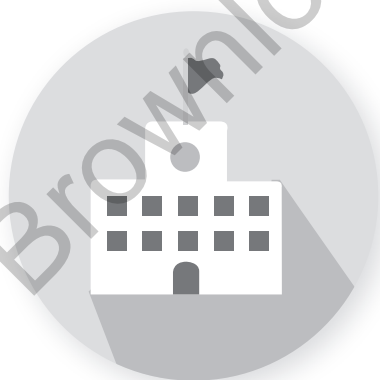


Solutions for Professional Learning Communities

How to Develop PLCs for Singletons and Small Schools



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Table of Contents

About the Author	vii
Introduction	1
Framing the Problem	1
Making the Problem Worse	2
Avoiding “Collaboration Lite”	4
Chapter 1: Vertical Teams	7
The Scenario	7
The Principles	10
Opportunities	14
Challenges	16
Recommendations	17
Chapter 2: Interdisciplinary Teams	19
The Scenarios	19
Scenario 1	19
Scenario 2	23
The Principles	24
Opportunities	25
Examples	26
Challenges	28
Recommendations	29

Chapter 3: Singletons Who Support	31
The Scenario	31
The Principles	34
Opportunities	39
Challenges	40
Recommendations	41
Chapter 4: Virtual Teams	45
The Scenario	45
The Principles	47
Opportunities	48
Challenges	48
Recommendations	50
Find Other Teachers in Your Discipline	50
Clearly Communicate Your Intentions	51
Make a Pitch to Your Supervisor	51
Decide on the Logistics	53
District Virtual PLCs for Singletons	53
Setup for Success	54
Leadership and Accountability	54
District Virtual PLCs for Small Schools	55
Chapter 5: Structural Change	57
The Scenario	58
The Principles	59
Opportunities	60
Challenges	62
Recommendations	62
Epilogue	65
References and Resources	67

Introduction

“How does all of this professional learning community (PLC) stuff work when I’m the only one in my school who does what I do?” If you are thinking this, you are a singleton!

Band, choir, special education, art, auto mechanics, welding, physics, consumer science, reading, technology, psychology, speech, business, drama, dance, media, K–5 in a small school, . . . the list goes on and on. Whatever your unique craft, I’m here to tell you that there is a place for you in the PLC process.

Framing the Problem

Traditionally, principals and teachers attend a PLC at Work™ Institute, listen to a PLC turnaround story, or read one of the many books about this topic and immediately see the potential power that the PLC framework offers. They get it; working together achieves so much more than working alone. So, they jump in with both feet. They begin tearing down the walls of isolationism with the promise of a new day built on a collective vision that *all* students can learn at high levels.

They start by organizing collaborative teams. Mathematics teachers with mathematics teachers, science teachers with science teachers, language arts with language arts, the band teacher with . . . uh, well, hmm. Wait a minute! What about that band teacher?

A similar problem occurs in many small schools, which are full of singletons. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), 25.4 percent of schools in the United States are rural schools. Not all rural schools are small; however, many of them

are. In many of these small schools, grade-level teachers or subject teachers are singletons. For example, in a small elementary school, it isn't uncommon to have one teacher per grade level or even one teacher for multiple grade levels. In a small secondary school, there may be only one biology teacher, one algebra teacher, one English 9 teacher, and one world history teacher—singletons! These schools hear the PLC message, agree with it, and then stumble on the inevitable singleton questions: How do you build common assessments when you're the only one who teaches your subject or grade level? Can this really work for you? Yes, it can and does!

As schools of all sizes take the plunge and begin working toward becoming a true PLC, some of the most common questions include, With whom do our singleton teachers collaborate, and what do they collaborate about? These questions matter, and they are addressed in this book.

Making the Problem Worse

In a school's haste to begin the PLC process, it is often the case that singletons, like the band teacher, are left out or assigned to a team as an afterthought. Understandably, guiding coalitions—the principal and a few teacher leaders who are guiding the PLC work—often make the mistake of focusing only on subjects that have the pressure of high-stakes testing. Inadvertently, they marginalize singleton teachers and their importance to the school community by not being thoughtful about the roles singletons can play within this new collaborative culture. When this happens, it's not unusual for singleton teachers to become resistant to the process, because they feel it is a waste of their time—largely, because it is! Without direction or a clear personal purpose for meeting, PLC meetings for singletons wind up having no impact on their work. We can do better!

If you are a principal or part of a guiding coalition, good for you! By picking up this book, you are taking a step toward becoming better informed about how to include *all* of your teachers in the

collaborative process in meaningful ways. You'll be better able to help your school develop a truly collaborative culture versus one that is collaborative in some areas and isolating in others.

