

*Solutions for Professional Learning Communities*

# How to Launch PLCs in Your District



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# Table of Contents

<b>About the Author</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
A Focus on Commitment and Longevity .....	2
Bumps in the Road to PLC Implementation .....	4
Facing Your District in the Right Direction .....	5
Changing District Culture .....	10
About This Book .....	11
<b>Chapter 1: Developing a District Guiding Coalition and Common Language</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Developing a Common Understanding .....	15
A Road Map .....	19
The Eighteen Critical Issues .....	20
Understanding Common Structural Components and Implementation Models .....	23
The Laissez-Faire Implementation Model .....	25
The Bureaucratic Implementation Model .....	26
The Loose-Tight Implementation Model .....	27
Final Thoughts .....	28
<b>Chapter 2: Empowering Site Leadership Through Staff Development and Training</b> .....	<b>29</b>
Being Present for Principal Training .....	32
Choosing a Presenter or Trainer .....	33

Training Teachers .....	35
Training Site Guiding Coalitions .....	36
Choosing a Kickoff Path.....	38
The General Session Presentation .....	38
The School-by-School Workshop .....	39
Optional Training .....	39
The Ideal Approach.....	40
Final Thoughts .....	44
<b>Chapter 3: Monitoring to Sustain Momentum .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Measuring the Right Things .....	46
Numerical Data.....	49
Programmatic Artifacts .....	50
Cultural Artifacts.....	55
Final Thoughts .....	57
<b>Chapter 4: Ensuring Sustainability Through Ongoing Commitment and Implementation.....</b>	<b>59</b>
Celebrating Wins .....	60
Refreshing Parameters and Expectations.....	61
The Golden Gate Staff Development Plan.....	62
Cohort Training.....	63
Avoiding Complacency .....	64
Final Thoughts .....	65
<b>References and Resources .....</b>	<b>67</b>

## Chapter 1

# Developing a District Guiding Coalition and Common Language

District leaders' long-term commitment to pursuing PLCs solidifies implementation. Once district leaders confirm their long-term commitment, they can develop a guiding coalition. This coalition provides district leadership with an advisory group to guide, measure, and evaluate the district's implementation efforts.

“Forming a powerful guiding coalition starts with identifying the true leaders” in your district (Frampton et al., 2010, p. 56). This includes formal leaders—those in key power positions in the district—and informal leaders—those recognized for their leadership, credibility, and influence in all sites and departments:

The guiding coalition (sometimes called a steering team . . . ) includes representation from all key stakeholder groups . . . . It then grows over time as respected, reputable individuals with the capacity to lead from various sectors within the community are identified. Finding the right blend of strengths and interests pays great dividends toward future success. (Frampton et al., 2010, p. 56)

The highest-ranking individual responsible for PLC implementation should give the invitations to participate in a guiding coalition. In many cases, this may be the superintendent; in other cases, it may be a different leader charged with districtwide PLC implementation. The individual who hands out the invitations must ensure that invitees receive the training information they will need to fully understand PLCs, including a copy of *Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2010), attendance to PLC institutes or workshops, and access to experts who can answer their technical questions. Those invited to become guiding coalition members must feel supported in developing their understanding.

The group's size should allow members to have constructive discussions—too large and the guiding coalition meetings become nothing more than informational gatherings; too small and the coalition may not give a realistic picture of the district's efforts.

District leaders must select members intentionally with a focus on ensuring successful implementation. Keep the following points in mind during your selection process.

- Consider those who have the following attributes within the district.
  - Credibility
  - Expertise
  - Influence
  - Position power
- Avoid inviting those who may see participation as a stepping-stone to getting administrative positions or gaining power.
- Invite those who listen well, give frank and honest observations, and have students' best interests at heart.
- Ensure that prospective members clearly understand the coalition's purpose.

Districts that form their guiding coalitions with individuals who seek to please district leadership rather than ensure successful implementation find themselves with unrealistic feedback. Often, these coalitions are labeled *yes committees* or *rubber stamps* for the administration because these individuals say exactly what they believe the administration wants to hear. Forming a guiding coalition that provides honest guidance and feedback is paramount, and careful member selection is the key. An effective, well-balanced guiding coalition provides a comprehensive picture of implementation through multiple perspectives. It focuses on offering multiple solutions and ideas that are essential to successful implementation.

As PLC implementation develops and the guiding coalition's understanding matures, the district can add additional members to the group. Attention should be paid to "maintain an appropriate balance of those with experience on the coalition and those who will infuse fresh perspectives" in expanding the guiding coalition (Frampton et al., 2010, p. 57).

Once you've chosen your group members, the coalition must fully prepare itself for implementation. For instance, it must develop a common understanding of end goals and vocabulary and must understand the structure of a PLC and the various implementation models in order to move forward efficiently.

## Developing a Common Understanding

After establishing your guiding coalition, it is time to become a productive group. This begins with clearly defining the PLC implementation process, providing opportunities and materials to learn about PLCs, and developing a doable calendar of meetings that respects the members' time.

As part of the learning process, the guiding coalition should develop a set of norms to bring focus and direction to meetings and clarify professional relationships between members. (See *Learning by Doing* [DuFour et al., 2010] for more on building norms.) The

guiding coalition must clearly understand its purpose and role. Meetings must have clearly targeted agendas leading to meaningful outcomes designed to support and ensure successful implementation. Meetings must allow time to discuss, share, ask questions, and find solutions to obstacles.

