

Professional learning communities



“The staffroom needs to be a professional community of scholars working together to maximise each other’s success.” Professor John Hattie

WHAT IS IT?

A professional learning community (PLC) in schools involves collaboration, sharing and ongoing critical interrogation of teaching practices in line with professional standards. PLCs should be learning-oriented and promote the growth of teachers and students.



WHY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?

- PLCs are more effective than individual champions in ensuring that school-wide pedagogical changes are sustainable.
- PLCs help develop teachers’ confidence and self-efficacy.
- Students achieve at higher levels in schools with positive PLCs.
- PLCs encourage and build effective leadership and management.
- When teachers across a school implement the same learnings and strategies, they create a consistent learning experience for students.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ARE MOST EFFECTIVE WHEN:

- the focus is on subject knowledge, curriculum and student learning
- members have a shared vision and sense of purpose
- data on student performance informs improvements in teaching and learning
- members take collective responsibility for student learning, which helps to sustain commitment and accountability
- there is mutual trust, respect and support among all staff members
- members look beyond the school for sources of learning, ideas, networks and partnerships
- teachers are supported in working towards their goals, including access to high-quality professional learning.

PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES:

- Leverage skills, interests and knowledge of teachers to lead PLCs. This can help develop leadership capabilities in teachers who do not have a formal leadership role.
- When establishing a PLC, it can be helpful to focus on topics teachers are comfortable with first before moving onto more challenging topics that demand greater critical rigour.
- Use tools for implementing effective professional learning, such as professional development profiles, action research and coaching.
- Provide the opportunity for collegial support in reflecting on practice and planning.
- Organise school timetables to allow time for staff to meet and plan regularly.
- Use student achievement data and samples of student work to maintain a focus on student need.
- Focus on learning delivering strategies that can be implemented in the classroom straight away and evaluated in the following weeks.
- It takes time to become proficient at new strategies, so regular cycles (e.g. two to four weeks) of learning, observation and review can be used to support and track progress.
- Seek feedback after each PLC session about what worked well and what could be improved.

THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- In a PLC, difference, debate and disagreement are necessary for improvement.
- School leaders are vital to the success of PLCs in the way they manage school resources, relate to teachers and students, support or inhibit social interaction and respond to the broader policy context.
- It can be more difficult to foster a sense of belonging to a whole-school community in larger schools, particularly secondary schools. It can be useful to leverage the sense of belonging teachers may feel to a departmental community in these schools.
- Keep in mind system/sector priorities when determining what professional learning to undertake.
- Deep learning takes time. Some schools focus on a single targeted topic for a whole year of professional learning, including research, analysis and goal setting, implementation of learning, and evaluation of impact.

WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

[Feedback case studies](#) – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
[Communities of Practice](#) – Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership
[Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems, Australian Edition](#) (Chapter 5 and Appendices) – Learning First
[Enablers for Effective Professional Conversations](#) – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
[How do Principals Really Improve Schools?](#) – Educational Leadership (2006), Professional learning communities: A Review of the Literature, Journal of Educational Change, 7, 221-258, 2006
Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., Thomas, S. (2006), Professional learning communities: A Review of the Literature, Journal of Educational Change, 7, 221-258, 2006

