

Strategies for Principals to Implement Effective PLCs

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Teachers are, of course, vital to the creation of successful professional learning communities (PLCs). They must be actively involved in their own learning and open to new ideas. When they have determined the best courses of action, they take measured risks in the implementation of their decisions. They display their commitment to their schools and students by their enthusiasm for their profession and their concern for students. But, perhaps even more important is how principals create a supportive, stimulating environment where all professional staff members take responsibility for the highest quality learning possible. Some mobilize their staff and engage them in collegial problem solving while others seize opportunities to develop learning communities among staff in order to study the possibilities of new curricula. While every principal is as different as the students that they serve, successful principals share common strategies when implementing PLCs in their schools.



1. They are continuous learners who transfer these practices to teaching staff.

Innovative principals devote attention to their own development as well as those of teachers. Professional staff development is a strength of successful principals. They read and study incessantly. They go to workshops and conferences. They are council members. They maintain a network of colleagues. Others recognize them for their leadership. They make good use of contacts beyond their immediate professional circle.

Successful principals are proactive about their own professional development and regularly put themselves into settings where they have opportunities for learning. They are always scanning the horizon for new information that would improve learning and student success at their schools. They apply that new information at their schools, overtly modeling the learning and its application. In so doing, a principal turns their own ongoing learning into capacity building among the staff to improve learning conditions for students at their schools.

2. They use similar strategies to achieve increased staff capacity.

Teachers respond by engaging in and initiating activities that reflect the practices of certain strategies, such as those concerned with collegial staff relationships, a focus on student success, continuous learning, and teachers as decision makers.

The staff members in these schools have the benefit of close professional interactions with their principals as co-professionals rather than simply filling the traditional roles of supervisor and subordinate.

These principals are able to serve along side teachers without “pulling rank” in order for their individual views to prevail in a group. They work elbow-to-elbow with their teachers to identify and meet the needs of their students. They put aside their own preferences in agreeing with the larger group’s consensus for action. These principals are supportive and help teachers to correct any mistakes they might make. The principal trusts and respects his or her staff as professionals.

3. They focus staff on student success.

Within their schools, successful principals lead their teachers to work with a common purpose. Every member of the staff must identify the vision for students and the school, and be clear on their roles in working to make that vision a reality. The teachers in these schools follow their principal’s lead and display values that concern students and student success. This serves as a mantra when staff undertakes new issues and problem solving.

4. They make opportunities for teachers to learn.

These principals structure gatherings for group learning that involves the whole staff. Teachers develop vibrant practices of group learning, which includes research, synthesis, and discussion of information on topics related to school operations and instruction. These practices are evident at staff meetings, study groups, and committee operations. Teachers know that their participation in conferences and workshops off-campus include responsibility for bringing back information to actively share with

their colleagues. This sharing often includes formally structured presentations to and discussions with the staff, as well as informal information exchange between classes and in the teachers’ lounge.

This genuine enthusiasm for collective learning is palpable and the principals nurtured it by providing even more opportunities for all staff to learn.

5. They invite teachers into decision-making and implementation.

Principals develop their own organizational structure to incorporate and support staff involvement in decisions for the school. These tend to be in the form of committees with specific charges for operation and/or instruction. It also includes whole-staff decision-making about goals for each school year. Teachers at some schools choose a theme for the following school year that determines what the curriculum and instruction will be.

In order to make these strategies work, the principal must sometimes agree to accept a staff or committee decision that is different from what they would choose themselves. These acts of trust are more than likely rewarded with good results. Not only are staff and committee decisions often effective, the staff members involved are encouraged to invest further in their school, increasing both the capacity and the commitment of staff for taking responsibility for their schools

6. They nurture new ways of operating.

These principals make concerted efforts to create conditions optimal for teachers to adapt to new ways of working in the school. These efforts are often both structures within the school and relationships between people at the school.

Arranging for early release time to allow whole-staff planning and meeting time is one way this could play out, with each principal using their creativity in order to make the arrangements necessary to change school schedules. Of equal importance is preparing teachers to make good use of the time they're given for whole staff learning and planning.

7. They build relationships.

Principals initiate relationship building by modeling with all teachers individually what it means to trust, support, and encourage others. As teachers supply support for each other, they become more concerned with finding strategies that work than with fearing failure.

Staff relationships are also nurtured through communication methods, such as newsletters, daily announcements, and informal networks like lunchroom sharing. As PLCs develop, teachers increasingly take responsibility for strengthening their relationships.

8. They lead by example.

The teachers at schools with effective PLCs emulate the examples set by principals who demonstrate the meaning of PLCs by constantly sharing their own learning and by orchestrating opportunities for staff to incorporate these same practices.

These principals value the expertise that their teachers possess and are able to tap it. The result is a staff that responds as professionals and is willing to expand their understanding of personal responsibility as teachers. In the process, teachers come to value the PLC itself as they increase their own personal effectiveness.

9. They promote the value of team work.

Teachers see that creativity and effectiveness increase when they work in groups. Although many might find working in a group or team awkward at first, they invariably come to prefer it once they learn how to use the team approach effectively. These teachers feel free to use their personal styles while their choices for instruction and participation in school operations reflect the entire school's.

10. They establish a context that nurtures the development of a PLC.

No longer are school administrators expected to be merely managers of routines, but must prepare to take initiative. In collaborative school climates, the principal must understand change as well as manage it. Openness to diversity, conflict, reflection, and mistakes becomes a necessity. In the facilitative role of fostering collaboration and collegiality, the principal must motivate staff to be dynamically interactive, professionally effective, and mission oriented.

In order to address these increasingly complex responsibilities, these principals create vibrant communities of staff learners. They use their leadership role to demonstrate and encourage continuous learning for themselves and all staff members in order to increase the effectiveness of their schools.