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# Improving Professional Learning Community Structures for Enhanced Professional Practice

Stephen Juracka

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IMPROVING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY STRUCTURES FOR ENHANCED PROFESSIONAL  
PRACTICE

Stephen James Juracka

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

June 2018

A THREE PART DISSERTATION:

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAM

IMPROVING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY STRUCTURES FOR  
ENHANCED PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES,  
MENTORSHIP, AND SHARED LEADERSHIP

Stephen James Juracka

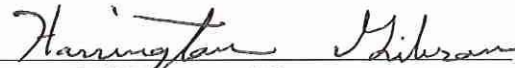
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

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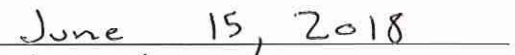
  
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## Dissertation Organization Statement

This document is organized to meet the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006). For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement with a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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## ABSTRACT

This Change Plan gauges the historical reality of the District ABC professional learning communities (PLC) to gain a better understanding of their past effectiveness and secure recommendations for the future. This Change Plan included a qualitative study conducted with the members of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). The ten members of the ILT provided feedback to the PLC Survey. The PLC survey was then coded for general themes and common language. The PLC Survey found that in past practice PLCs were absent within District ABC and collaboration among teachers was inconsistent and ineffective. Based upon the findings of the PLC survey I developed this Change Plan to include the development of PLC behavioral protocols, the creation of PLC collaboration structures, and professional development for PLC leaders.

## PREFACE

This Change Plan is an outgrowth of the work of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) of District ABC. In July of 2015, I took over as the Associate Superintendent of Instruction and Personnel in District ABC. At that time there was no organizational structure that drove the development of a clear and consistent curriculum. During the 2015-2016 school year, as the ILT began to find its footing, it became clear that the Professional Learning Communities within the district were either completely absent within past practice or loosely organized.

It is within this historical context that this Change Plan takes shape. As will be seen within this study, PLCs were largely absent from the district. As the ILT Survey confirms, there was much need for improvement as it related to the four arenas of change as described in Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, Helsing, & Rasmussen (2006). The PLC context, culture, competencies, and conditions were not fertile ground for effective PLC work.

This change plan was created to move District ABC forward to a place of effective PLC implementation. This Change Plan validates the historical ineffectiveness of district PLCs and outlines the strategies and actions that have led to greater productiveness for District ABC's professional learning communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Problem Statement**

District ABC had a culture in which teachers worked in isolation; professional learning communities have been absent in common daily practice. As Wagner et al., (2006) stated, isolation is a barrier to improvement within schools. Therefore, this change plan seeks to improve the professional learning community (PLC) culture, conditions, and competencies within District ABC to promote greater collaboration, professional learning, instructional improvement and student academic growth.

The problem that our district faced was the lack of PLC structures, which deprived us of some critical attributes for successful collaboration and educational improvements. From a cultural standpoint, the district had areas of need that were deep rooted due to years of PLC neglect and deprivation. Wagner et al., (2006) described *culture* as the shared beliefs and values of an organization. Culture is the underlying mindset and meanings that are held by individuals within the organization. Culturally speaking, there were several challenges that the district faced, starting with a culture of apathy toward collaboration.

Grade level PLCs had not had a consistent purpose when convening and such a lack of clarity allowed PLC collaborations to be rendered valueless. Prior to the 2015-2016 school year (SY), teachers were not meeting in PLCs with a sense of purpose and direction. Regular PLC meetings were not taking place; when they did occur, meetings lacked focus or regular behavioral norms or protocols. With PLCs lacking direction, clarity of purpose, focus, and behavioral protocols, teachers felt little value in

collaborating and, therefore, developed a sense of apathy towards PLCs and professional collaboration.

Historically, there had been a significant lack of trust among teachers and administrators within District ABC. Prior to the 2015-16 SY, the culture and climate of the school district needed positive improvement. The lack of trust among teachers and administrators led to a lack of desire to implement or follow administrative-led initiatives. As will be detailed by teacher survey responses in the *Data Analysis and Interpretation* section of this change plan, teachers felt that the district administration was not working collaboratively with them and they felt the top-down administrative approach was authoritative rather than cooperative.

Within this change plan I will use Wagner et al., (2006) four arenas of change, i.e. culture, competency, conditions, and context, as a framework for improvement. Wagner et al., (2006) described the *conditions* of an organization as that of being the actual arrangements of space and time. The structures that promote or hinder work are critical to the success of the organization (Greeny, Patterson, Maxfield, McMillan, & Switzler, 2013). One of the major challenges to improved PLC cultures and structures within District ABC was securing the time for PLCs to collaborate. There was not a consistent time that allowed teachers to work collaboratively on either a weekly or monthly basis. Scheduled and structured PLC time needed to occur on several fronts to develop consistent PLC cultures (Dufour & Dufour, 2013). Lack of PLC collaboration time didn't allow teams to develop relationally. Teams had not developed regular meeting norms or standards of behavior because of the inconsistency of their meetings. For teams to develop a sense of teamwork, collaboration, ownership and autonomy, they needed to

have a regular and consistent time to meet. One of the major challenges of this change plan was overcoming school schedules and the district calendar to secure consistent PLC meeting times.

