

What a PLC is like in the first year?

Professional Learning Teams: Year One What it is all about?

Learn first hand from an experienced teacher what it is like to be part of a Professional Learning Communities Team.

1. Year one is about relationships:

Professional learning teams are different from traditional “teacher teams” in that they are deeply focused on student learning. Teachers working together on a professional learning team reflect on instructional practices, seeking to amplify those that are the most successful with students. There is willingness between members of a professional learning team to rethink what it is that they do in their classrooms based on the work of their colleagues and on student achievement data (both formal and informal) gathered throughout the school year. A culture of inquiry and an action orientation define the best professional learning teams.

These kinds of powerful conversations rely on a high level of trust between members of a professional learning team. Trust allows teachers to work through the conflicts that are an inevitable result of collaboration. Trusting teams are able to build consensus and to commit to the shared work of the group. This commitment leads to positive results for students.

Building trust means building relationships. Throughout your first year together, you will learn one another’s strengths and weaknesses. Through shared experiences, you will begin to look at one another as valued colleagues and your personal bonds will translate into professional successes. If this is all you accomplish in your first year together, you will have been successful!

2. Year one is about structures:

Teaching has traditionally been an isolated profession where interaction between colleagues has been optional. “Meetings” are generally characterized by a simple sharing of information by a team leader. While such meetings are essential for handling administrative tasks, they are not conducive to the kinds of deep conversations about instructional practices and student learning that are a defining characteristic of professional learning teams.

A primary task for new learning teams, therefore, is to develop effective and efficient structures for conducting powerful conversations. Group norms and expectations will have to be developed that everyone can agree to—and hold one another accountable for. Procedures for setting goals, identifying instructional practices worth considering, and collecting data on student achievement will begin to take shape as your team moves forward together. A system for recording group decisions and actions is necessary for documenting your efforts.

New learning teams will also need to develop plans for networking with other interested groups within the school. Teachers must learn to balance their commitment to—and communication between—their primary learning team and other “boundary groups” that they may be involved in.

This process of developing structure for teams is not “neat and clean,” and cannot be dictated by outsiders. Each group will spend significant time experimenting with meeting practices, discovering those that are the most effective for their members. Over the course of year one, PLTs will become more efficient and “meetings” will become more productive. Establishing these structures in year one will allow teams to move into deeper work in year two and beyond!

3. Year one is about staying focused:

One of the most difficult things to remember as a member of a new learning team is that you cannot tackle every new task during your first year together AND survive! The most effective learning teams stay focused on developing positive working relationships and strong structures for conducting meetings during their early work together.

There will be great temptation to allow your focus to drift! As a group, you'll get excited about (among other things): collecting data, developing formative assessments, analyzing student performance, identifying and applying new instructional practices, sharing research articles, observing one another teach, and designing remediation plans for struggling students. While all of these tasks are valuable—and will eventually become common practice for your learning team—teams that have taken the time to build a strong foundation of trust and shared expectations will be the most successful at addressing them.

Professional Learning Teams

Year One: What's it all about?

Professional learning teams differ from traditional teacher teams in the following ways:

Professional Learning Teams

Traditional Teacher Teams

- Have regular meetings focused specifically on student learning-and only student learning!
- Have regular meetings that may sometimes be focused on student learning but are often primarily focused on school routines or procedures.
- Have high levels of trust between group members, allowing for productive conflict to occur in a safe environment. This level of trust leads to consensus and commitment on the part of all team members.
- Have inconsistent levels of trust between team members. Teachers may engage in collegial conversations, but tend to avoid conflict with one another. "Keeping the peace" is a priority.
- Seek to identify and amplify instructional practices that work. Members are willing to rethink what it is that they do in the classroom based on the collective work of the group.

- Rarely expose teachers to the instructional practices of their peers. Members tend to rely on their own professional experiences when making decisions for their students.

- Members see themselves as interdependent, sharing ownership for the success of all students.

- Members see themselves as loosely connected colleagues. While they may share a common group of students, teachers largely act as individuals when making instructional decisions.