessments.



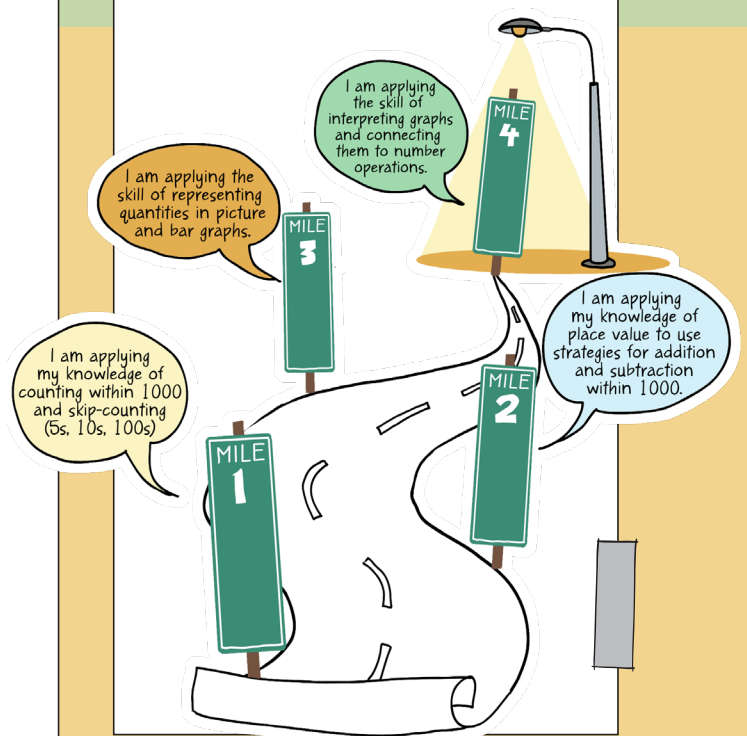
Unit Goals in a Second-Grade Math Unit

For the *Building Understanding of Numbers and Data* unit, the micro-level progression might unfold as follows:

1. Strengthen number sense by counting within 1000 and practicing skip-counting patterns (5s, 10s, 100s).
2. Apply place value knowledge and skip-counting to develop efficient strategies for addition and subtraction within 1000.
3. Extend understanding of numbers and operations to represent quantities in picture and bar graphs.
4. Interpret graphs to answer questions and connect data representations back to number operations and place value concepts.

You Can Later Make This Student-Facing, Too

These initially assist teams in creating assessments that are used formatively during the unit. But they can also be used later as a roadmap for students to track their progress across the unit. And of course, these mile markers should be associated with assessment opportunities for you and your students to use and can be incorporated into daily learning intentions.