Wagner et al., (2006) also discussed *competencies* as being a major factor in change. PLCs need to have the skills and knowledge to be able to undergo successful collaborative work. Because there had been a lackluster focus on PLC development, teachers within District ABC had not developed skills related to PLC work. Grade Level team leaders, who were charged with leading PLC work, had not yet received the training to develop their leadership skills. It was evident that the lack of leadership capacity impacted the success of several of the teams.

Additionally, a lack of understanding and knowledge in meeting norms and protocols negatively impacted the effectiveness of the grade level PLCs. Grade level leaders were not well versed in establishing and adhering to meeting norms and protocols. PLCs had been known to veer off topic or turn into complaint sessions in which teachers spent significant time discussing the challenges that are outside of their control. Teachers, on occasion, failed to realize the tremendous power they possessed due to their focus on student variables (e.g., race, SES, etc.) that are outside of their influence. Therefore, building the leadership competencies of the grade level team leaders who can ensure the establishment of and adherence to meeting norms and behavioral protocols will strengthen our PLCs and make them more effective.

A fully realized and implemented change plan would lead to significant cultural and professional shifts within District ABC. Creating time to allow teachers to have regularly scheduled weekly and monthly PLC times will allow them to practice the work

of PLCs. Further, offering professional learning opportunities for team leaders would allow them to successfully lead and implement PLC behavioral norms and protocols. By successfully changing the conditions and the competencies of the PLC structures, we would be able to realize a successful PLC culture which is professionally focused and engaged in the work of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student achievement.

### **Rationale**

Improving PLC structures and cultures was critical to moving District ABC forward. Teachers needed regular meeting times to allow them to dig deep into curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the purpose of improving learner outcomes. In the past, within District ABC, opportunities for teacher collaboration were limited and the cultural and professional development of our PLCs has remained stagnant.

This change plan was vital to the success of our students in District ABC because it would empower teachers to grow and learn together in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment and professional development. From a curricular standpoint, this change plan would enable teachers to have regular meeting times to develop standards based curricular roadmaps and the district's learning framework. PLC time would be focused on giving grade level teachers an opportunity to develop consistent grade level curricular roadmaps including standards-based learner targets and objectives. Grade level curricular roadmaps would allow teachers to approach instruction with a uniform foundation and consistent learner goals. Additionally, working together on curricular development allowed teachers to develop a sense of ownership in their work which is vital to effective PLC culture (Farris-Berg, 2013).

Successful PLC culture and collaboration would also serve to improve instruction for teachers. PLCs that would allow teachers to share their successes and challenges in lesson planning and implementation would help to sharpen instruction and isolate successful strategies. With increased consistent collaboration time, teachers would be able to discuss teaching methods, identify impactful resources, and utilize student data to improve instruction. Teacher collaboration, and the ability for teachers to work and share instructional ideas, is vital to the success of PLCs, schools, and districts (Farris-Berg, 2013; Fullan, 2011).

PLCs could also give teachers the opportunity to analyze and evaluate student performance data. As teachers approach student learning, they are presented with significant amounts of student performance data from statewide, local, and individualized assessments. Empowering teachers to utilize PLC time to evaluate student data to inform instruction is best practice in improving student learning (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). Student data come in many forms. They are often detailed and require time to examine and interpret. Providing teachers with a consistent, focused, professional learning community will afford teachers the opportunity to utilize data to inform and improve instruction to the benefit of our students.

Successful PLCs would also promote professional learning. Developing a professional culture within each PLC would be vital to this end. Grade level teams can share research, explore new instructional methods, and learn together. PLCs could promote new ideas and challenge old practices to propel improved teaching and learning.

If PLCs are going to amplify professional learning and improved instructional methods, teachers will also need to develop professional cultures that promote group

learning. Successful PLCs could serve as a catalyst for improved teaching and learning by way of shared competitive culture (Fullan, 2011). Fullan (2011) described team competitiveness as a mindset where each member of a team positively challenges and grows one another through modeling and exemplary performance. PLCs could promote a group climate which creates pressure for improved performance. Further, PLC culture could lift the performance of less skilled teachers by way of collaboration, shared learning, and team competitiveness (Fullan, 2011).

As the Associate Superintendent of Instruction and Personnel, seeing teachers thrive in their PLCs was vitally important to me, personally. Being able to create the environmental conditions that would foster teacher growth and collaboration speaks to my purpose as an administrator. Further, knowing that research supports PLCs as best practice emboldened my commitment to the PLC structure and fueled my drive for improving the educational environment for teachers and students. Creating a culture where teachers take ownership of their curricula and collaborate for teaching and learning was critical to the success of our teachers and our students. PLCs which function to analyze student data with the goal of impacting instruction and improving student growth are passions of mine, as well as that of the other district administrators and teachers within District ABC. Highly effective school cultures exist when teachers are flourishing collaboratively by sharing ideas, using data, and examining instruction (Farris-Berg, 2013). Effective school cultures also included teachers taking ownership of their curricula through development and deep understanding (Farris-Berg, 2013).

