

Preface

The most successful PLT in this building is run by the social studies department. They really got on board. They've structured their departmental meetings completely using the PLT structure. They have jumped in, read everything, even if they need to meet at lunch time. They've changed their practice—every single social studies teacher has changed practice around the PLT model. . . . PLTs are the vehicle we used to pull people together and create camaraderie. Were PLTs completely responsible for building cohesion? No, but they played a big part in that.

Lonnie Barber, Former High School Principal
Current Assistant Superintendent, Idaho

There is a body of research describing professional learning communities and documenting the positive effects of teacher collaboration in professional learning communities. However, there is much less information providing guidance for schools hoping to develop and sustain such communities. This publication was written as a resource for school administrators, school leadership teams, and teacher leaders as they embark on the journey establishing professional learning teams (PLTs) as a structure to enhance teacher collaboration and student learning in their schools. The main purpose is to help leaders understand and support the work of PLTs. This guide provides practical and useful information to assist them in planning, starting, and sustaining PLTs. It also assists central office administrators to understand and support the PLT process in their district's schools. At the same time, the research informing PLTs is included as a necessary underpinning to the leaders' information base.

School leaders are more fully equipped to provide essential supports when they understand the structure and processes of PLTs along with the rationale and research. Attending PLT workshops, engaging in training activities, and strengthening their own leadership skills are all important actions for these leaders. The PLT process described in this book provides guidance and strategies for teachers as well as school leaders to begin to effectively develop these learning communities in coordination with their school improvement plans. To ensure successful implementation, school leaders need support in taking the critical and sometimes difficult first steps toward creating job-embedded, collegial, schoolwide professional growth opportunities. This book provides that support with both a theoretical foundation for PLTs and concrete advice on getting ready for PLTs. It assists in building support structures and relationships, reinforcing PLT skills, and anticipating some of the potential challenges.

Table 1 Typical PLT Timeline for One Year

Task	School Staff	School Leaders
1. Determining PLT topics based on student data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLT process is introduced • Staff analyzes student achievement and other data to determine specific topics to investigate in order to improve classroom achievement • Teachers select into PLTs • Effective teamwork and collaboration skills are introduced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the PLT process as a schoolwide effort • Provide data and ensure coordination with the district and school processes already in place • Attend all PLT training sessions • Intentionally build trust and create a safe environment for teachers • Acknowledge and celebrate past successes and build on them • Plan to celebrate often as long as there is cause for authentic celebration
2. Digging deeper into data and developing a focus question to guide inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teams deepen their understanding of the topic based on further analysis of data • Teams share and discuss current practices • Each PLT develops a focus question to guide its inquiry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide additional resources as needed • Understand the focus for each team—attend individual team meetings and read team logs • Provide avenues for teams to share information with the rest of the staff: provide time at staff meetings for sharing; ask teams to make notebooks public
3. Investigating research and best practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss pertinent research and identify ways to access additional research related to the PLT's focusing question • Deepen understanding of current research and best practices, the schoolwide context, and implications for their own professional practice • Teams identify research-based instructional practices to implement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide some research and information on best practices • Develop or expand the school's professional library • Model professional learning by sharing information from your own reading • Develop instructional leadership skills to support teachers in changing practice (see Chapter 4)
4. Analyzing teaching practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers become reflective practitioners by using tools for structured reflection • Teams collect and share schoolwide data on current classroom practices and methods of assessment • Teams develop skills for systematically analyzing student work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop visibility in classrooms; institute the walk-through practice • Listen to each teacher's voice and respond
5. Determining instructional changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLTs review potential practices and select one or more to implement • Develop a common understanding on the characteristics and steps of the practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule time for schoolwide sharing of selected practices and implementation plans • Create conditions that allow teachers to develop their own expertise and sense of empowerment

Teachers, like students, want to feel safe in the school environment. This can mean different things to different people in different schools. In some schools, it is necessary to create sheer physical safety from violence and threats so that students and staff feel secure in coming to school. However, in the context of developing the PLT process, it is also essential to make it safe for teachers to try something new, to take a risk, to experiment with sometimes daring strategies, and occasionally to realize the strategies didn't work as envisioned. Thus, it becomes safe to admit a mistake, to learn from that experience, and to regroup and try something else. This requires leaders to work at trust building with staff as well as to communicate a sense of confidence in teachers: a belief that they can change their practice in ways that result in enhanced learning and achievement for their students. This parallels the need for teachers to express their belief in their students' abilities to change and learn increasingly complex concepts—in fact, to achieve at higher and higher levels.

This is particularly important as teachers are asked to share their practice and make their teaching public. Teaching has traditionally been a very private endeavor, one where the teacher closes the classroom door and shares very little with her colleagues. However, teachers in successful schools value and participate in norms of collegiality and continuous improvement, indicating that *working together* to improve teaching has a positive effect on student learning (Little, 1982, 2002).

Build Relationships With Staff and Students

VOICES
FROM THE
FIELD



Understand and deal with the fact that the work is draining—part physical, part emotional—working in schools with kids and adults. Relationships are important. With students in poverty and minority students, until those relationships are built, no learning will take place. In the same way, not much happens until there is a trusting relationship with the staff. You have to build confidence and trust—then better things will happen. Make sure the teachers believe you have confidence in them. Your actions will show this—stand behind them. Sometimes allow them to make a mistake and learn from it.