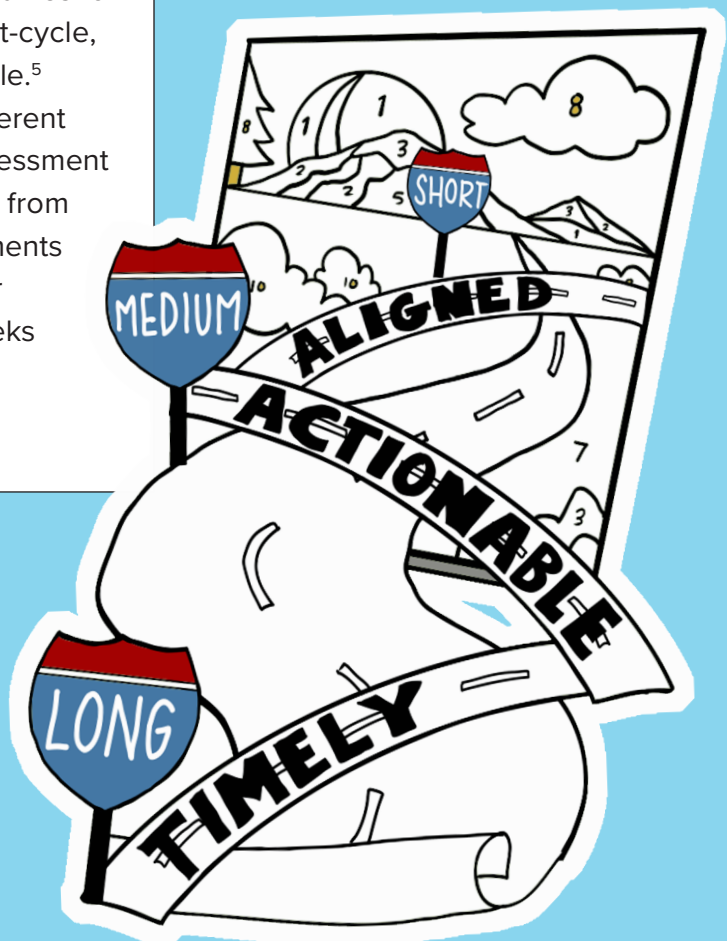


CYCLES OF ASSESSMENT TO GENERATE EVIDENCE

Effective assessment must be timely, actionable, and aligned with instructional goals.

Cycles of Assessment

To help educators understand how assessment informs teaching and learning, Dylan Wiliam describes three interconnected time frames for formative assessment: short-cycle, medium-cycle, and long-cycle.⁵ Each cycle represents a different interval of time in which assessment can guide decision making, from moment-to-moment adjustments in the classroom to broader curricular changes over weeks or months.⁶



Short-Cycle Assessment

Short-cycle assessment refers to assessment that occurs within a single lesson or between lessons on the same day. These quick, informal checks are designed to give teachers immediate insight into what students understand and where they may be struggling.

Because the feedback is so rapid, teachers can make real-time instructional adjustments by redirecting a question, reteaching a concept, or clarifying a misunderstanding before moving forward. This type of assessment is deeply embedded in the flow of instruction and emphasizes responsive teaching.

Medium-Cycle Assessment

Medium-cycle assessment takes place over several days to about two weeks, typically aligned with the completion of a topic, theme, or unit of instruction.

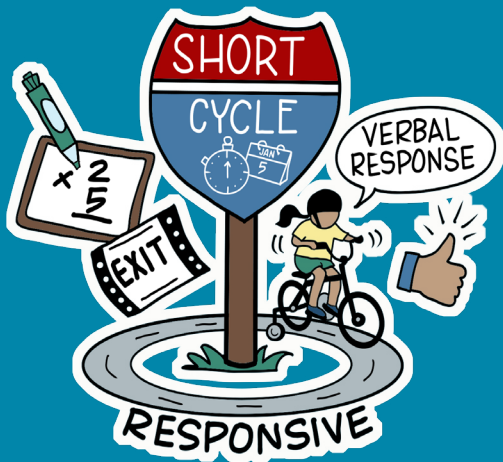
These assessments are used to determine progress toward competency and are more structured than short-cycle checks and provide a deeper look into student understanding over time. The results help you determine whether students have mastered specific learning goals and what instructional steps should follow.

Long-Cycle Assessment

Long-cycle assessment spans a much longer period of time, often six to twelve weeks. These assessments are used to evaluate student learning across major instructional goals or broader curricular outcomes.

These assessments are often summative in nature, though they can still serve formative purposes when used to reflect on patterns, adjust curriculum, or plan for future instruction.

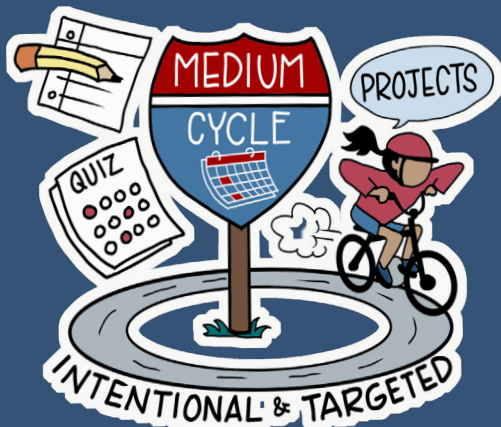
Short-Cycle Assessment: Minute-by-minute and day-by-day



Purpose: Rapid feedback loop is deeply embedded in the flow of instruction and emphasizes responsive teaching

Example: Exit tickets, thumbs-up/thumbs-down signals, quick polls, observing students' verbal or written responses, and universal response strategies such as dry erase boards, response cards, or online game-based tools