It is critically important to include the administration and the teaching staff in the implementation of this change plan. Considering that grade level teacher leaders are



partially responsible for the guidance and direction of their Grade Level Teams (GLT), their input and buy-in is vital to the success of our PLCs. Creating improved PLC cultures and competencies is highly adaptive work and requires the engagement of people to learn new behaviors and new professional languages that relate to common practice (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Teachers need to be able to assess our current reality to develop solutions to the current challenges within our PLC structure. Heifetz et al., (2009) refer to the importance of taking a “balcony view” of an issue when trying to properly assess the issues that relate to a problem. That is, to be able to look at problems from up above to be able to gauge all the moving parts, examine their intricacies, and be able to appropriately diagnose the problem.

For teachers to buy-in to the need for improved PLC cultures and competencies, they need to be a part of the adaptive work of diagnosing the challenges our grade level PLCs face. Teachers and administrators will be given a voice to share their view of the conditions of our PLCs. They were given an opportunity to assess our current reality and I seek their input in developing creative solutions to our conditional, cultural, and competency based challenges.

Developing effective PLC structures and cultures will improve teaching and learning. Teachers will have the opportunity to dive deep into curriculum development and derive a greater understanding of the standards. PLCs will also allow teachers to collaborate on instruction and teaching methods. Teachers can share ideas and discuss what is working in their classrooms. PLCs will allow teachers to develop a greater understanding of student data and server to inform instruction. Finally, successful PLCs

will serve to promote highly effective cultures of teacher autonomy, ownership, and collaboration (Farris-Berg, 2013).

## **Goals**

The goal of this change plan is to develop the PLC structures to improve the culture, competencies, and conditions that exist within the kindergarten through fifth grade PLCs in District ABC. District ABC is organized in grade level centers where all grade level teachers within the district operate in the same building. For example, all district kindergarten teachers are in the same building and the classrooms are near each other. Therefore, this change plan will seek to improve the culture, competencies, and conditions for those teachers organized by grade level within the same building.

Additionally, prior to the 2015-2016 School Year (SY) grade level PLCs did not exist within District ABC. As of the writing of this document, during the 2016-2017 SY, grade level PLCs, also known as Grade Level Teams (GLTs), were being developed in accordance with this change plan. Because this change plan was written over a year's time, the strategies and actions for improvement were implemented as the study proceeded.

During the 2016-2017 SY each newly developed grade level PLC had approximately five grade level teachers. The grade level PLCs also included, and were supported by, reading specialists and English Learner (EL) resource interventionists. The reading specialist and EL resource interventionists provided instructional supports to students who need additional support in literacy and English learning. The interventionists intermittently provided student data to the PLCs who utilized a suite of assessments to gauge student performance.

PLCs did not have a sustained regular meeting time that allowed them to significantly approach curriculum, instruction, assessment, and data analysis. Kindergarten and 1st grade teachers did not have a consistently scheduled weekly or monthly meeting time. Teachers in grades K-1 met when they had a similar plan time, however, this did not include the entire grade level team. Grades 2-5 had a 45-minute meeting, one time per week, however, the meetings were often consumed with logistical issues that detracted from curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Further, the newly developed grade level PLCs had various demeanors and cultures. Some PLCs worked more harmoniously together whereas others seemed to be more factioned. Some PLCs developed nice relationships with one another that may be viewed as friendly, jovial and warm, whereas other PLCs were seemingly less connected, collegial, and amiable. Some PLCs had strong buy-in and ownership and others lacked teamwork and autonomy.

These new PLCs were led by grade level team leaders who served on the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). The ILT is a committee whose purpose is to collaboratively drive curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The ILT meets approximately 5 times per school year. Teachers who serve on the ILT work collaboratively and professionally under my leadership to lead their grade level PLCs. The ILT worked to develop curricular templates, refine the 5 year curricular development cycle, develop common formative assessments, and identify professional learning needs. Each ILT member, who also serves as the grade level team leader, leads each grade level PLC.

PLC culture is the set of values and behaviors that exist within a group. Culture consists of the mindsets and the quality of the relationships that exist within our professional learning communities (Wagner et al., 2006). This change plan aims to improve PLC culture by providing structures that lead to a consistent and regular time together where meetings are focused, agenda driven and have clear norms and protocols for professional interaction and behaviors. Heifetz (2009) described this work as that of being adaptive, in that, it requires the ongoing participation of groups of people and leadership in practicing for improved outcomes. The culture that is formed within a PLC is highly sensitive and needs to be nourished through trustful relationships and consistent behavioral protocols that are routinely practiced.

Improving the competencies of our PLCs included focusing on the skills and knowledge of teachers and teacher leaders within the grade level PLCs (Wagner et al., 2006). Team leaders were given professional learning opportunities that focused on leadership and teambuilding to improve their competencies. PLCs also developed a set of protocols for designing curriculum, analyzing student data, coordinating assessments, and sharing instructional methods. Developing protocols and creating professional learning opportunities improved the effectiveness of the PLCs within District ABC and promoted student learning.

