

13th Annual

# Thinking & Learning Conference

**COLIN SLOPER**

Friday 20 May

**Transformative Leadership in a PLC:  
Tools and Strategies for success**

Session 2

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**MELBOURNE**

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# COLIN SLOPER

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## COMMITMENT 4: Shape school structures for success

some have complained publicly that collaborative team meetings intrude on time when they could be planning lessons or marking assessments.

The leadership team at Northwest School decides to question a few of the more dedicated educators to gather information about what is going on. Educator after educator reports that meetings are being consumed with the sharing of information, the completion of administrative duties and other tasks not directly related to student learning. When the school leaders dig deeper to analyse the demands being placed on teams, they are shocked to discover that many are coming from the leadership team themselves.

At Southeast School, by contrast, the leadership team takes steps to explicitly build consensus among staff about which tasks are appropriate to include on a collaborative team's meeting agenda. Educators are taught how to 'car park' some less-pressing issues when they arise during collaborative team discussions so that they can be followed up at the appropriate time. A daily bulletin is established and becomes the central point for all school communications and reminders.

The leadership team models a focus on learning by acting as a filter to make sure that staff meetings focus on professional learning or collaborative problem-solving. They monitor collaborative team meetings and respectfully challenge teams when items appear that do not relate to the PLC process. The leadership team raises the status and importance of collaborative team meetings by supporting teams to ensure that they can focus on the right work.

## STRUCTURES TO ENSURE EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE TEAMS

### Scheduled time to meet and plan

Most people involved in school improvement agree that the most critical factor is time. What's more, research validates this commonly held belief. According to Raywid (1993), 'collaborative time for teachers to undertake and then sustain school improvement may be more important than equipment, facilities or even staff development'.

Given that collaborative teams are the engines of school improvement when it comes to achieving high levels of student learning, one of the most important questions that needs to be resolved when transforming from a conventional school into a PLC is, 'When will collabo-

**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC

rative teams actually meet?’ In a true PLC, the work of the collaborative team becomes so embedded in the daily efforts of educators that it is seen as an integral part of the school’s operations. As such, allocating adequate time for collaborative team meetings is an imperative consideration for schools on the journey towards becoming a PLC.

As discussed in Action 4.2, the authority to modify the school’s structures, timetable or schedule typically rests with school leaders, so it is ultimately the leader or leadership team who will have the authority to make the provision of meeting time a reality. However, even though the authority to alter the existing structures rests elsewhere, educators should be consulted for their views on the options available. This approach is one way of distributing leadership beyond the leadership team as possible structural changes to meeting schedules are considered.

It is important that the time provided for collaborative teams to meet is not simply added to educators’ already busy schedules. If the priority of the school is to improve student learning outcomes, and if collaboration between educators is seen as a crucial component in achieving this outcome, then the imposition of an additional meeting out of school hours sends the wrong message to educators about the value of collaborative team interactions. The time allocated for collaborative teams to meet needs to be during the working school day and should be built in to the weekly or fortnightly meeting schedule of the school. It must be protected and given priority over all other school endeavours.

Beyond these basic principles, the specific answer to the question ‘When will collaborative teams meet?’ will be as varied as the schools themselves. Each school needs to answer this question in light of its current context and reality. What is clear is that while the solutions will vary from school to school, a time must be found. As challenging as the search for time can be, there are many creative ways to resolve this issue. Structural changes that school leaders we’ve worked with have made to find this time include the following:

- repurposing an existing meeting time
- using student assembly times
- aligning educators’ preparation and planning times
- adjusting the start or end of the school day
- combining classes involved in non-instructional activities to free up teachers to meet collaboratively
- banking time by adjusting learning session length

By providing team meeting time during the working school day, school leaders send a strong message that collaborative team time is key when it comes to the PLC goal of improving student learning outcomes.

## COMMITMENT 4: Shape school structures for success

Making and finding time is a necessary structural consideration when beginning the journey to become a PLC, but how that time is used is also critical. While the scheduling of time for collaborative teams to meet is vital, it does not necessarily mean that the allocated time will be used productively to impact on teacher practice or student learning. Educators can become frustrated and begin to see this time as yet another obligation that keeps them from their real work of getting things done. Realising the potential of collaborative team meetings requires that all team members have both the drive and the skills necessary to transform these meetings into dynamic learning forums where the school's PLC mission and vision come to life. Collaborative team meetings are the primary opportunities for teachers to work together, so these meetings must be reserved for in-depth professional discussions about the learning program, student learning data and most effective teaching practices in improving student learning.

