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# Idea 2

THE NEXT GENERATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES MUST ADDRESS THE BARRIERS THAT HAVE CONFRONTED CURRENT PLC EFFORTS.



**Essential Question: What must change to improve the experiences teachers have with their colleagues as they collaborate?**

Since their inception, professional learning communities have been positioned as an important catalyst for school improvement from within the organization. However, from the beginning, Hord (1980) cautioned that a fundamental misunderstanding of the ways adults work together could undermine these efforts. The problem? Groups that function cooperatively—but not collaboratively. Hord noted that while collaborative groups operated using shared agreements about focus, tasks, and results, cooperative groups placed a higher value on helping each other. In the cooperative model, results tend to be more variable and less predictable. She notes that in a cooperative model, there is mutual agreement, but they do not progress beyond that point. A group may agree on a topic for their learning community work, but not move further than the study of the topic. A collaborative group, on the other hand, not only arrives at an agreement about the topic but also implements and executes a plan for improvement. Or to use another analogy: “Dating is a cooperative venture, while marriage is a collaborative one” (Hord, 1980, p. 6).



## PAUSE AND PONDER

What is the current status of PLC teams at your school? Do they operate as cooperative models or collaborative models? What is your evidence? Regarding the current status, what do you see as benefits and barriers to their work?

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## DECAY

Decay is a further issue when it comes to how groups work together. The extensive content responsibilities of teacher preparation programs leave little room for learning about how adults work with others. This omission has negative consequences when a teacher who is new to the profession is hired at a school and learns only that “PLC meetings are on Wednesday afternoons.” For teachers who lack basic background information about best practices for PLC meetings, the PLC processes become whatever the existing hyper-local traditions are. Over time, the processes and purposes of the professional learning community decay, and what gets perpetuated is a mere shadow of what they were originally designed to accomplish.

Ever play the telephone game, where a sentence is whispered into the ear of the first person in line, and then subsequently passed through a series of whispers to the rest? The end result is hilariously different than the original message. In the case of professional learning communities, however, the decay is not so funny. It's little wonder that during these meetings, many teams end up either planning next week's lessons (not always together) or talking about next week's field trip. They are working cooperatively, but not collaboratively. Don't mistake activity for results.



### PAUSE AND PONDER

**When was the last time the faculty had formal training in the purpose and operations of professional learning communities? Now compare this to the initial employment dates of teachers at your school. What percentage of teachers at your school have not had training? Why might this be a hindrance to your work?**

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# THE NEXT GENERATION: PLC+

Schooling in the third decade of this century is vastly different than schooling in the 1990s. And yet in some cases, school organizations might be continuing to cling to models developed decades ago that don't reflect contemporary issues in schooling. The design of the PLC+ framework, noted in Figure 2.1, outlines the five guiding questions and four cross-cutting values, which are meant to reflect changing conditions.

**FIGURE 2.1**

## THE PLC+ FRAMEWORK

PLC+ GUIDING QUESTIONS	PLC+ CROSS-CUTTING VALUES
1. Where are we going?	Equity
2. Where are we now?	High Expectations
3. How do we move learning forward?	Individual and Collective Efficacy
4. What did we learn today?	Activation
5. Who benefited and who did not benefit?	

Source: Fisher et al. (2019b).

While the guiding questions drive the investigation cycle, the cross-cutting values are manifested within each of the questions:

- **Equity.** Information is processed to identify and apply appropriate and impactful evidence-based instructional practices and culturally responsive teaching that values the background of every student and helps prepare each of them for success. Valuing the assets each learner brings to the classroom requires ensuring instruction, curriculum, and assessment are responsive and affirming.
- **High expectations.** PLC+ teams manifest high-expectations teaching by ensuring that grade-level and course standards are taught. This requires not only holding all students accountable for reaching mastery but also holding ourselves accountable for teaching with high expectations.
- **Individual and collective efficacy.** There is an incredible amount of brain power we can capitalize on when we take our individual capacity and contribute it to a collective whole. This model asks us to use our collective efficacy to create the belief that we can make an impact on each and every one of our students and align our beliefs with actions to make it so.
- **Activation.** High-functioning PLC+ teams don't just happen by chance. They require deliberate efforts and structures put in place to ensure they are efficient and focused. This requires skilled facilitation as well as

participation. The team relies on the growing ability of all its members to activate the thinking and action of others.