The conditions which support our PLCs needed to be improved to realize effectiveness within our PLCs. Conditions are the structures that support the work of PLCs such as schedules, time, monies, tools, spaces and resources (Wagner et al., 2006). In District ABC, this change plan aimed to make some significant changes to the conditions which support our PLCs. First, by seeking to secure monies for regular PLC

collaborations. Monies were used to secure substitute teachers to allow PLCs to meet for full and half day PLC meetings both during the school day and in the summer. These monies would allow teachers to work collaboratively on curriculum and assessment development. Giving teachers a healthy amount of compensated time together would allow them to build momentum in their work and allow them to accomplish more.

Also, this change plan sought to adjust the school calendar to create late start times once a month for grade level PLCs. This obviously presented challenges in the arena of transportation and child care. However, giving teachers a regular monthly PLC time would help to maintain curricular momentum, sustain meeting cultures, and supported regular data analysis. Additionally, this change plan would seek to create a regular schedule for weekly PLC meetings at each grade level. Working with building principals was imperative in order to realize a schedule that allowed for a common PLC time for all grade level teachers.

Additionally, this change plan would seek to furnish PLCs with tools to assist in fostering professional behaviors. Grade level team leaders worked with the ILT to develop tools to drive PLC meetings. These tools included developing a standard set of professional meeting norms that defined behaviors and roles. ILT members worked to create data meeting protocols to assist teachers in understanding how to analyze and make use of student data. Also, PLCs learned to utilize agendas to maintain focus and ensure planning and follow through on specific task and action items.

Improving the culture, competencies and conditions of our PLCs was vital to the success of our teachers and students in District ABC. Giving teachers the time to meet and collaborate on the topics of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student data

would allow them to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to improve teaching and learning. Highly effective organizational cultures are ones which foster collaborative working environments where teachers take ownership of curriculum and student outcomes (Farris-Berg, 2013). This change plan sought to improve the conditions of our PLCs for the purpose of improved culture and stronger teacher competencies.

### **Demographics**

District ABC is a small diverse suburban school district in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. The student population is approximately 64% Hispanic, 26% White, 6 % Asian and 1% Black. The district serves a large English Learner (EL) population of approximately 31%. Additionally, the district includes 57% students from low-income families, 14% of students are in need of special education services, and there is a 12% mobility rate.

As the data indicate, the population of District ABC is highly diverse. The student populations vary quite significantly. Many of our Hispanic students come from homes where Spanish is the primary language. There is a direct overlap between Hispanic students and low-income status. Generally, the students on free/reduced lunch are either Hispanic or Black and those students who are White or Asian tend to be of non-low socioeconomic status.

In terms of student academic performance data, approximately 28% of students were meeting or exceeding academic standards according to the statewide 2015-2016 PARCC (Partnership of Academic Readiness of College and Career) assessment. The assessment showed 30% of students meeting or exceeding expectations on the PARCC

English Language Arts (ELA) assessment, 25% meeting or exceeding academic expectations on the PARCC Math assessment.

There is a great disparity among the performance of our low-income, Hispanic students and our White, non-low-income students. In overall PARCC composite scores, White students meet or exceed standards at a rate of 44% whereas Hispanics meet or exceed standards at 14%. Additionally, and a striking similarity, low-income students meet or exceed standards at 14% and non-low-income meet or exceed standards at 44%.

The same disparity exists in both ELA and Math PARCC assessments. In PARCC ELA scores, 51% of White students meet or exceed standards in comparison to 16% of Hispanic Students. Further, 50% of non-low-income students meet or exceed standards in comparison to 16% of low-income students. The same trend exists in PARCC math assessments as well where 41% of White students meet or exceed expectations compared to 11% of Hispanic students. Forty-four percent of non-low-income students meet or exceed standards compared to 10% of low-income students.

The district has an average class size of 18:1 and a 15:1 teacher ratio. The per pupil expenditure is \$7,603.00 which is just slightly below state average. Students are in school for 176 days per school year and receive a minimum school day of 6.5 hours with focused instruction in ELA, math, science, social studies, art, music, physical education, and Spanish.

The district also has a popular Dual Language program. Students from both native English and native Spanish speaking backgrounds receive dual language educational services. Dual language students receive Spanish Language instruction in literacy, social studies, and science and receive instruction in English in ELA and Math.

The teaching staff is largely White at 85%, 1% Asian, 3 % Multiracial and 11% Hispanic. Fifty-seven percent of teachers have master's degrees and the district has an 83% teacher retention rate. A significant point is that while the student population is 67% Hispanic, the teacher population is 11% Hispanic. Many of our Hispanic teachers support the students in our Dual Language Program, those students in the Transitional Bilingual Education Program (TBE) and students in our Transitional Program of Instruction (TPI). During the 2016-17 School year, 50% of teachers in the Dual Language programs grade K-5 were of Hispanic ethnicity. Concurrently, 0% of our teachers in the regular education classrooms in grades K-5 were Hispanic.

District ABC has a strong Parent Teacher Organization and Bilingual Parent Advisory Council. The two organizations work closely to facilitate several community outreach events. Cultural events such as the "Dia De Los Muertos" celebration and "The Day of the Child" event tend to draw many attendees from the various ethnic communities. Although the community is diverse, the various communities generally support each other and work together for the benefit of all students.

District ABC, as the data indicate, is very diverse and there is a clear disparity among White and Hispanic students in terms of academic achievement. The academic disparity is a significant concern among parents, Board of Education (BOE) members, teachers and administrators. Improving our PLC culture, conditions, and competencies was a significant variable in closing the achievement gap and improving teaching and learning for all students.