Given the need to ensure that collaborative team meetings remain focused on the most critical issues related to teaching and learning, school leaders should consider and, where possible, implement school structures to support the completion of necessary tasks that arise from these discussions. Aligned planning time, when educators have synchronised release time from teaching responsibilities, is one way to ensure that teams of educators can carry out the organisational tasks that flow on from decisions and commitments agreed upon at collaborative team meetings. These tasks could include more detailed planning of the learning program, continued work on common formative assessment tasks, processing of data, planning for intervention sessions and so on.

The provision of additional time will depend on many factors, including the size of the school, the number of teachers at each year level, industrial agreements and the resources available to the school. While the success of a school's transformation into a PLC is not dependent on this extra time, it is one way to ensure planning and organisational tasks do not intrude into collaborative team meeting time.

Consider the following scenario, which compares how two schools deal with the issue of structuring collaborative team time.

At Northwest School, the school leaders decide that collaborative teams will meet weekly after school for one hour. Teams are told their meeting time and given no opportunity to query it. From the onset, educators are vocal in their negativity towards the meeting time, with the result that they meet because of compliance rather than a sense of the importance of the work. Most educators see collaborative team meetings as something extra that they

continued

**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC

continued

are required to do, rather than as a practice essential to their endeavours to achieve high levels of learning for all.

At Southeast School, the school leaders review all the meeting arrangements that have developed in the school over time. They work from the premise that 'If this work is important, it is important that we find time for teachers to meet during the contractual school day'. The leaders decide that they will not negotiate about the fact that collaborative teams must meet for an hour each week, but they are flexible on when this meeting occurs.

The school leaders consider a range of ways to create time for collaborative team meetings, including repurposing existing meeting times, aligning common planning time, providing additional resources and creatively using assembly time. Once they have a few options they think are feasible, they ask staff to suggest any other options they can come up with and then have them list the advantages and disadvantages of each suggestion.

Once educators are involved in this way, a preferred option surfaces, and the school leaders take the necessary steps to ensure that this time becomes the protected meeting time for each collaborative team. Following their involvement in the process of establishing the meeting time, school staff are enthusiastic about how they can use this time to achieve high levels of learning for all students.

**Structures that foster collaboration**

A collaborative team without common purpose functions more as a group than as a team. To mitigate this issue, collaborative teams are often structured according to commonalities between teachers. In primary schools, teams are usually formed based on the common content that teachers deliver to their students, while in secondary schools, teams may be made up of educators who all teach the same year level or subject area. These commonalities allow team members to work together to achieve a common goal.

Since the primary approach used by collaborative teams is one of collective inquiry, in which teams identify and address issues relevant to their students' learning, the most important consideration when educators come together to form a team is to identify the team goals that will unite them in their work. The more specific and targeted the goal, the stronger are the bonds that unite the team. For example, in a primary school setting, all the teachers of Year 4 students may form a collaborative team. United by the common skills and knowledge

## COMMITMENT 4: Shape school structures for success

they have identified that all Year 4 students need to master, the team might come up with a goal: 'By the end of Term 3, 80% of students will score proficient (90%) or above on the skills and knowledge related to Year 4 prioritised standards for the topic of fractions, as evidenced by a common assessment to be administered on 8 September.' This goal instantly unites the educators because it compels them to work both individually and interdependently to achieve their aim. If all educators don't work towards achieving the goal in their individual classrooms, the chance that the collective goal will be met is minimal. Carefully considering the goals that individual educators have in common and constructing collaborative teams based on these common goals provides a solid platform for future endeavours and inquiry.