**The next generation of professional learning communities begins with an understanding of what students already know.** Instructional time is far too precious to be squandered teaching students things they already know. Yet the evidence is that approximately 40% of instructional time is spent on things students already know (Nuthall, 2007). The problem, of course, is that it isn't the same 40% across students—there is variability in what each learner already knows.

The second question in PLC+ focuses directly on this issue: *Where are we now?* This is consistent with the mounting data on teacher clarity as a formidable driver for learning. John Hattie's Visible Learning database reports that teaching with clarity holds an effect size of 0.85, representing a high potential for accelerating student learning (Visible Learning Meta<sup>x</sup>, 2021; [www.visiblelearningmetax.com](http://www.visiblelearningmetax.com)). Knowing where students are now, in advance of new learning, sets the stage for understanding our impact.

**The next generation of professional learning communities must engage educators in conversations about effective instruction.** Knowing our starting point is important, but knowing how we can advance learning is crucial. We should never be left guessing about how to move students' learning forward. In the same way that doctors monitor the trajectory of their patients' treatment and recovery, educators must monitor how their students are progressing this week. We can't afford to wait until the end of the unit, semester, or course to learn about what's working and what's not. Imagine if a doctor's only monitoring tool was whether a patient lived or died. We would call that malpractice. Failing to monitor and respond to students' progress is educational malpractice.

**The next generation of professional learning communities must ignite the knowledge of the team by activating dialogue on the most important topics.** Adults who don't really know how to work together are at risk of falling into a pattern of cooperation rather than collaboration. The maintenance of the social contract is paramount; friendships rule the day. But a team that is friendly isn't automatically a team that is productive. So how do we reconcile these two—at times—competing values? We must ensure that teams are equipped with tools and processes they can use to activate each other's thinking in ways that are humane and growth producing. Rather than solely relying on an individual to parent the team, PLC+ situates the activation of team decision making and action in the hands of the team itself.

**The next generation of professional learning communities must systematically deliver on the promise of equity.** To date, no PLC framework has directly integrated equity into the discussions teachers have with each other. Yet no issue has driven schooling change in this century like equity.

Having said that, too often “equitable education” is hampered by a perception that it is at a distance from the classroom. But structural and institutional inequities are perpetuated through daily classroom practice. There is a saying that the last thing a fish notices is the water it swims in. The PLC+ framework seeks to make



material the actions that teams take to disrupt barriers that are hiding in plain sight.

**The next generation of professional learning communities must address students' opportunities to learn and remove barriers to learning.** One barrier that is hiding in plain sight involves lowered expectations of teachers for their students, especially in the wake of COVID. Yet these lower expectations, manifested in teaching below grade level, existed before the pandemic; a 2022 report documented this trend in the years preceding the shutdown of in-person schooling (TNTP, 2022). This study of 150,000 classrooms examined the literacy experiences of students and reported these findings:

- Below-grade-level work increased by 5% in 2021–22 in the wake of the pandemic.
- Students in high-poverty schools spent 65% more time on below-grade-level literacy work than peers in more affluent schools.
- In classrooms where students of color dominate, 38% were *never* provided grade-level assignments, and only 44% of teachers believed their students could master the standards.
- Ironically, comparative success rates for the same student on grade-level and below-grade-level assignments revealed insignificant performance differences, equivalent to answering three additional questions correctly over the span of ten assignments.

The study's authors stated that “inequities in access to grade-level work that existed long before the pandemic have only deepened, and that most school systems are not yet implementing strategies that could put students on track to recover from the disruption of the last several years” (p. 2). A PLC+ framework seeks to correct these inequities of expectation through the systematic application of the first question, “Where are we going?” A return to what the standards actually say (not the folklore that emerges when teams fail to recalibrate) ensures that teaching for clarity is sufficiently challenging.

A new framework is needed if schools are to reflect the needs and assets that communities and students possess. Importantly, a new framework should amplify the educators who make up the professional learning community.

## IDEAL STATE

Plato (1992) is attributed with the concept of an “ideal state,” where those with different needs coexist and understand that groups are mutually dependent. Plato envisioned what this society would look like and how it would operate, but you don't need to be an ancient Greek philosopher to create a plan for what you hope to achieve for professional learning communities at your school or district. Begin by considering the questions in Figure 2.2.

**FIGURE 2.2**

**WHAT IS YOUR IDEAL STATE?**

What is your vision for professional learning communities 36 months from now?

What is your current state?

What success criteria will you use to measure progress toward goals?