## ASSESSING THE 4 Cs

### **Context**

In Section two of this change plan I elaborate on the state of my problem related to Wagner et al., (2006) four arenas of change, referred to as the Four Cs. Wagner et al., Four C's include context, culture, capacities and conditions. According to Wagner et al., (2006), these four arenas of change can be used to analyze an educational challenge or problem. I will begin by examining the *context* that exists within District ABC as it relates to improving PLC structures to impact professional practices.

Wagner et al., (2006) described the change arena of *context* as the social and historical factors that relate to a specific issue or challenge. In District ABC, there are many historical and social factors that have created poor communities of professional learning. For many years the notion of utilizing PLCs to improve professional practice was absent from the district's improvement plans. The development or utilization of PLCs for any of their potential purposes was not present within the district. Therefore, teachers often planned lessons and implemented curriculum in isolation.

The practice of working in isolation without any consistent or district adopted curricular scope and sequence was common place within District ABC. Teachers either planned by themselves or possibly with a colleague with whom they shared a positive relationship. There was no evidence of any PLC structure or team related organization. Teachers did not share a common planning time and teachers were left to themselves to develop individual classroom learning experiences and assessments. The isolated professional practice of teachers led to inconsistent curricular experiences for students and disallowed educators the benefits of shared practice and collaborative expertise.

District ABC was aware of its status as a struggling district; teachers, parents, administrators, and board members were aware that the district's students were underperforming. State assessments indicated that many students were not meeting state standards in ELA or Math. This awareness led to an increased focus on the need for school and district improvement.

Additionally, the district serves students of various backgrounds, and there is a clear bifurcation between students from low-income and non-low-income households. Assessment data clearly indicate that students who coming from low-income Hispanic households struggled to meet grade level proficiency standards. 2016 PARCC Assessment data indicated that only 14% of Hispanic students, and 14% of low-income students, met grade level expectations.

In sum, the district faces significant challenges that relate to a social and historical context of low performing students from low-income backgrounds. In addition, teachers have been operating in isolation without structures that lead to professional collaboration, consistent curricula, or shared practice. This context highlights the need to establish PLC structures that can lead to improved shared professional practices.

## **Culture**

District ABC is also faced with cultural challenges that have hindered collaboration and effective professional practices. Improved PLC structures could have a significant impact on the culture of the district and lead to a more collaborative approach to curriculum and instruction. Wagner et al., (2006) described the culture of an organization as the, "shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors related to students learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership. Culture

refers to the invisible but powerful meanings and mindsets held individually and collectively throughout the system” (Wagner et al., 2006, p.102).

In District ABC, prior to the 2015-2016 SY, the lack of a PLC structure led to a significant deficit in the ability to cooperate and function as a team. Grade level teams were not educated in the purpose and functions of professional learning communities; therefore, grade level teams did not operate at optimum effectiveness or efficiency. Teams did not have the professional learning structure or framework to guide team behaviors or norms. Further, grade level teams operated without a clear direction, goal, purpose, or expected outcome.

Grade level teams in District ABC also operated without clear behavioral protocols. Grade level team meetings were often informal and impromptu. Meetings were not consistently guided by planned or prescribed agendas. Without such structures, meetings would often drift in focus from topic to topic, leaving unclear purpose that served to be minimally productive.

Grade level teams were also unfamiliar with the notion of established norms. GLTs would operate with an unclear set of behavioral guidelines. Individuals would operate within teams absent of any prescribed constructs to guide behaviors. With a lack of behavioral norms, team agendas were not followed. Team roles were not established, and individuals were unsure of their authority within their teams. With teachers unclear of their individual roles, there was not a collective mindset as to how teams should operate.

Additionally, teams lacked operational protocols. The process and procedures that guided grade level team meetings was nonexistent. Teams did not have rituals for

solving student issues or guidelines for problem solving. Further, data protocols were not in place, leaving dialogue regarding student assessment data missing from team meetings. Teams, without protocols, operated without the guidance of tools for reflective practice. Teams did not intentionally share instructional practice or reflect on quality teaching together as a professional learning community.

The behavioral culture and collective mindsets of grade level teams was unintentional, lacking clear focus, purpose, and structural protocols to guide professional behaviors. With teams rendered impotent, teachers often operated in isolation, devoid of the collective expertise that collaboration can provide. The culture of isolation that existed led to inconsistent curriculum and instruction. Without consistent, focused, structured professional learning communities, teachers implemented individually designed curricular experiences without a consistent curricular scope and sequence. Grade level teachers did not follow a coherent and consistent curricular pathway, leading to unpredictable learning experiences for students. Further, without curricular roadmaps, students were receiving variable learning experiences without a common standard of rigor. Common assessments were missing from the curriculum, and learning experiences varied from classroom to classroom.

Additionally, with a lack of PLC structures, teachers were unable to discuss their assumptions about student learning expectations. With such assumptions left undiscussed, teachers did not have a shared definition of high expectations for all students. Teachers were left to create their own measures for grade level performance without a set of consistent expectations with consideration of race, ethnicity, gender or language background.