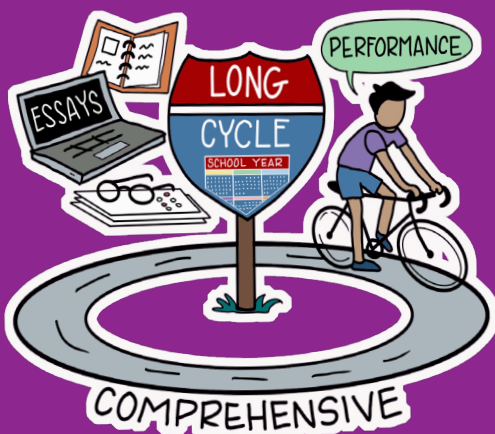
Medium-Cycle Assessment: Weekly or bi-weekly



Purpose: Tied to unit goal to allow for intentional decisions such as reteaching a concept, grouping students for targeted support, or enriching instruction for those who have already demonstrated proficiency

Example: Quizzes, short constructed writing prompts, exit slips collected over time, or collaborative projects

Long-Cycle Assessment: Several weeks to a full school year

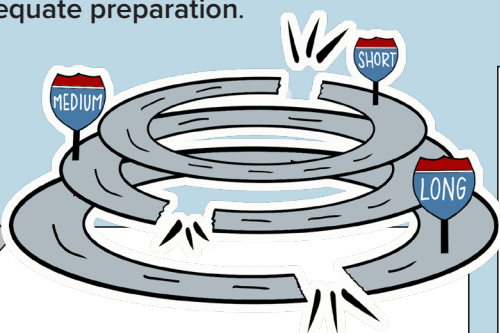


Purpose: Provide valuable and more comprehensive information about student growth, instructional effectiveness, and the alignment of teaching to standards

Example: Unit projects, cumulative essays, major performances, portfolios, benchmarks, final exams, and standardized assessments

ALIGN EVIDENCE WITH AN ASSESSMENT INVENTORY

Effective assessment systems are aligned across the short-, medium-, and long-cycle assessments. When assessments at different points in a learning cycle are not intentionally connected, students may struggle, not because they lack understanding, but because the expectations and formats shift without adequate preparation.

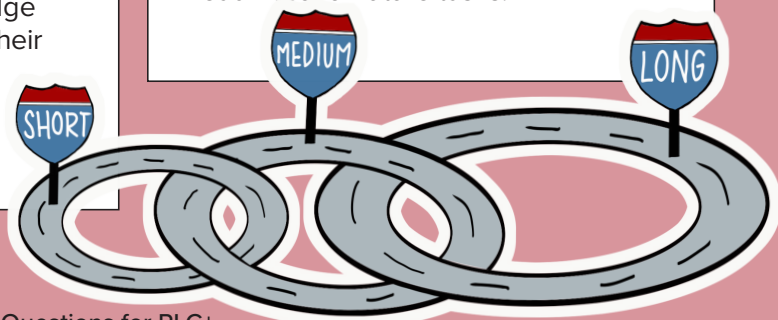


Misalignment Generates Flawed Evidence

Consider a classroom where short-cycle assessments consist of response cards, quick polls, and exit slips, all of which ask students to reflect informally on their understanding. However, the medium- and long-cycle assessments in the same classroom rely heavily on multiple-choice questions and extended constructed written responses. Students in this environment may be caught off-guard during more formal testing simply because they haven't had the opportunity to practice demonstrating their knowledge in these formats. As a result, their performance may not accurately reflect what they've learned.

Alignment Makes the Evidence Trustworthy

You and your team can conduct an assessment inventory aligned to the standards you intend to teach toward (long-cycle), your unit goals (medium-cycle), and daily checks for understanding (short-cycle). Filling in the following tool can assist teams in reviewing the types of assessments used in each cycle. By reviewing your inventory, you and your colleagues can identify inconsistencies, redundancies, or gaps. For example, if long-cycle assessments emphasize writing and analysis, but daily assessments focus only on factual recall, your team might decide to integrate more analytical writing into short- and medium-cycle tasks. This reflective process supports the design of a more coherent system in which every assessment contributes meaningfully to student learning and readiness for future tasks.