If you are a teacher, good for you! You are likely a singleton who is looking for practical solutions for how you can participate meaningfully in the PLC process. You, like so many others, probably know the power of collaboration but don't see how you fit into that process in your school. If you have felt marginalized in some way, I want to challenge you to assume good intentions. It is highly unlikely that your principal, and those working with him or her to help establish the PLC framework, thought, "Let's see how we can make some people feel devalued." Instead, assume that they just didn't know how to include you—yet. By picking up this book, you are empowering yourself with knowledge of how you too can collaborate in meaningful ways for the purpose of improving your craft and responding to student learning, either through supporting your current team structure or by proposing a new structure that works better.

This resource describes five different ways that teams can be organized for helping singletons and small schools participate fully in the PLC process.

1. Vertical teams
2. Interdisciplinary teams
3. Singletons who support
4. Virtual teams
5. Structural change

I have chosen to highlight these five methods for structuring teams because they are proven to work and address most situations. The scenarios presented illustrate ways in which teachers have found common ground for creating assessments and participating in the full PLC process. However, each school and each singleton situation has its own unique DNA. That is, it would be impossible to address every particular situation. However, using the principles in this book

and your own expertise, you will be empowered to customize a collaboration solution. There is a solution for every teacher!

Avoiding “Collaboration Lite”

Mike Schmoker (2004) writes:

Mere collegiality won't cut it. Even discussions about curricular issues or popular strategies *can feel good* but go nowhere. The right image to embrace is of a group of teachers who meet regularly to share, refine, and **assess** the impact of lessons and strategies continuously to help increasing numbers of students learn at higher levels. (p. 48, emphasis added)

The PLC process focuses on data, usually collected from common formative assessments. If a team is going to take seriously the charge of answering the following four fundamental questions (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), assessment becomes key.

1. What do we expect students to learn (know and do)?
2. How will we know if students are learning?
3. How will we respond when some students *are not* learning?
4. How will we respond when students *are* learning?

Think about it. How can you respond to student learning (questions 3 and 4) if you don't know where students are in the learning process (question 2)? I would assert that teachers aren't quite clear in knowing what they expect students to learn (question 1) until they have described what students should be able to do and at what rigor level they need to perform when they have learned it. In other words, until you can create an assessment question, task, or prompt that describes exactly what students must be able to do to demonstrate proficiency, you are not yet clear on what you expect students to learn. As Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker (2009) tell us, the linchpin is assessment.

Common formative assessments must inform learning. They should:

- Help teachers determine how well they are teaching a concept
- Support teachers in learning from each other the ways to improve their craft
- Inform teachers about which students need more time and support
- Inform teachers about which students need their learning extended
- Inform individual students about their position in the learning progression

Bottom line, if a team isn't administering common formative assessments, it is practicing "collaboration lite."

Don't get me wrong; any increased level of collaboration is a good thing, and you have to start somewhere. However, the ultimate goal is for singleton teachers, like all other teachers, to become part of the common assessment process. Like with any rule, there are a few exceptions, which are discussed later in the book. *These are exceptions.* Whether singleton teachers are part of a vertical team, an interdisciplinary team comprising multiple singletons, a virtual team, or a traditional team, the goal is for them to take an active role in gathering and using data from common assessments to improve their craft and promote student learning. Figure I.1 (page 6) shows a continuum summarizing the steps teams should consider when forming a successful collaborative team.

To that end, this book is not focused on theory or research but on practical experiences of teachers and schools who have found ways to make collaboration work. It serves as a springboard to readers who are looking for ideas and principles that they can apply to their own situation. There are many ways to do this, and your solutions will be as unique as your singleton situations. For the conscientious educator,

As you form your team, use the following continuum as a guide to think through some of the steps you'll need to take. The goal is to achieve the level of collaboration at the bottom of the continuum.


- 
- ▶ Establish a team (vertical, interdisciplinary, or virtual), or change structures so that you are no longer a singleton.
 - ▶ Establish a time to meet.
 - ▶ Identify target skills or content worthy of your attention. If improved, these skills will make an important difference for students.
 - ▶ Develop a means for assessment (often through the use of a common rubric).
 - ▶ Establish inter-rater reliability and develop an assessment schedule.
 - ▶ Establish SMART goals.
 - ▶ Determine some best-practice strategies for initial instruction.
 - ▶ Administer common assessments with an agreed method for grading and reporting the data.
 - ▶ Disaggregate data gathered from common formative assessments.
 - ▶ Decide on individual and collective responses to fundamental questions 3 and 4 of the PLC process.

Figure 1.1: Implementing a singleton collaborative team.

the moral imperative to ensure that students learn the essentials looms heavy. However, ten times the pressure of that weight is the exhilaration of seeing students in your charge become empowered with the skills necessary to achieve to the best of their ability academically, build a productive career, and succeed in both school and life. As you find ways to harness the potential and power of true collaboration, I wish you the best on your journey.

The promise of a new day awaits!