The PLC culture that existed within District ABC can only be described as non-collaborative. Teachers were friendly and did collaborate on a minimal level without formal PLC structures such as norms, agendas and behavioral protocols. Individual educators operated in isolation where they adhered to their individually designed curriculum, absent of any consistent grade level rigor, assessment and learning experiences.

### **Conditions**

District ABC also had some conditional limitations that have historically hindered effective professional learning communities. Wagner et al., (2006) described conditions as the time, space and resources that impact student learning. From a conditional standpoint, District ABC had four main deficits i.e., lack of a common grade level PLC planning time, limited time for curricular collaboration, lack of extended or full day PLC opportunities, and lack of funding dedicated to PLCs.

First, the organizational structure did not allow for a common plan time for teachers to work as PLCs. In terms of priority, the building level administrators had not organized their master schedules in a format that would allow for a common grade level PLC structure. Commonly, when PLCs are a priority, building principals organize the master schedule in a manner that allows for all grade level teachers to meet at one time. Common planning time is often used for PLC structures to plan, collaborate, and share best practice. In District ABC, however, the building level master schedules were not developed to prioritize a common PLC time.

Second, with limited time set aside for curricular work, teachers were unable to gather in PLCs to plan and create curricular roadmaps and common assessments.

Further, with insufficient time for PLCs to work together, grade level teams were able to share instructional strategies, examine best practice, or collaboratively assess student work. This limitation led to an absence in consistent grade level curricula and common assessments while promoting isolation among teachers.

Third, District ABC had not supported full day PLC collaboration. Grade level teams did not have the ability to work together for sustained periods of time to plan, organize, or create common grade level curricula. Without a time to focus on curricular development, the grade level teams were left fragmented to implement the common core standards individually without the benefit of sharing ideas, assessments or instructional strategies. Full day curricular collaboration could allow PLCs the time to plan and organize curricula in order to create consistent and measurable learning experiences for all students.

Finally, District ABC had not set aside monies for PLC work. The work of PLCs requires the need for monies. For teachers to have common PLC times during the school day, students need to have alternate experiences to allow teachers to meet collaboratively. This may mean a need for additional staff to provide those experiences while PLCs meet. Alternatively, if common PLC time is not able to be organized into the master schedule, teachers need to be paid for their additional time. Teachers would need to agree upon a common PLC time and then be paid to meet before or after school. Concurrently, to conduct sustained day-long PLC work, teachers need to receive substitute teachers to provide instruction. In the past, monies for substitute teachers had not been set aside for the work of PLCs. While allowing grade level teams to meet for day-long PLC work can

be an expensive endeavor, if PLC work is a priority and it is to be undertaken, simply put, it requires monies.

In terms of time, money and resources (Wagner et al.,2006), District ABC has neglected to prioritize PLCs. There has not been a significant focus in providing the regular and sustained time for PLCs to meet and carry out the business of curriculum and assessment development. Further, PLCs have not been a financial priority. Dedicated monies have not been set aside for common PLC times and day long PLC collaboration has not been funded. With such conditions being prevalent, it has led to an inconsistent curriculum, and an absence of common assessments and common instructional methodology.

### **Competencies**

Wagner et al., (2006) fourth arena of change is *competency*. Competencies refer to the skills and knowledge that impact a specific area of needed change. In the case of District ABC, there have been significant competency deficits that have hindered professional learning communities. PLCs were asked to develop common curricular roadmaps and assessments for creating consistent educational experiences for all students. The competencies necessary to carry out that work needed to be developed. Therefore, the competency deficits can be described as a lack of professional training in PLCs and their purposes, an absence of trained grade level team leaders, an unfamiliarity in utilizing tools and protocols to guide PLC behaviors, and deficits in understanding how to develop curricular roadmaps and common assessments.

From a foundational perspective, the grade level teams had not been trained or sought training in the overall functionality or purposes of PLCs. PLCs had been

nonexistent, and the grade level teams had not collaborated with a clear purpose. Grade level teams had not been versed in the many purposes that PLCs can serve. Drago-Severson (2009) described the many purposes that PLCs can serve, such as curriculum development, assessment creation, professional inquiry, professional learning, instructional leadership, and action research. District ABC teachers have not operated in PLCs with any of these purposes. With grade level PLCs being nonexistent, teacher collaboration was devoid of purpose, and set outcomes were not established.

Grade level teams lacked leadership as well. In addition to not having structures in place, the grade level teams lacked leadership to guide and set purpose for PLC work. Grade level teams operated informally and without clear leadership to provide expertise in guiding teams, setting expectations, and developing goals. Unstructured teams, without teacher leaders, had left the grade level teachers to operate in isolation without clear and consistent grade level curricular maps and common assessments.

Further, without leadership and training, grade level PLCs had not operated in accordance with structured behaviors. Grade level teachers did not operate under a prescribed set of behavioral norms to guide and frame their practices, therefore, the behaviors that result from developed norms were not evident in informal grade level team meetings. Grade level teams did not operate under prescribed protocols for problem solving; consequently, such teams were challenged to be able to effectively solve curricular and instructional challenges. In sum, the competencies that exist due to structured norms and behavioral protocols have not been captured by the teaching staff. The lack of structured grade level PLCs has left a competency vacuum in terms of operationalization.



