



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Professional learning communities



Guidance

Guidance document no: 108/2013

Date of issue: July 2013

Replaces guidance document no: 062/2011

Professional learning communities

Audience	All practitioners working in an educational setting in Wales.
Overview	To provide all educational practitioners with an overview of the national model for professional learning communities.
Action required	None – for information only.
Further information	Please contact the Professional learning communities mailbox: PLC@wales.gsi.gov.uk
Additional copies	This is an online document only and can be accessed from the Welsh Government's website at learningwales.gov.uk/yourcareer If an alternative format is required, please contact the mailbox above.
Related documents	<i>The School Effectiveness Framework (2008)</i>

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Professional learning communities (PLCs) – the national context

The Minister for Education and Skills has set out a programme of school reform which is challenging and ambitious. The Welsh Government together with its partners is working to transform and shape the education system for the future.

Our focus for improving the education system in Wales is based around three interrelated priorities:

- improved literacy levels
- improved numeracy levels
- reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment.

These priorities are underpinned by the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) which is our overarching policy for improving educational attainment and provision in Wales and the one to which all our other policies are aligned. The SEF is about the whole school-based education system – schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government working collaboratively to:

- achieve better learning outcomes and well-being for all children and young people regardless of their socio-economic background
- reduce the variation in learning outcomes within and between classrooms, schools and local authorities.

To support these aims we have developed an integrated system that brings together the professional standards, professional development and performance management. This new structure is the practice review and development (PRD) model and applies to the whole school workforce including teachers, headteachers and support staff.

The core purpose of PRD is to contribute to the school improvement agenda for Wales by providing a clear structure to ensure that professional standards, performance management and professional development work together as a single system, rather than as separate, individual elements.

The PRD model recognises that professional development is at its most powerful when it is focused on coaching and mentoring; reflective practice; action research; and participation in PLCs. All practitioners in Wales are expected to use these approaches to address their professional development needs.

Involvement in PLCs within and beyond the school also makes a significant contribution to building the school's capacity for continuous improvement, especially in relation to the national focus on literacy, numeracy and tackling disadvantage.

Why have a PLC?

The research evidence consistently highlights the importance of interdependent learning and collaboration as the cornerstone of school improvement and effective professional development. It reinforces that where teachers collectively investigate ways of overcoming barriers to **their** students' learning, the outcomes can be dramatic. Working in this way, as a PLC, can bring many benefits but most importantly, if done well, PLCs can result in improved learner outcomes (Verscio et al, 2008; Saunders et al, 2009). In addition, networks of PLCs (between and across schools) enable the groups to widen their expertise and to share their most effective practice.

Extensive research evidence shows that teachers who are part of a PLC tend to be more effective in the classroom and achieve better student outcomes (Lewis and Andrews, 2004). PLCs can also improve teachers' professional learning and secure improved school performance, irrespective of the school context and its socio-economic profile (Elmore, 2002; Goldenberg, 2004).

In short, a PLC engages teachers¹ in collaborative enquiry, about a specific issue or problem, with the prime aim of changing professional practice so that improved teaching and learning follows (Dufour et al, 2009). The purpose of a PLC can be summed up in three words – 'improved learner outcomes' (Harris and Jones, 2010).

¹ Note: the PLC can also include additional staff in the school responsible for supporting learning and teaching.

What is a PLC?

The Welsh Government's agreed definition of a PLC is:

A PLC is a group of practitioners working together using a structured process of enquiry to focus on a specific area of their teaching to improve learner outcomes and so raise school standards.

When consistently implemented using the national model, PLCs have the potential to make a positive difference to learner outcomes as well as enhancing the quality of professional learning. If PLCs are to make a real difference to school performance and learner outcomes, the participants need to engage in collaborative and interdependent learning. They need to:

- have the responsibility to try new learning and teaching strategies in order to extend their own professional development and learning
- enquire as a group in order to generate new professional knowledge and understanding
- implement the most effective learning and teaching solutions.

There is a risk that PLCs could be misrepresented as a convenient 'catch all' for any form of collaboration, partnership or networking however effective or ineffective. Unless PLCs are properly configured using the national model, they will not have an impact on the learning outcomes desired. Simply renaming existing groups, such as departments, working parties or existing curriculum teams as PLCs, is misleading and will do little to improve actual school performance or to change classroom practice.

The following table on page 6 sums up what a PLC is.

A PLC

Group of professionals working as a team to address specific learner needs arising from the analysis of data/evidence.

Chooses the focus of enquiry and the membership of the group.

Imperative to generate new ideas and new practice.

Operates within a clear cycle of action enquiry.

Leadership is widely distributed and the group chooses its own facilitator.

Each member is accountable for the outcomes of the PLC – there is reciprocal accountability.

Disbands and reforms with a new focus on enquiry and changed membership.

Assesses its impact directly on learner outcomes and has a responsibility to share these outcomes with others.

Independent and interdependent learning. Reflection upon individual and collective learning based on evidence.

Active community of learners.

The PLC national model

The diagram of the PLC model contains seven phases which guide you through the PLC process.

Effective PLCs follow each phase of the national model. The information included in the following pages provides further clarification of each phase, including a definition of what each phase means.

Click on each phase for further information.



Phase 1: Establish the group

Definition	Expectations
During this phase data is used to identify the composition of the group. All participants have a shared understanding of the PLC national model and agree responsibilities within the PLC.	Before moving on to the next phase, have you . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none">• considered data?• shared the national model with all participants?• agreed who will take on the role of the facilitator?• agreed what will happen in subsequent meetings?• agreed working practices for the PLC?

