

Implementing Teacher-Driven Professional Learning Communities: A School Case Study

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Abstract

This action research project explores the implementation of using a Professional Learning Communities (PLC) structure in order to raise the quality of my school's weekly 90-minutes of whole staff, contractual professional development known as, Professional Collaboration Time (PCT). Prior to this implementation, our teachers disparaged the work during our PCTs. Our teachers felt this time was not used strategically due to the lack of consistency, clarity, and focus during each professional development session. To alleviate these challenges, our school's Instructional Planning Team (IPT) decided to implement PLCs to promote teachers to work collegially, consistently, and with intentionality by using data and investigating problems of practice within the curriculum and instruction. This study was carried out to explore the perceptions of the teachers towards the PLC structure; to learn what factors in a PLC structure promoted effective professional development and also factors that hindered; and finally, how PLCs affected student achievement, particularly towards marginalized students. This study was grounded in using qualitative research methods through interviews, observations, analyzing student data, and document collection of two different PLC teams. The major themes drawn from this study is a higher level of satisfaction of teachers preferring the PLC structure during our PCT; higher levels of collegial interactions and teacher-driven professional learning; and lastly, gains of student achievement from all demographic backgrounds. However, these findings are limited due to a lack of fidelity, accountability, and structural supports from our school's leaders.

Research Questions

In this action research project, the purpose of this work is to answer the research questions as stated below. These are:

1. How will the implementation of a PLC structure once a week at DME during PCT affect student achievement?
 - a. How will PLCs promote or hinder teacher teams to learn and strengthen their pedagogical practice?
 - b. How will the use of protocols in a PLC promote or hinder teacher teams as they analyze data and make data-driven decisions?
2. How will adding an equity component to a SMART(E) goal affect student achievement, especially for students of color, English Language Learners, special education students, and students struggling within the curriculum?

Methods and PLC Implementation Plan

Implementation of PLC Action Steps

When implementing the PLC structure, these were ideal action steps the IPT wanted each grade level team to exhibit, but only some were able to.

Whole Staff Professional Development

Members of the IPT led trainings for teachers in our building to identify:

- What is a PLC?
- What components promote an effective PLC?
- What components hinder a PLC?

Teacher Created Norms Charter

- After learning the definition and the components that could either promote, or hinder, a PLC, teachers collectively created a charter to articulate how they wanted to honor their time.

Weekly Structure of PLCs

- Teachers met with their grade level partners for 45 minutes weekly. Furthermore, grade level teams also carried out six-week data cycle to hone in on a specific skill or standard that they wanted to work on.

Data-Analysis Protocols

- Teams used a data-analysis protocol to provide a structured format to analyze data collectively and promote shared decision-making.

SMART(E) Goal Template

- Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, Timely, and Equity goal template for teacher teams to state for their students in a six-week data cycle

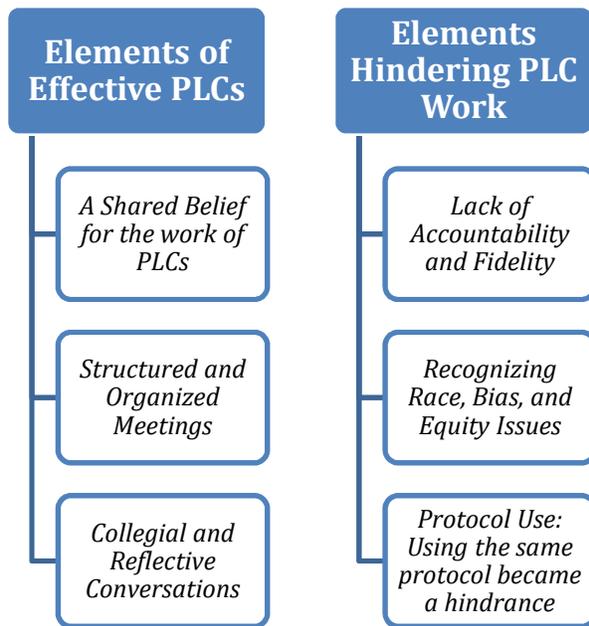
Accountability Systems

- All protocols, and goal templates are stored in a binder to keep track of progress throughout the school year and also reviewed by the school’s administrators.

Data Collection

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| <p>Interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individually and Semi-structured • Transcribed in Verbatim • Interviewed four Kindergarten teachers, one 5th, and my own self reflection | <p>Observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created an observation protocol derived from the research literature on effective PLCs • Two separate observations of the Kindergarten team |
| <p>Field Notes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive and analytic • Recorded observations of staff meetings and informal conversations between staff members pertaining to PLCs | <p>Document Collection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protocols filled out by both the Kindergarten and 5th grade teams • Student work samples and assessments |

Themes



Conclusion

As showcased in the Findings section, the work of PLCs may impact how teachers interact and engage in a professional learning setting which could in turn impact student achievement. Furthermore, by having teachers add an equity component to their SMART(E) goals, this could create more intentionality towards instruction to better serve marginalized students. Finally, when the structures are in place, the teachers valued this work over a sit-and-get professional development structure that has been traditionally used at DME.

At my school site, we have taken a critical step forward in the way we think and enact professional learning. However, as mentioned in the Themes section, there are elements that have hindered, rather than promoted, the work of PLCs and professional learning.

To note, the effect of student achievement is impacted by multiple variables from both inside and outside of the classroom. We cannot determine the true effect PLCs have, but derived from the Findings Section, it does not seem to hinder the outcome of student achievement.

Next Steps

Below are recommended actionable steps our school could take to promote effective, teacher-driven PLCs:

1. There needs to be a shared vision of teaching and learning that has input from all stakeholders.
2. Teachers at DME need to continue to examine the intersections of race, bias, and equity in order to serve all students and their families effectively.
3. Our PCT needs to be strategically scheduled, continuous, job-embedded, and relevant professional learning for teachers to promote inquiry into their own practice.
4. We need to create robust systems of accountability and fidelity to ensure effectiveness of program implementation, if we are to see the fruition of strong teaching and learning.