When Working Together Becomes Learning Together

Recently, I was preparing a 30-minute kickoff for a school district entering its second year of professional learning community (PLC) implementation. During the first year, teachers had discovered many of the benefits that come from having dedicated time to work with colleagues. They shared strategies and resources, problem-solved around student needs, developed greater consistency across classrooms, and built stronger professional relationships.

Those are important outcomes. But they raised another question for me: When does a professional working community become a professional learning community? Teachers can work together very effectively without necessarily learning together. A team can coordinate lessons, share materials, develop common assessments, discuss students, and solve immediate problems. All of that is valuable. But the L in PLC asks for something more of us. It's why I stress the PLC question, "What do our students need us to learn?"

PWC	PLC
Sharing ideas and resources	Jointly investigating teaching and learning
Helping each other get work done	Helping each other learn
Focus on tasks and activities	Focus on student learning
Planning instruction	Studying the impact of instruction
Sharing strategies that worked	Examining why, when, and for whom strategies worked

Schools need both. The issue is whether time designated for professional learning moves beyond getting work done to generating new learning.

As I prepared for the district's second year of PLC work, I developed a six-part framework to help teams move from identifying a student need or desired outcome to engaging in a collective inquiry process.

Goal – What change do we want to see in student success? This could be overall growth in a content area or growth for an identified group of students who are currently underperforming. In addition to content standards, the goal might focus on critical life skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, or critical thinking.

Student learning-production behaviors needed – What would students need to do differently to produce the desired outcome? Students cause student achievement. What students do as learners—thinking, practicing, questioning, persisting, collaborating, revising—produces their learning.

Hypothesis – What do we believe teachers might do differently that would increase the student behaviors needed to produce the desired outcome? The hypothesis connects changes in teacher actions to anticipated changes in student learning production behaviors.

Teacher moves – What specifically will we do differently to test our hypothesis? These are the instructional actions, strategies, prompts, structures, or responses that teachers will intentionally implement.

What might we look for? – What evidence would indicate that student learning behaviors are changing? These signs provide early indications of progress. If they aren't appearing, we have reason to revisit our hypothesis and teacher moves rather than simply waiting for the eventual outcome.

What is the PLC learning? – What are we discovering about the relationship between our actions and students' responses? What seems to be working, for whom, and under what conditions? How can we use that learning to determine what we try next?

Here is an example of how the framework might unfold around a goal of increasing students' problem-solving attempts before requesting teacher help or giving up. Notice that the PLC doesn't begin by deciding what teachers should do. It first

identifies what students need to do differently and then builds a hypothesis about the teacher actions that might produce those behaviors.

Goal	**Students will increase their problem-solving attempts before requesting teacher help or giving up.**
Student learning-production behavior needed	Students need to independently use strategies to understand the problem, make a plan, try an approach, and evaluate their thinking before they ask for help or stop trying.
Hypothesis	**If** we reduce immediate teacher assistance, explicitly teach and model strategies for getting unstuck, and make productive struggle visible and valued in our classrooms, **then** students will increasingly try multiple strategies and use appropriate resources before requesting teacher help or giving up.
Teacher moves (What we will do differently)	• **Reduce immediate help:** Pause and use wait time when students are stuck. • **Ask before telling:** Use prompting questions that guide thinking without giving answers. • **Teach strategies:** Explicitly teach and model strategies for understanding problems and getting unstuck. • **Provide tools and references:** Ensure students know what resources are available and how to use them. • **Normalize struggle:** Acknowledge and celebrate productive struggle and multiple attempts. • **Use peer resources:** Encourage students to turn to peers before the teacher. • **Provide feedback that advances thinking:** Feedback focuses on strategies, reasoning, and next steps.
What might we look for?	• Students try at least one strategy (or more) before asking for help. • Students use tools, references, or peers as resources. • Students persist longer when they encounter difficulty. • When students ask for help, their questions are more specific. • Decrease in "I don't get it" or "I give up" responses.
What is the PLC learning?	Which teacher moves (questioning, wait time, cues, scaffolds, feedback) most influence students' willingness and ability to persist and solve problems independently?

The hypothesis in this example isn't a prescription or a promise that these teacher moves will produce the desired student behaviors. It is the PLC's best thinking about where to begin. The learning comes from putting that thinking into action, observing students' responses, and returning to the PLC with evidence. Perhaps students begin persisting longer but still turn quickly to the teacher rather than using peers or other resources. Perhaps the strategy works for some students but not others. Each finding gives the PLC something new to explore.

That's why I see the framework as a cycle rather than a plan to be implemented:

Desired outcome → Student learning behaviors → Hypothesis → Teacher moves → Evidence → PLC learning → What do we try next?

Effective PLCs stay engaged in this cycle. They remain curious about what students are doing and how students are responding

to changes in teacher practice. Both evidence of progress and evidence of a lack of progress inform what the PLC decides to do next. The learning gained from that inquiry can then be applied to future teaching and learning situations.

In strong schools, that PLC learning doesn’t remain within the team. It is shared across the school—and perhaps across the district—so that the learning of one group can benefit other colleagues and students.

A professional working community asks, “What are we going to do?” A professional learning community adds, “What are we learning from what we do?”