Finally, one purpose for grade level PLCs in District ABC is the development of common curricula and assessment development. Teachers were not well versed and had not received training in curriculum development. Teachers did not have the competencies and requisite skills to begin the work of curriculum and assessment development. Grade level PLCs, without the appropriate curricular competencies, were not be able to appropriately manage the demands of curricular development.

District ABC had several competency deficits that relate to PLCs. In order for grade level PLCs to operate optimally, teams needed a significant infusion of knowledge and skills related to behavioral structures, leadership competencies and curriculum development.

In alignment with Wagner et al., (2006) four arenas of change, District ABC's current PLC context, culture, conditions and competencies leave significant room for improvement. The goal of enhancing the structures and resources dedicated to grade level PLCs greatly improved the professional practice of teachers. Further, with an increased focus on building the leadership capacity of grade level team leaders who are well versed in the work of curriculum development, teams were able to effectively develop common grade level curricula and assessments. I will be expanding further on the future goal of improving PLC structures for enhanced professional practice in Section Six: A Vision of Success.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Research Design Overview**

The challenge that District ABC faced was a lack of PLC structures and protocols which prevented teachers from collaborating for the purposes of curriculum, instruction, and assessment development. Lacking PLC structures creates significant barriers to best practice and had left teachers in isolation to plan and implement curriculum. The research design aimed at improving District ABC's PLC structures was qualitative. Utilizing a qualitative design approach allowed me to gather data that assist in gauging the current culture, context, conditions, and competencies related to the PLCs within the district. The qualitative design approach was useful in identifying what was happening, or had happened in the past, within and across the grade level PLCs (Patton, 2008). Utilizing a qualitative research method allowed for open-ended survey questions that provided information as to the current and past reality of PLCs. This approach enabled me to capture what the experiences had been for grade level teachers and their colleagues (Patton, 2008). Further, the qualitative data that was captured through the PLC Survey allowed me to give a voice to the members of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) and utilize their input for charting a path for change and improvement.

To be able to gather qualitative data related to the context, conditions, competencies, and culture of the current PLC structure, I created the PLC survey. The PLC Survey included open ended questions aimed at understanding the current PLC reality related to Wagner et al., (2006) four arenas of change. The 10 teachers who serve on the ILT were asked to participate in the survey because they had between three and twenty-four years of experience within the district and were able to provide historical

knowledge related to the state of the PLCs. Additionally, much like Patton (2008) describes, allowing the ILT members to participate in the survey allowed those members the ability to engage in the work of creating positive changes. Allowing ILT members to provide feedback not only in terms of the past and present status, but also in terms of future improvement, gave ILT members ownership and voice in the change process. By enabling the ILT members to provide suggestions for improvement, I was able to gather data that could lead to future positive changes. Consequently, since the suggestions for improvement and change came from the ILT members, there was a natural sense of buy-in and ownership which allowed us to foster an urgency for change.

In sum, the PLC survey was a qualitative survey designed to collect data related to the PLC structures within District ABC, utilizing Wagner et al., (2006) four arenas of change. The survey consisted of 13 open ended survey questions aimed at gauging the historical reality of the PLC structures and suggested strategies for improvement. The survey was taken by the members of the Instructional Leadership Team, whom I will describe in more depth as I describe the participants of the PLC survey.

### **Participants**

The teachers chosen to participate in the survey were the 10 members of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). The ILT is the district-wide committee whose stated goal is to foster a culture of shared ownership and collaboration, where teams make curricular decisions in the best interest of their students, leading to high-level outcomes for all students in District ABC. The committee, in large part, worked to set the course for curriculum and assessment development within the grade level PLCs. The ILT is comprised of 10 teacher members. The members include one grade level teacher

leader from each grade level, Kindergarten through 5th grade. The teacher leaders that serve grades 2 and 5 are also Dual Language Teachers. Also included on the ILT is one reading specialist, one special education teacher, one middle school representative and one advanced programs teacher. With the exception of one of the members, all of the teachers are tenured educators within the district.

ILT membership is open to all teachers and candidates are screened through an interview process with the building principals and me. ILT members who serve as grade level leaders are paid a stipend which was determined throughout the 2016-2017 SY. Figure 1 describes the demographics of the team, including, gender, level of education, years of service within the district, and years of service on the ILT. (Note: Teachers on the ILT during the 2016-2017 SY vary from 2015-2016 Program Evaluations due to changes in years of service and membership)

Figure 3.1 ILT Member Background

**Figure 1 ILT Member Background**

ILT Member	Gender	Highest Level of Education	Years of Service	Years on ILT
Kindergarten	Female	Master's Degree	13	2
1st Grade	Female	Master's Degree	23	2
2nd Grade - Dual Language	Female	Bachelor's Degree	9	1
3rd Grade	Female	Master's Degree	11	1
4th Grade	Female	Master's Degree	12	1
5th Grade - Dual Language	Male	Master's Degree	6	2
Reading Spec.	Female	Master's Degree	14	2

Sped. Teacher	Female	Master's Degree	9	2
Advanced Teacher	Female	Master's Degree	14	1
Middle School Rep.	Female	Master's Degree	12	2