Assessment Inventory Template

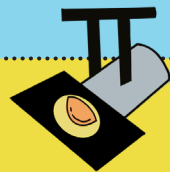
In collaboration with your team, fill in this tool to identify short-cycle, medium-cycle, and long-cycle goals.

Short Cycle	Medium Cycle	Long Cycle



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

SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH



A systematic review of fifty-four empirical studies identified the essential teacher conditions required for effective implementation of assessment practices in classroom practice.⁷ The review synthesizes a range of findings, identifying key teacher prerequisites such as a deep understanding of formative assessment principles (e.g., recognizing critical learning goals, providing actionable feedback), sufficient assessment literacy (the ability to interpret and respond to student evidence), and reflective and adaptive instructional design and delivery. Without such competencies, classroom assessment practices are unlikely to be enacted effectively, despite their potential to enhance student learning and instructional responsiveness.

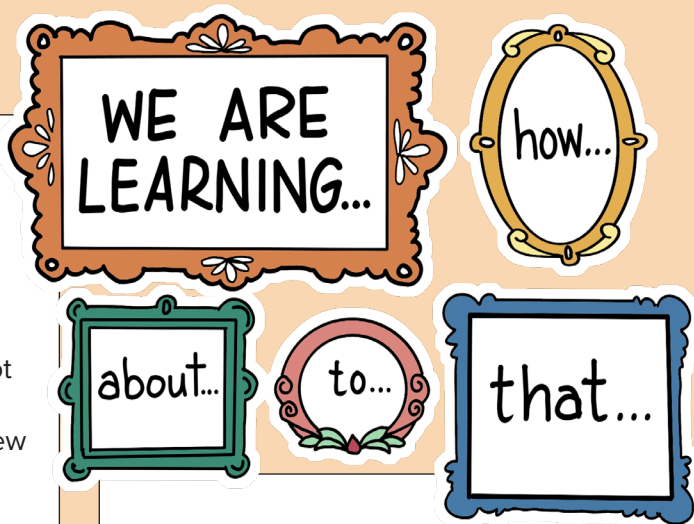
LEARNING INTENTIONS: DESIGN FEATURES FOR MEANINGFUL LEARNING

Learning intentions translate broad standards into clear, lesson-size goals that guide daily instruction. They specify exactly what students are expected to learn in a single class period, helping teachers focus instruction while giving students direction and purpose.

Clarifying the Purpose of Learning Intentions

Learning intentions specify what students are expected to learn during a single lesson. They are not activities or tasks (that's what they are doing) but are statements of new knowledge or skills students will acquire (what they are learning). When made explicit, learning intentions reduce ambiguity, focus attention, and direct student effort.

When students know what they are expected to learn, they are more likely to monitor their own progress and persist with challenging work.



Framing Lesson-Size Intentions

Because standards and unit goals are too large to be mastered in a single day, deconstruct them into smaller pieces. A learning intention begins with “We are learning _____” (about, to, how, that) and focuses on an aspect of a concept or skill (or both) that students will be learning, making the purpose transparent while preserving the academic rigor of the standard.

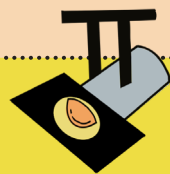
This bite-size framing reduces cognitive load, increases motivation, and helps students recognize what success looks like during the lesson.

Learning intentions are a crucial aspect of teacher clarity.

- We are learning how to show numbers in 10s and 1s.
- We are learning how to talk with a partner about what we read in an article.
- We are learning how to notice when we get stuck and try a strategy to keep going.
- We are learning to identify cause-and-effect structure in an informational text.
- We are learning about the role of nationalism as one of the causes of World War I.