Phase 2: Identify a focus

Definition	Expectations
During this phase the PLC will identify a particular issue or problem for a group of learners, based on an analysis of data.	Before moving on to the next phase, have you . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none">• agreed a specific, measureable focused question for enquiry?• ensured that your question for enquiry is related to learner outcomes?• established success criteria to assess and measure impact on learner outcomes?

Phases 1 and 2 are interdependent.

Phase 3: Action enquiry

Definition	Expectations
During this phase, which is critical to the success of the PLC, the participants will have researched the potential strategies that could improve practice and learner outcomes.	Before moving on to the next phase, have you . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none">• considered the current, evidence-based research on your question for enquiry?• agreed a set of enquiry activities in order to identify potential strategies that could improve learner outcomes?• identified data/evidence to be collected to evaluate the impact of the strategies and approaches you have chosen?

Phase 4: Innovation and change

Definition	Expectations
During this phase the strategies identified through the enquiry are shared with the PLC participants. The strategy identified to have the most potential impact is selected for trialling. The necessary changes to support the trialling phase to take place at school level are agreed.	Before moving on to the next phase, have you . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ensured all participants have considered the potential strategies and have reached a consensus about the strategy to trial?• considered how barriers to trialling and change may be overcome?

Phase 5: Trialling and feedback

Definition	Expectations
During this phase the strategy or strategies for improvement are trialled. Progress and feedback are shared by PLC participants.	Before moving on to the next phase, have you . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none">• trialled the agreed strategy or strategies for improvement?• collected interim data/feedback on the impact of changes to classroom practice?• shared data and feedback on the impact of changes to classroom practice?

Phase 6: Refining

Definition	Expectations
During this phase the PLC will refine or refocus the trialled strategies based on the data/evidence collected.	Before moving on to the next phase, have you . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none">• considered the effectiveness of the strategies being trialled, based on data and evidence collected and shared?• considered refining or refocusing strategies to maximise impact and effectiveness?• continued to trial the strategies over a period of time and in a range of contexts?• continued to collect data and evidence on the impact of the strategy or strategies?

Phase 7: Sharing outcomes

Definition	Expectations
<p>During this phase the outcomes, impact and recommendations of the PLC are shared with staff, governors, parents/carers and, where appropriate, other schools for action.</p>	<p>Before completing the process, have you . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• demonstrated specific measurable outcomes from the PLC work?• shared the outcomes and impact with staff, governors, parents/carers and where appropriate other schools?• made recommendations based on the impact and outcomes for staff, governors, parents/carers and, where appropriate, other schools for action?

Frequently asked questions

Q1. How do I start a PLC?

Use data to identify a particular issue or problem for a group of learners. Establish a group of participants to enquire into ways of overcoming this issue or problem. Identify a group facilitator. Agree a set of enquiry or research activities.

Q2. What is the role of the PLC facilitator?

The PLC facilitator is critical to the success and sustainability of the PLC. They should:

- provide appropriate levels of support and challenge for the PLC
- ensure pace, momentum and enthusiasm are maintained
- keep the PLC focused and on track
- broker resources
- manage links and networking.

Q3. What kind of data can I use?

Without using data you cannot gauge the impact of your PLC on learner outcomes. The type of data you should use to focus your school improvement can be found in the following:

- All Wales Core Data Sets and School Comparative Information reports. These include family of schools and comparative performance data for class/year group, subject and key indicators.

Q4. Where do I access this data?

It is available in every school and is accessed via your Senior Leadership Team.

Q5. How large should a PLC group be?

Ideally there should be no more than six to eight participants in a PLC as this ensures effective contribution from all participants. Any less than three to four staff means there might not be sufficient depth and challenge within the team.

Q6. Should the headteacher be involved in a PLC?

Headteachers should be supportive of the national model. The question for enquiry will determine whether a headteacher needs to be a participant.

Q7. Who leads/facilitates the PLC?

Any participant of the PLC could be the facilitator. It is not dependent on existing roles or structures within the school.

Q8. How do I measure impact?

The impact measures will relate directly to the particular focus or question for enquiry that the PLC is addressing. Initially, the impact will be in terms of changes in teaching/classroom practices. Subsequently, these changes in teaching classroom practices should lead to improved learning outcomes which can be measured. Both quantitative and qualitative data should be collected.

Q9. How long should a PLC last?

The life cycle of a PLC is determined by the depth of enquiry that the team is expected to undertake but usually lasts no more than a year as each year the cohort of students change and by association the issue/focus relating to those learners will also change.

Q10. What happens in PLC meetings?

The facilitator keeps the meeting to task. Each participant reports to the PLC on progress made. Opportunities are provided to discuss specific issues or difficulties. Agreement is reached on what needs to be done prior to the next meeting.

Q11. How do you share outcomes?

This can take a variety of formats, including reporting to governors, participation in staff INSET programme and written reports.

Q12. What if the PLC goes off at a tangent?

This is where the role of the facilitator is crucial to ensure that the PLC team remains focused and enthused.

Q13. What if the question for enquiry is too broad?

If the focus is too broad then the group has to continually refine at Phase 2 until it is precise enough for the group to address. So, for example, improving literacy is too broad and presents too big a task for a PLC.

Q14. Where does the time come from?

Schools allocate time and resources at different times of the year according to need. For example, use of staff development/CPD/ money to support school visits and use of dedicated in-service training time for PLC work and the abandonment of other meetings in favour of PLC meetings.

Q15. Can a PLC fail?

No it can't, because through the process some learning will have occurred even if it is not around the intended outcomes.

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