A PLC Journey

We’ve been teaming for years in our school system. Elementary and middle school teachers used to meet at least twice a week during common planning time. Teachers would meet by content or grade level and talk about curriculum—lesson plans, interdisciplinary units, common projects, and common assessments. Once in a while we would talk about the students, mostly to vent frustration with discipline issues or low performance, but not to work on changes. On that issue, we were on our own.

Two years ago, however, the district administration made a commitment and investment to create professional learning communities (PLCs) for all grade levels. At the middle school, core teacher teams now have a 45-minute block during each school day to meet by grade level and in content teams. The middle schools have rotating focus days that cover Response to Intervention (RtI), student personalization, data analysis, and content curriculum. There is time to examine data from standardized tests, state achievement tests, and locally designed assessments. We talk about student performance, analyze student work, and meet with parents, counselors, and the school psychologist regularly. We also group and regroup students through RtI to meet specific instructional needs. We have a designated 30-minute intervention class period to provide remedial instruction in reading and mathematics, and we have enriched groups to give our proficient and accelerated students more challenging work.

I believed our old ‘team time’ was effective, but it was very teacher-based. With PLCs, we have refocused our work so that it is student-based. The transition was not an easy process. As a team leader, I have learned some lessons about PLCs along the journey.

1. Administrative support both in word and deed is crucial. Teachers need time to be together and do the work. Involving teacher leaders and administration in professional development made PLCs a shared plan of action, not a top-down mandate. As a teacher leader, I was involved in the process of planning and implementation. I could answer questions and be a voice for the rest of the team at leadership meetings.

2. Communication was vertical and horizontal. District and building administration needed a forum to communicate directly with teacher team leaders, and the exchange of information went freely up and down the leadership team. Horizontal communication was equally important. Teachers had to dialogue between core teams and content teams. Guidance from PLC resources was helpful to establish norms for team meetings. I led the discussion with the team on our meeting norms. We created them together, and that made the difference, because it was an impersonal way to remind the team to refocus.

3. Fostering independence and collegiality was tricky. We were used to connecting as a core team, but we weren’t used to using an in-depth team approach to examine student work and develop ongoing, changing plans. The need for the intense collegiality of a PLC meant giving up some of my independence, but the added ideas and support from the rest of the team helped me to become more effective and efficient in planning and instruction.

4. The PLC implementation has been refreshing for my teaching. Through PLCs, I have become more connected—and connected in new ways—to teachers, administrators, students, and the community. Being involved in a PLC has strengthened my work with students; they have shown improvement, which affirms the process. I like the teacher I am becoming through our PLC.

This issue was written by Martha E. Daniels, an eighth grade language arts teacher, community core team leader, language arts team leader, and district secondary lead mentor at Plain Local Schools in Canton, Ohio. February 2011

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