Once collaborative teams have been established, it is vital that school leaders consider the ongoing support that teams need to be able to work collaboratively. As noted in Commitment 3, just because educators are placed in a team, even one that shares strong interdependent goals, doesn't mean that each individual team member will have the skills required to work collaboratively. Team members will need to be skilled at making sure that conversations focus on achievement of agreed-upon goals and remain respectful, constructive and objective. Without professional learning to foster the skills required for collaborative interaction, teams can become unproductive and negative. As such, PLCs must develop structures that support ongoing development of the skills and strategies necessary for collaborative team members to work effectively together. For example, teams will need to learn how to develop norms in a range of areas. Other examples include:

- how to develop reasonable but challenging goals that focus on student learning
- how to construct rigorous and reliable common formative assessments
- ways to develop and strengthen team trust
- how to reach agreement
- how to discuss and interpret learning data
- how to communicate effectively

While educators will quickly discover the need to increase their knowledge and understandings in these areas as they begin to work as a collaborative team, their lack of knowledge should not be an excuse to delay the start of the PLC journey. These issues will naturally arise as collaborative teams do 'the work', providing a compelling purpose for the professional learning in these areas. Directed and specific professional learning on how to work effectively as a team increases the ability of the team to 'get on with' the real work that they are meeting about – the learning of the students they serve. When equipped with the skills to work effectively as a team, educators gain professional confidence and improve their ability to ensure high levels of learning for all students.

**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC

The following scenario demonstrates the importance of professional learning designed to foster collaboration.

At Northwest School, collaborative teams have been established and time to meet has been arranged. The collaborative teams have developed norms that outline the professional behaviours expected during team meetings. Team members have a clear understanding of the PLC process and are enthusiastic about the work they will be doing together. The teams identify the elements of the curriculum that they want students to be proficient in during the next cycle of learning, collaboratively develop common assessments, and hold discussions about the learning data collected to identify student learning progress.

All these developments seem positive, but when a member of Northwest's leadership team sits in on a collaborative team meeting, she is shocked to discover that the team just seem to be going through the motions. Discussions about the learning data are shallow, cordial and brief, with very few opposing points of view being aired and debated, and the leader notes that the team struggle to develop quality common assessments. By the end of the meeting, even the school leader is confused about which actions the team members have agreed to implement before the next meeting.

At Southeast School, the leadership team look carefully at the agenda of their staff meeting and realise that the majority of the time is spent on items that don't have a high impact on student learning. Realising that collaborative team members often need to develop new skills and capabilities to be successful, the leaders strip the staff meeting agenda of these low-priority items and restructure this time for professional learning designed to develop the skills and aptitudes team members will require to get better at working as a high-functioning collaborative team.

The leaders monitor each team, and when common struggles are evident, all the members of that team participate in professional learning at the next staff meeting. Teams that are making headway or have overcome an issue are invited to present. At the end of these meetings, the educators are questioned about what else they need to know or be able to do to support the work of their collaborative team. Because collaborative teams receive regular and targeted professional learning in this way, team morale at Southeast is strong, and the collaborative functioning of teams quickly begins to improve.



## COMMITMENT 4: Shape school structures for success

**Data-processing structures**

The main purpose of collaborative team meetings is to provide the forum for educators to be involved in highly effective, job-embedded action research in which the teaching and learning process is investigated. Based on the available learning data, educators in a team should select a specific aspect of student learning to examine in order to first gain an insight into what is happening in their classrooms and then identify the most effective teaching practices to implement. Collaborative teams in a PLC use learning data to establish goals, provide evidence of effective teaching, monitor progress to enhance individual and collective teaching practice. Through the effective analysis of learning data, collaborative teams develop the capacity to manage their own improvement as they engage in job-embedded professional learning. As such, the analysis of data is an integral component of the work of collaborative teams and the PLC process.

The establishment of school structures to manage the processing and collation of data embeds the process of collective inquiry in the culture of the school. Without this support, valuable team time will be devoted to the collation of data rather than to discussions of how teacher practice can improve student achievement. Organised systems to collate and represent data before it is discussed and analysed by collaborative teams must be established at the school level so that teams can dedicate their time directly to the achievement of higher levels of learning for students. One possible option is the establishment of data-processing teams made up of existing administrative or non-teaching personnel whose role is to manage and disseminate data in a timely and effective manner.

The following scenario compares two contrasting schools to demonstrate the impact that data-processing structures can have on the functioning of collaborative teams.

The principal of Northwest School is pleased with the way teachers have adapted to the PLC approach. Team members work collaboratively and understand the components of the PLC process. However, collaborative teams constantly report that they don't have enough time at meetings to undertake rich and rigorous discussions about best teaching practice as revealed by student learning data.

