

By [IU PIIC Mentors Lori Ceremuga and Missy Petrilak](#)

Everyone can agree that good professional development can be defined as a process, not a one-time event. So it's not surprising that one of the most powerful forms of professional development in education over the last twenty years has been professional learning communities (PLCs). This practice of having individuals sharing goals and working together to assess them has been gaining extensive attention in education because of the positive results in improving teaching quality and student achievement.

In PIIC, creating a collaborative environment is an important factor in successful school improvement. Linda Darling-Hammond reported in an article from *Educational Leadership* in 2009 that countries that had high student achievement had reported that professional development consisted of teachers having time to learn and collaborate together.

Effective professional learning communities function under the premise that collaboration time is built into the school day for teams to focus on key questions and pursue specific and measurable performance goals in one of four areas—study groups, action research teams, communities of practice, and conversation circles.

It takes careful thought and planning to form a successful PLC. Geoffrey and Renate N. Caine reported in their book, *Strengthening and Enriching Your Professional Learning Community*, several key principles to use in the process.

- **Ensure Safety**—a safe place must be created so that voluntary participants feel free express their beliefs in a low-risk environment.
- **Consistency**—a level of consistency must be maintained. Having a set procedure to begin and end a session will aid in the success of the PLC.
- **Maintain Energy of the Group**—providing an environment for a positive group dynamic is key. Setting norms for learning will set the stage for this process to happen.
- **Stay or Go**—in order to develop a sense of community, participants should not be a casual attendee. A person should feel free to participate or not, but coming and going should not be permitted.
- **Slow Down to Speed Up**—grounded in learning theory, material should not be covered too quickly. The goal of the group should be to give participants time to digest and reflect on

the topic.

- **There Are No Initial Outcomes**—in order for the process to be successful, it must be reflected that understanding and skills must be developed before major outcomes are achieved such as improved test scores.

- **Benefit From Individual Differences**—a variety of differences will occur in the group. Conducting an identity style activity in the beginning would allow participants to understand and appreciate all identity styles. This skill is beneficial for teachers, students and leaders.

- **Do Not Give Each Other Advice Unless Asked**—The PLC is not a time to give advice. The process is for people to learn from their individual experiences and reflection. Feedback should only be provided if requested.

- **Honor the Format**—setting and adhering to clear objectives will deepen the depth of learning.

- **Maintain the Process**—we all have our high and low points. It is important to remember the importance of the power of community.

Madeline Hunter once said that teaching is the second most private act. Professional learning communities are helping schools to break down the walls of isolation and promote a climate of trust, collaboration, and research that empower teachers to focus on practices that lead to higher student achievement.

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