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# SET EXPECTATIONS TO FRAME THE WORK AHEAD

Organizations use expectations to foster consistency and instill confidence in their staff. Unifying the staff to deliver on the school’s core mission—student learning—can be a challenge if adults are not accustomed to collaborating (not just cooperating). Your expectations will evolve into the success criteria you will use to measure progress. Consider setting these success criteria using a timeline that sets interim goals along the way (see Figure 2.3).

**FIGURE 2.3**

## SUCCESS CRITERIA TIMELINE

YEAR 1 SUCCESS CRITERIA FOR PLC+	YEAR 2 SUCCESS CRITERIA FOR PLC+	YEAR 3 SUCCESS CRITERIA FOR PLC+
<p>Introduction: 30-day success criteria from the ideal state task</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded)</p>	<p>Onboarding for new staff and Introduction of Year 1 revisions: 30-day success criteria</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded)</p>	<p>Onboarding for new staff and Introduction of Year 2 revisions: 30-day success criteria</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded)</p>
<p>Practice: 60-day success criteria</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded)</p>	<p>Full Implementation: 90-day success criteria</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded)</p>	<p>Full Implementation: 90-day success criteria</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded)</p>
<p>Piloting: 90-day success criteria</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded)</p>	<p>Continuous Improvement: 180-day success criteria</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded for the purpose of revision)</p>	<p>Continuous Improvement: 180-day success criteria</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded for the purpose of continued revision)</p>
<p>Refining: 180-day success criteria</p> <p>(Monitoring and evaluation embedded for the purpose of revision)</p>		

The Institute for Organization Management, the professional development initiative of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, says that setting expectations can be beneficial across six dimensions: *clarity, baseline for measurement, communication, empowerment, a reference point when expectations aren't met, and accountability to self and the school*:

- **Clarity.** When expectations are discussed and unpacked, you and the staff can get on the same page. Every rower knows that all the oars in the water need to be pulling in the same direction.
- **Baseline for measurement.** Instructional leadership requires communication, feedback, and goal setting. But when staff aren't clear on how their efforts contribute to the mission of the school, performance can suffer. Clear expectations equip staff with the calibration tools they need to guide their own performance.
- **Communication.** Stated expectations provide staff members with a common vocabulary of excellence.
- **Empowerment.** Expectations are not intended to be onerous, or to ensnare people in a game of "gotcha." Empowered staff are better able to make decisions that are consistent with guidelines. After all, you don't want everyone coming to you about every decision.
- **A reference point when expectations aren't met.** A staff member who struggles is a staff member in need of feedback. But feedback is much more difficult when the expectations haven't been clearly stated and enacted.
- **Accountability to self and the school.** Formal performance reviews are conducted as articulated by contracts and bargaining agreements. But all of us operate on another level of informal accountability to ourselves and to the school.

Above all, clear expectations convey assurance for all the members of the staff and demonstrate your confidence in them. During a time of change, expectations can be a steady factor for all involved.

## NOTES

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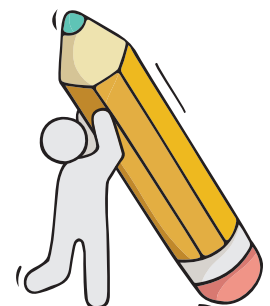
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# SELF-ASSESSMENT

A crucial aspect of moving to an ideal state is to gain a clear picture of the current state. Use the following needs assessment chart to determine areas of strength and growth opportunities for professional learning communities in the school or district you serve.

THE TEACHERS IN THIS SCHOOL/DISTRICT				
STATEMENT				PRIORITY (1 - 10)
<b>1. Use PLC teams to align with current professional learning goals and efforts.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	
<b>2. Routinely determine what it is that students already know to plan for student learning.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	
<b>3. Utilize teacher clarity processes to promote student learning.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	
<b>4. Consult current research on student learning to inform practice.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	
<b>5. Ground discussion of teaching in the context of student learning.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	
<b>6. Ground discussion of teaching in the context of its impact on student learning.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	
<b>7. Possess the communication skills needed to collaborate, not just cooperate.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	
<b>8. Examine how measures of equitable education are evidenced in their own classroom.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	
<b>9. Interrogate student learning results in the context of measures of equitable education.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	
<b>10. Continuously recalibrate their expectations using grade-level standards to plan.</b>				
None (0–10%)	Some (11–50%)	Most (51–89%)	All (90–100%)	

## PAUSE AND PONDER



Now that you have self-assessed, what are the current strengths that you can leverage?  
What are the growth opportunities?

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