Darrel Burbank, Retired Elementary Principal, Idaho

At the heart of creating a safe environment is relationship building. Working and learning together in teams is a complex process that requires individuals to understand themselves. They must also understand their beliefs, thoughts, and motives, as well as those of other group members (Wald & Castleberry, 1999). Teamwork melds individual interests into a collective shared journey. It also requires group agreements and understandings that create bonds of trust, belonging, and purposefulness. These complexities are more easily addressed when the group takes the time to establish the groundwork for building relationships and to define the agreements or *norms* for working with one another (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Katzenbach & Smith, 1999; Maeroff, 1993; Murphy & Lick, 1998; Schmuck & Runkel, 1994; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994). Those *working agreements* should be revisited and revised

■ TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Central to an expanded vision of teachers as “researchers, meaning makers, scholars, and inventors” (Lieberman & Miller, 2000) is the concept of teachers as leaders who can make a difference in schools (p. 11). The growth of teacher leaders was an unexpected and valuable outcome of this PLT process as we field tested in schools. Teacher leadership is fostered and supported initially by involving teachers on the leadership team that plans and develops PLTs in the school. Teacher leadership is expanded as individuals work in teams to move through the inquiry cycle (see Chapter 1). Since PLTs are teacher led, leadership emerges and is nurtured both by the individual PLTs and by administrators who work closely with the leadership team to oversee school reform efforts. There is a strong role for both administrators and teacher leaders as the organi-

zation shifts to become a professional learning community. “Administrators are viewed as leaders of leaders. Teachers are viewed as transformational leaders . . . [Teachers] transform students’ lives, motivate and inspire students, and get students to do things they never thought they could do” (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002, pp. 22–23).

This PLT accomplished more research and decision making than any other team I’ve been on. It’s been a slow growing process that finally led to results.

Elementary School Teacher, Reading PLT, Idaho

The PLT structure and processes align well with two communities of practice—the National Writing Project and Leadership for Tomorrow’s Schools—that demonstrate the research on teacher leadership as it plays out in real life (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). “Both organizations enact the tenets of professional learning within a community of practice: learning is experiential and collective; it is context-driven and context-sensitive; and it occurs through social participation . . . [Both organizations] rely on a set of social practices that promote learning, meaning, and identity and that assist teachers in coming to view themselves as teacher leaders and in learning to act the part” (pp. 33–34).

Implementing the PLT process helps build the capacity of teacher leaders. However, it is not sufficient to train teachers and leave them to their own devices to develop leadership. It requires a conscious effort on the part of administrators to encourage, support, and sometimes make additional leadership training available to their teachers. In addition, widely distributing leadership among teachers can help ensure continuation of reform strategies—such as the PLT process—even when there is a new principal.

While supporting the process in multiple ways, it is important that administrators ensure that PLTs are teacher led. There may be times when the principal disagrees with the PLT’s line of inquiry. She may make suggestions or ask thoughtful questions to stimulate a learning discussion. However, it is essential to let the teachers lead by owning the process. They need to be encouraged to think outside the box at times and to try new strategies. Principals reinforce the concept of teachers as professionals when they set and communicate their expectations for teamwork and then support teachers as they proceed to focus on student learning and classroom instruction in their PLTs. Principals put the *P* in PLT when they support their staff in developing their own leadership skills and encourage teams to be teacher led.

Tool H-11 Factors Supporting the Success of PLTs

TOOL



1. There is *collective participation and collaboration* that involves groups of teachers working together to solve problems and refine practice to improve learning for all students.
2. Professional learning is *content rich and student focused*; that is, teacher learning provides opportunities for teachers to develop strong expertise in the content areas they teach and in understanding how students learn that subject area.
3. Professional learning is *teacher led*. It is learning that addresses real problems teachers face in their classrooms and involves individual as well as collective reflection and inquiry into professional practice.
4. There is ample *time and duration* for professional learning. Professional learning must be sustained over time and involve a substantial number of contact hours.
5. Professional learning occurs in a *data-rich* environment where teachers use multiple sources of information to analyze student learning goals against student performance.
6. There is *strong, supportive, and shared leadership* for professional learning. The role of the principal is vital. Sharing leadership with teachers, developing collaborative decision-making processes, and cultivating opportunities and structures for teacher learning are examples of practices that support PLTs.
7. *External support* such as district-level or external facilitators is important for teachers to be exposed to fresh ideas, approaches, and perspectives that challenge traditional thinking.
8. PLTs are one component of a *coherent plan* for improving student success. Coherence means that professional learning is part of a larger school improvement effort and that it is planned over multiple years, focused on specific goals tied to student learning.

Information relating to these factors can be found throughout this guide. In addition, school leaders can consider the following actions to further support the work of PLTs:

- Model tools, strategies, and professional learning.
- Ensure that individual PLTs are led by teachers.
- Anticipate and prepare for challenges.
- Emphasize the importance of self-reflection.
- Celebrate, celebrate, celebrate.

Many teachers need to experience cooperative professional inquiry before they will commit to it.

Bruce Joyce, 2004, p. 80

REINFORCING PLT STRATEGIES AND SKILLS ■

School leaders make a powerful statement about the value of collaboration when they attend and participate in all training sessions and use the PLT strategies learned in workshops in their other meetings. Following an agenda, keeping a log