Notes:

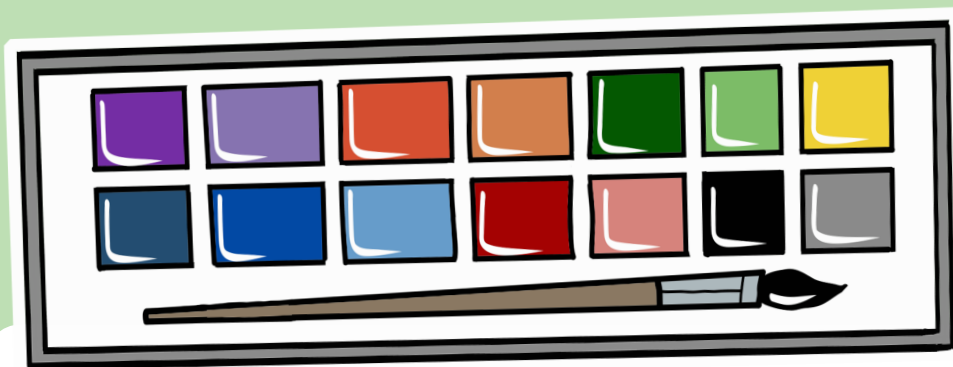
SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH



A study of nearly 300 students looked at how teacher clarity structures affect learning. The researchers found that clarity works indirectly: When lessons are structured and easy to follow, students don't waste as much mental energy figuring out what's expected. That reduction in cognitive load frees them up to focus on learning, which boosts their motivation and confidence. In the study, students who received clear lessons not only felt more capable and interested but also scored higher on the test than those who experienced unclear lessons.⁸

SUCCESS CRITERIA: DESIGN FEATURES FOR MEANINGFUL LEARNING

Success criteria make learning intentions visible by defining what success looks like for students. When aligned with unit goals and assessments, they provide both teachers and learners with a shared roadmap for measuring progress and achievement.



The Purpose of Success Criteria

Success criteria describe the evidence of learning students should be able to show if they have met the intention. They might specify accuracy, completeness, or the quality of reasoning demonstrated. The development of success criteria in a PLC+ provides members with a common understanding of expected outcomes, which ensures consistency across classrooms and strengthens collaborative planning.

Here are some examples:

- I can explain what my graph shows in words.
- We can model energy transfer using a food-chain diagram for our classmates.
- I can use evidence from a primary source to support my explanation of one cause.
- We can check our solutions by substituting them back into the original equation.

The word "SUCCESS" is written in large, colorful, bubbly letters. Each letter is a different color: S (red), U (green), C (orange), C (blue), E (purple), S (black), S (black). A paintbrush with a brown handle and a silver ferrule is positioned at the end of the word, with its tip touching the final 'S'.



Connecting to Unit Goals and Assessments

Well-aligned success criteria act as checkpoints that connect daily learning intentions to broader unit goals and eventual assessments. For example, if the intention is “We are learning to identify cause-and-effect structure in an informational text,” then success criteria might include underlining signal words, labeling sections of the text, and explaining how events are connected. Thus, it informs what the short-cycle assessments for a particular lesson should be.

This alignment keeps instruction purposeful and allows teachers to gather meaningful evidence of learning that ties directly to summative assessments.



Different Types of Success Criteria

Success criteria can take multiple forms depending on the learning intention. Rubrics describe levels of quality, exemplars show students what strong work looks like, and checklists break down the steps needed for success.⁹ Each type serves a different purpose, but all give students concrete ways to judge their own progress and support teachers in providing consistent feedback.

Regardless of the type, success criteria hold the potential to lessen the cognitive load for students by clarifying expectations and increasing motivation to meet them.

SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH

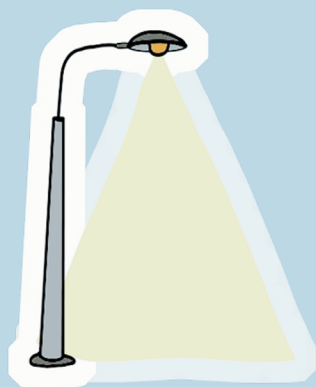


A meta-analysis of sixteen empirical studies on self-assessment drew on forty-six individual effect sizes and a combined sample of more than 7,650 students ranging from primary school through higher education.¹⁰ Overall, the study found a small but statistically significant positive effect (Hedge's $g \approx 0.37$, $p < 0.05$) on improving students' academic performance when students were taught to evaluate their own work against explicit standards or criteria. Self-assessment is not a “high-impact” intervention on its own, but it plays a valuable role in promoting student agency and learning ownership, particularly when implemented in ways that emphasize student autonomy rather than teacher-led correction.