Upon further investigation, the leadership team finds that much meeting time is spent perusing through students' responses to common assessments and collating data. Collaborative team members are focused and busy as they crunch numbers on calculators and work out percentages to reveal how close they are to the targets they have set. However, what little discussion there is

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**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC

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centres on numbers rather than the team's analysis of the data. By the time the meeting ends, school leaders can sense the frustration as many overdue agenda items are once again carried over to the next meeting.

At Southeast School, school leaders understand clearly that the primary purpose of the learning data collected by collaborative teams is to provide evidence of student learning, allowing the team to have discussions about the collective actions they will take based on the data. They also understand that teams need to access the learning data in a timely manner so that they can immediately adjust their response to ensure that students who are struggling or excelling have their specific learning needs met.

As such, the school leaders systematically and regularly review the ways that collaborative teams are using and collating data. Based on this knowledge, and in cooperation with collaborative team facilitators, the leaders investigate the best system to process and collate the data. As teams become more data-driven and responsive, the leaders ensure that a whole-school approach to data collation is established. Data-entry spreadsheets are created that can be quickly modified by teams to work with each new common assessment developed. Formulas and conditional formatting of cells are developed to automate as much of the data calculation as possible. When educators lack skill in the program used, professional learning is conducted. Over a period of time, a system is developed that allows educators to enter their data quickly in advance of the team meeting and bring the collated data back to the team for discussion. The collaborative team time and discussions now focus more on analysing and acting on the data, since precious meeting time is not consumed with processing the data.

Southeast's school leaders constantly check with teams to ensure that the system suits their needs. A process of continuous improvement is established as agreed-upon adjustments are made to ensure that each team has the ability to turn data into specific information and action.

**Decision-making structures**

Hattie (2009) concludes that the most powerful strategy for guaranteeing that students learn at high levels is to ensure that teachers work collaboratively to identify essential learnings, gather evidence of student learning through ongoing assessments, and then use the evi-

## COMMITMENT 4: Shape school structures for success

dence of learning to discuss, evaluate and plan for continued student learning. This model requires educators to make collaborative decisions and take action based on the evidence of student learning.

The inquiry process demands that each team is granted the authority and responsibility to solve problems of practice in creative, innovative and evidence-backed ways. Naturally, the school's mission and vision must guide the approaches implemented, but school leaders need to ensure that school structures enable collaborative teams to make their own decisions in alignment with the school's strategic direction. Collaborative teams need to be given the opportunity to experiment and take risks as they inquire into various ways to improve student learning. As long as the data collected provides confirmation that the action taken is having a positive impact, school leaders need to let go of the notion that school improvement and improved student learning is only possible through the decisions they make.

The creation of structures that shift decision-making responsibilities to teachers enables everyone to contribute towards the goal of high levels of learning for all students. However, it does not absolve school leaders from responsibility for school improvement. In a PLC, their role is to ensure that the goals that collaborative teams set are being achieved and to support collaborative teams through the provision of time and resources.

As a result of the reciprocal accountability this arrangement demands, school personnel are united as they work toward the achievement of the school mission and vision. Consider the following scenario featuring two PLC schools:

The leaders of Northwest School have gained strong staff support for the implementation of the PLC process. Professional learning has been conducted and an action plan has been developed.

One school leader implements an accountability system to ensure that the leadership team is clear about what each team is up to and whether they are following the strategic direction that had been set. The leader requests that each team send her a list of the team's proposed actions after each meeting. The leader will then check the actions, and if she agrees they will have a positive impact on improving student learning, she will communicate with the team and allow them to implement the proposed actions.

After several months the school leader notices that, while teams seem to be busy, there appears to be very little change in how teachers are teaching in

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**TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION:** Five commitments for leading a PLC

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their classrooms. In fact, even the actions that are approved seem to be implemented with little enthusiasm or genuine interest.

At Southeast School, all staff understand that the purpose of the PLC process is to allow teams to inquire and make decisions about effective teaching practice to improve student learning. As such, the school leaders have made sure that all staff are involved in developing the school's mission and vision statements. These statements are constantly discussed in school forums, and over time they become entrenched in the culture of the school.

With the knowledge that everyone on staff has a clear understanding of the direction of the school, the school leaders encourage teams to be as innovative as possible as they develop actions based on learning data. Teams understand that they have licence to set their own course of action, so long as it is based on evidence of improved student learning and contributes to the achievement of the school mission and vision.