In addition, district leadership and the guiding coalition that leads districtwide PLC implementation must have a common framework in which to work and lead. They must share the same basic understanding and a common language of PLC implementation and its essential processes. “Language itself, then, is a critical tool for successful collaboration . . . [and] one of the keys to collaboration among educators, along with mutual respect and flexibility” (Ehren, Laster, & Watts-Taffe, 2009). It’s tempting to think that one can easily lead district movements through a generalized view of the PLC implementation process. “Just develop a shared vision, and the rest will fall into place,” we hear often. However, “for collaboration to be successful participants in the process have to create shared language for communication” (Ehren et al., 2009). But how can parties develop a shared vision when they have their own biases surrounding PLCs and don’t have similar views of reality or the same expectations of the future?

A common language is essential. Without intentional focus, however, language can interfere with districtwide implementation. Teachers across disciplines and grade levels do not always use the same language, nor are they always aware of how other teachers use words because teachers may not converse much outside of their grade levels, departments, or schools. They understand their own vocabulary terms and working environments and may not know what vocabulary that teachers in different disciplines, grade levels, or schools use. Without shared meaning, educators may not be able to engage successfully in problem solving and decision making as they work toward implementation (Ehren et al., 2009).

Districts that have had success in developing common languages and frameworks have begun by reading and studying the critical questions and elements of the PLC process. See figure 1.1.

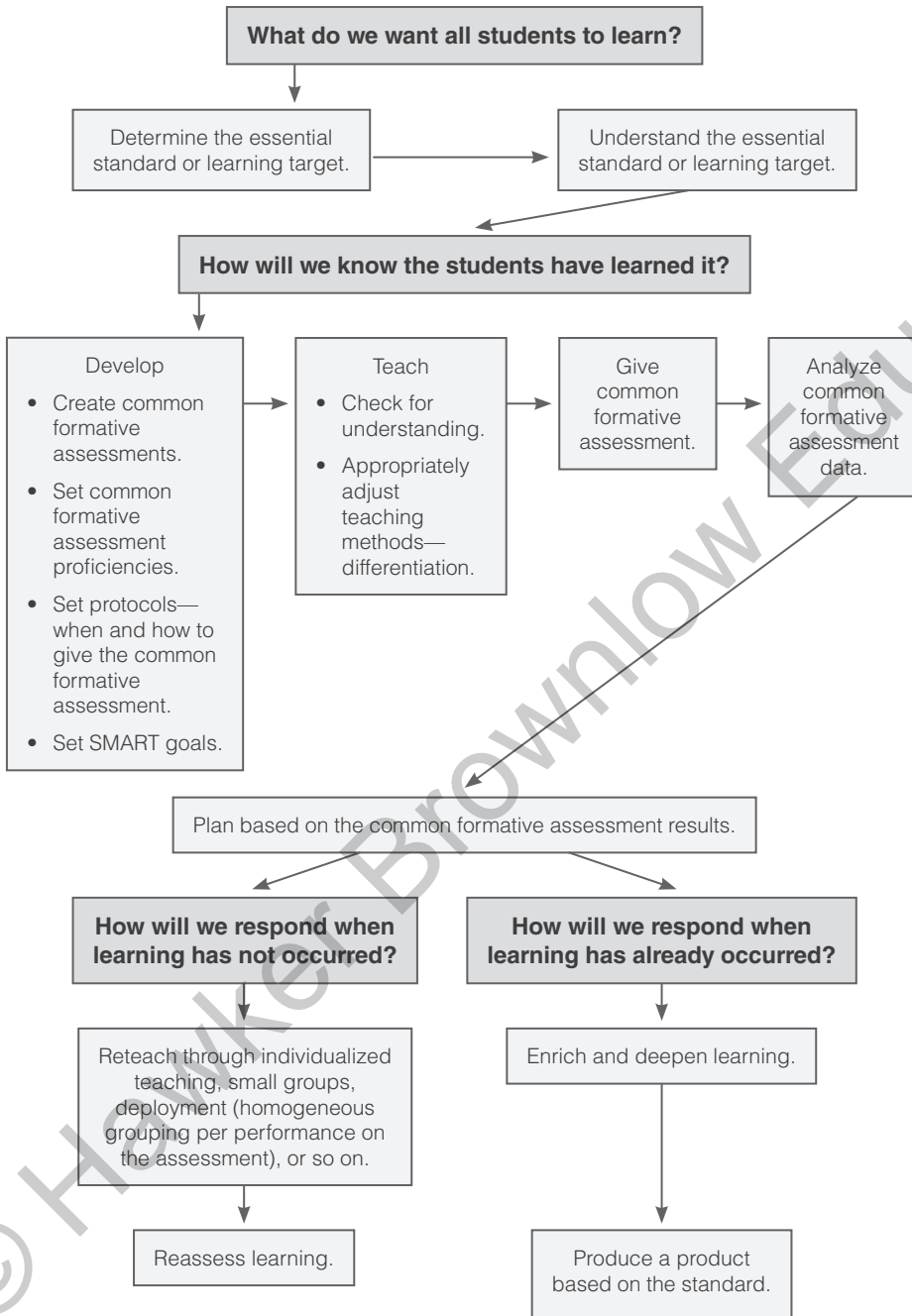


Figure 1.1: District PLC flowchart for common understanding.