PLC+ Teacher Checklist for “Where Are We Going?”

Use this checklist during PLC+ team meetings to ensure clarity, coherence, and alignment across teaching, learning, and assessment.

1. Clarify the Purpose of Learning (“Where Are We Going?”)



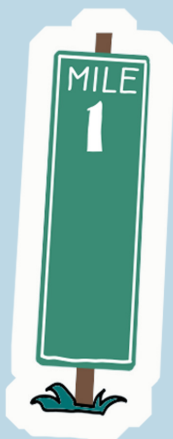
Have we clearly identified the learning intentions for this unit?

Are the success criteria explicit, measurable, and student facing?

Do our intentions and criteria align with state or provincial standards?

Have we planned backward from desired outcomes to design instruction and assessments?

2. Analyze Standards for Desired Results



Did we identify the key concepts (nouns) within the standards?

Did we identify the skills (verbs) and determine the appropriate level of rigor?

Have we connected the concepts and skills to ensure that both content focus and cognitive demand are addressed?

Are expectations sequenced logically to build deeper understanding?

3. Set Unit Goals



Have we broken down broad standards into micro-level goals or learning progressions?

Do these “mile markers” help students see and track their growth?

Are unit goals coherent with daily learning intentions and success criteria?

Do checkpoints provide meaningful opportunities for formative assessment?

4. Plan Assessment Cycles



Are short-cycle assessments embedded in daily lessons to give immediate feedback?

Do medium-cycle assessments (weekly/bi-weekly) inform adjustments in grouping, reteaching, or enrichment?

Do long-cycle assessments (projects, benchmarks, exams) align with unit goals and provide comprehensive evidence?

Have we conducted an assessment inventory to ensure alignment across short, medium, and long cycles?

(continued)

PLC+ Teacher Checklist for “Where Are We Going?”

(continued)

5. Align Instruction With Learning Intentions



Are lesson intentions framed as “I/We are learning . . .” statements (not tasks)?

Do they specify knowledge, skills, or strategies students should acquire?

Do we believe students will understand what they are learning?

6. Develop and Use Success Criteria



Have we defined what success looks like (accuracy, reasoning, completeness)?

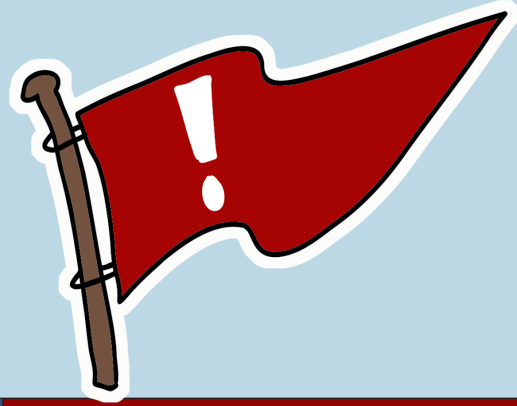
Are criteria explicitly linked to learning intentions, unit goals, and assessments?

Have we identified rubrics, exemplars, or checklists to guide student self-assessment?



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for downloadable resources.

PLC+ Reflection Tool: Where Are We Going?



Look-Fors and Listen-Fors	Red Flags and Mistakes to Avoid
Conversations focus on coherence between standards, unit goals, daily intentions, and assessments.	Instruction, tasks, and assessments are designed separately without alignment.
Teams analyze both concepts (nouns) and skills (verbs) within standards.	Focus is only on verbs without considering conceptual depth.
Members probe Depth of Knowledge (DOK) to match rigor.	Teams skip standards analysis (“We already know them.”), leading to misaligned or superficial goals.
Evidence of backward planning—outcomes → evidence → learning experiences.	Planning is primarily sequential, with assessment design left for after teaching is underway.
Teams reference short-, medium-, and long-cycle assessments to monitor growth.	Overreliance is on one assessment type (e.g., quizzes only, summatives only).
Dialogue emphasizes mile markers and checkpoints to track growth.	No clear learning progressions or checkpoints; team cannot explain sequencing.