The school leader remains informed on the actions and decisions teams are making but allows them to act autonomously. She knows that teams will review any decision they make in light of the data they receive and will quickly revise or abandon the action if it doesn't improve student learning. As a result, teams feel empowered, trusted and supported as they work together.

**Administrative structures**

We have already established that as collaborative teams begin to focus on the inquiry process and actively research best teaching practices, it is vital they are not diverted from this work by the less important tasks that can clog collaborative meeting agendas. The transformation from conventional school to PLC requires educators to work in different ways and on tasks that may not have been a priority in the past. In the initial stages of the PLC journey, the tendency of teams will be to default to previous ways of working and familiar tasks. For example, discussions about the organisation of an upcoming excursion – while important – are much easier and more familiar to newly formed collaborative teams than discussions aimed at analysing learning data to identify the best teaching practices.

School leaders need to ensure that school structures are put in place to reduce or minimise the administrative and technical tasks that can often intrude into valuable collaborative team meeting time. While these tasks are important for school operations and can't be eliminated

## COMMITMENT 4: Shape school structures for success

entirely, school leaders need to review existing school structures and free educators of as many of these second-tier tasks as possible. As previously discussed, organisational arrangements will vary from school to school depending on their unique circumstances. It is vital, however, if we are asking educators to work in different ways and on different work than they are used to, that due consideration is given to removing some of the traditional tasks educators have been required to perform. Ultimately, collaborative teamwork is doomed to failure if school leaders do not find ways to reduce the number of tasks educators perform that could distract from the PLC purpose of improving student learning.

By ensuring that administrative or technical tasks are dealt with by others, addressed in other forums or quarantined to a brief, specific time on the collaborative team meeting agenda, school leaders show that they actively support the important work of collaborative teams aimed at ensuring high levels of learning for all students.

At Northwest School, the leadership team comes back from a PLC professional learning session excited for the school to commence its journey towards becoming a PLC. School staff are always eager to try new things, and they are quickly convinced of the benefits for student learning. They particularly like the fact that time will be created for them to collaborate with a focus on improving student learning – the very reason most of them entered the profession in the first place.

The PLC process start off well, but after only a few weeks the school leaders begin to notice that staff seem to be increasingly tired and run down. When school leaders try to speak to one of their most trusted members of staff about the situations, she explains that she doesn't really have time to talk because she just has too much to do: 'We just don't seem to ever get on top of things. We're working hard on this PLC stuff, but we still have everything else to do as well.'

At Southeast School, school leaders understand that any change process can be time-consuming and energy-draining if not handled in the right way. The leaders know that educators will become overburdened if they are asked to adopt new practices while keeping up all the other tasks for which they have previously been responsible. As such, when the idea of working to become a PLC is met with the support of the majority of staff, the leadership team decides to assess which existing practices and approaches can be abandoned or at least modified to ease the pressure on educators. They use the opportunity to show staff that it is okay to abandon ineffective practices if they impact on the school's ability to achieve its mission and vision.

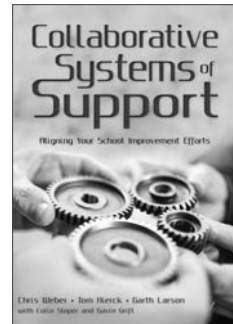




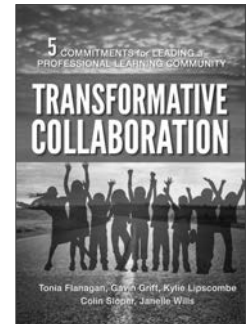
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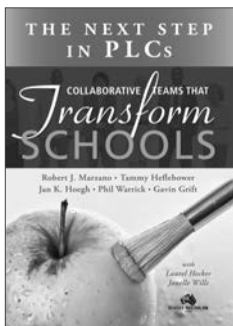
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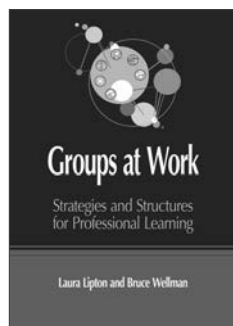
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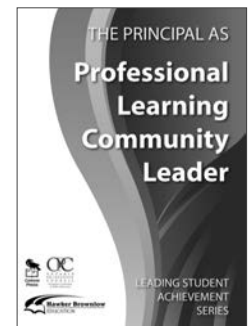
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