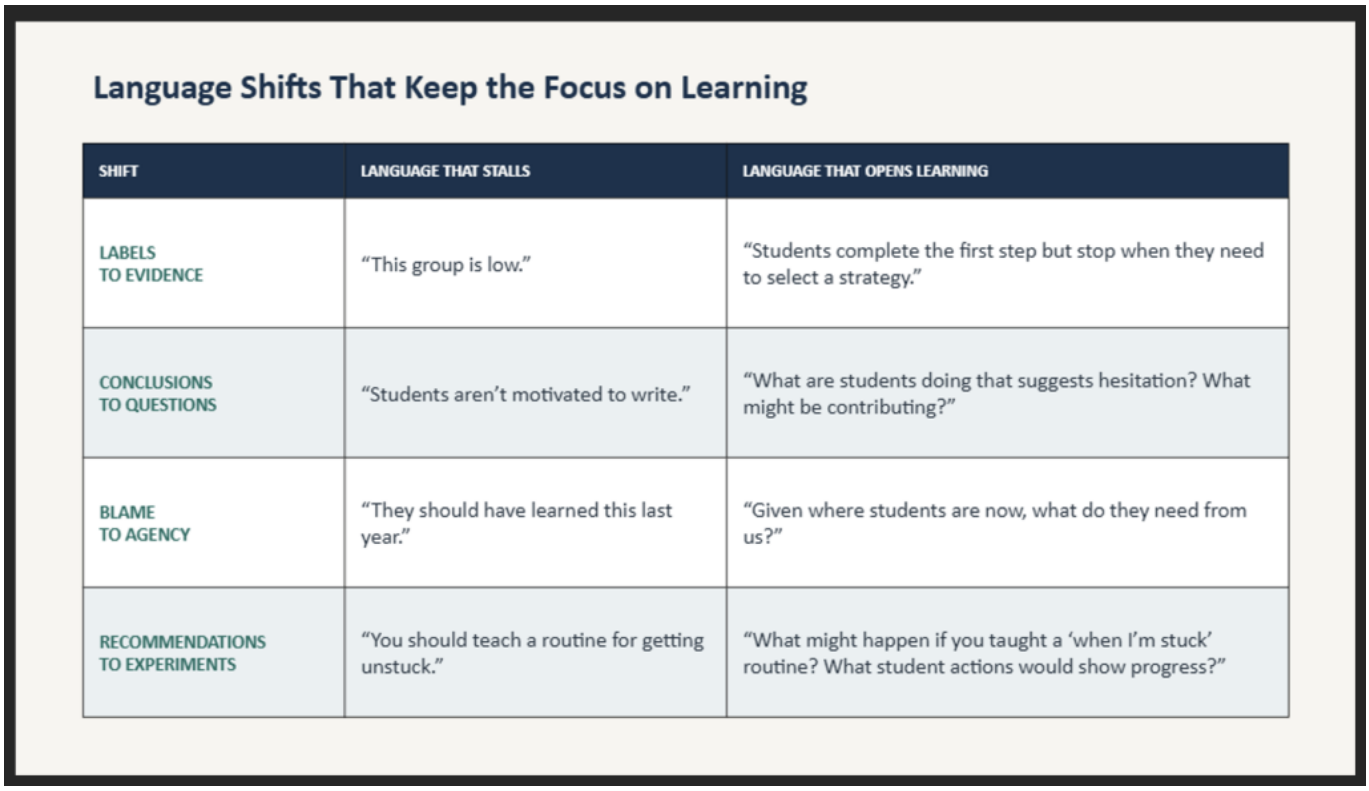
Language That Keeps the Focus on Learning

“The way we talk about instruction is part of the instruction itself.”

That statement from Connie Hamilton’s Kappan article, “Language Is Leadership: How Teacher Talk Shapes Team Thinking and Instructional Action” (Summer 2026), caught my attention. Hamilton illustrates how the language teachers use to describe students and their work influences what they believe and what they decide to do next. *“They don’t get it”* produces a different conversation from *“They are completing the first step and getting stuck at the second.”*

Consider how this applies to the language used by instructional coaches and teachers leading PLC conversations. Their words—and their responses to the words of others—can determine whether professional conversations reinforce judgment, compliance, and explanation or foster curiosity,

agency, shared responsibility, and collective learning. Four shifts can help keep the focus on learning.



Language Shifts That Keep the Focus on Learning

SHIFT	LANGUAGE THAT STALLS	LANGUAGE THAT OPENS LEARNING
LABELS TO EVIDENCE	"This group is low."	"Students complete the first step but stop when they need to select a strategy."
CONCLUSIONS TO QUESTIONS	"Students aren't motivated to write."	"What are students doing that suggests hesitation? What might be contributing?"
BLAME TO AGENCY	"They should have learned this last year."	"Given where students are now, what do they need from us?"
RECOMMENDATIONS TO EXPERIMENTS	"You should teach a routine for getting unstuck."	"What might happen if you taught a 'when I'm stuck' routine? What student actions would show progress?"

Across all four shifts, the goal is to keep thinking moving rather than police people's words. Labels become evidence, conclusions become questions, blame becomes agency, and recommendations become opportunities for professional learning.

These shifts become especially important when frustrations surface in coaching conversations and PLC meetings: "Students don't care." "They give up too easily." "They never use the feedback we give them."

I have long encouraged coaches and leaders to listen for the goal hidden inside a gripe. "They give up too easily" may express a desire for students to persist, draw upon available strategies, and seek help purposefully. By acknowledging the frustration and uncovering the desired future within it, a facilitator or coach can open the door to reflection and action.

Here is how a coach might respond when a teacher expresses a gripe:

Teacher: “I spend so much time giving students feedback, and they never use it.”

Coach: “You’re investing considerable time in feedback and seeing very little of it reflected in what students do next.”

Teacher: “Exactly. They look at the grade and move on. Some don’t even read my comments.”

Coach: “So, receiving feedback has become the end of the process rather than the beginning of their next learning step.”

Teacher: “Yes. I want them to do something with it.”

Coach: “What would you like to see students doing when they receive your feedback?”

Teacher: “I’d like them to read it, identify what needs improvement, and revise their work. Eventually, I’d like them to apply it to their next assignment without waiting for me to point out the same issue again.”

Coach: “So, the goal is for students to use feedback independently—to improve their current work and increasingly carry that learning into future work.”

Teacher: “That’s it.”

Coach: “What might help your students begin taking those actions?”

The coach did not challenge the teacher’s frustration or rush to recommend a feedback strategy. Through listening, paraphrasing, and questioning, the coach helped transform “They never use my feedback” into a goal describing what the teacher wanted students to do.

That shift in language changes what becomes possible. Once the goal is visible, the conversation can move from describing what students are not doing to identifying the learning-production behaviors they need to develop. From there, teachers can consider actions, gather evidence, and determine what they need to learn. Language moves the conversation from sharing frustration to engaging in inquiry.

The language of instructional coaches and PLC facilitators is leadership in action. They need not have the answer or quickly steer the group toward a solution. Their words can keep the conversation open long enough for educators to examine evidence, uncover goals, challenge assumptions, and consider what they might try and learn.

Perhaps that is the most important test of our language: Does it end the thinking, or does it keep the focus on learning? Does it move the conversation toward the question at the heart of a PLC: **What do our students need us to learn?**