The members of the ILT were chosen to take the PLC Survey because of their long-standing experience within the district, and their dedication to district improvement. Although the survey was presented to the team by me (Associate Superintendent), I created conditions to insure minimal risk and teachers felt empowered to respond to the survey freely, honestly, and without reservation of repercussion. In working with the ILT, I have built a strong sense of trust and openness within the team, and although I know they may not speak completely freely, they have in the past, readily shared their concerns openly when topics focus on school and district improvement. All ILT members are tenured teachers and have the confidence to voice their opinions as to how things can be improved, and they regularly speak frankly when discussing areas of needed enhancement or development. The PLC survey was aimed at school and district improvement; and I feel in reviewing the responses, teachers replied openly and honestly to the historical state of the PLC structures within the district and to how those structures can be improved. When preparing the PLC Survey, I had it approved by the Institutional Research Review Board at National Louis University, whose approval confirmed that this survey was minimal risk to participants and allowed teachers to respond freely and openly.

## **Data Collection Techniques**

The PLC Survey was a qualitative survey which included 13 open-ended survey questions. Utilizing this data gathering technique allowed me to understand the historical reality as it related to the PLC structures within the district. The approach allowed me to examine whether PLC structures existed or were absent within the district and to gather information as to the effectiveness of those structures. Further, it allowed me to understand the larger context, culture, and conditions related to the PLC structures. This technique also allowed for the ILT members to generate and propose future developmental ideas (Patton, 2008).

The data were collected in the form of an anonymous electronic survey which included 13 open-ended free response survey questions. Teachers were given up to two hours to respond in writing and their responses were captured electronically. I informed the ILT members of the survey and its purposes via email. Within my email, teachers received a Google Forms Survey link, the “Consent Form,” the “Statement of Purpose,” and the “Risk and Anonymity Statement.” The survey required that teachers click the “I Agree” button before continuing to take the survey, therefore, guaranteeing consent. The PLC Survey was administered in May 2017 to all teachers who participated in the May 2017 ILT Meeting. A total of 10 teachers responded to the survey.

The risks involved in the PLC Survey were minimal, no greater than encountered in daily life. The survey was anonymous. The benefits of the survey were that it allowed me and the ILT to gain insight into the history of the PLC structures, their perceived effectiveness, and proposals for improvement. Participation in this survey helped the District ABC create more effective PLC structures that will lead to consistent grade level

curricula, instruction and assessments which will serve to provide a more precise and measurable educational experience for all students in the district.

The PLC Survey was developed in accordance with Wagner et al., (2006) four arenas of change i.e., culture, context, competency, and conditions. According to Patton (2008), because the purpose of this research was for knowledge generation, the stakes were moderate to low and, therefore, minimal risk was involved. Additionally, I feel the respondents, despite the survey being presented by me in the role of Associate Superintendent of Instruction and Personnel, were able to provide responses that were honest, thoughtful and aimed at improvement. Because many of the questions within the PLC Survey focused on past practice, prior to the current administration, there was not a motivation to have to provide answers that could be perceived as serving my perceived preferences. In other words, I did not have a stake in their perceptions of past practice because I was not employed by the district at that time. The PLC Survey, therefore, allowed me to gather an honest historical perspective from the ILT members as to the PLC structures that existed and their perceived effectiveness. Other questions did, however, seek suggestions for future improvements and could be influenced by my roles within the district. When teachers were asked for future suggestions, they may have sought to provide answers that may confirm or acknowledge current efforts. Although the questions which asked for future suggestions may have allowed for potential biases, the responses were beneficial and did offer insight as to how future PLCs could be improved.

## **Data Analysis Techniques**

The PLC Survey was an open-ended survey and the responses were captured electronically using a Google Form. This allowed for each participant's response to be collected in an electronic chart. This format allowed for the natural organization of responses into a chart or template format which was then efficiently organized and sorted. This format served as an innate way to create a coding or scheme mechanism (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Once the survey was conducted, the data lay in a chart format in which each participant's response was categorized by the question posed. For example, all responses to Question #1 were captured on the same column of the chart, therefore, creating a coding scheme or manual (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The coding manual then allowed for the organization of similar text (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). With the data organized in a functional manner, I was able to review participant responses and find common themes, language, or phraseology. It was my job as a researcher to sort and organize the responses in a manner that would lead to emergent insights (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2007). As James et al., (2007) described, this approach leads to the emergence of larger understanding and themes. Figure 2 represents an example Coding Manual based on the collected data.



**Figure 2 Coding Manual Example**

Participant	Question 1 asked: <i>Prior to the 2015-2016 School Year, describe how grade level teachers collaborated to develop grade level curricula, assessments and provide consistent grade level curricular implementation.</i>
Participant 1 Response	R1: “It was inconsistent. Staff was usually alone...Teachers preferred to be alone.”
Participant 2 Response	R2: “Implementation was not always uniform....Teachers tended to go their own.”

Crabtree & Miller (1999) suggested simply using a highlighter as an elegant method of identifying common words and language. After printing the coding manual and highlighting the common language, I began “chunking” similar words, language, and phrases (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Chunking, according to Crabtree & Miller (1999), refers to the organization of text into similar contexts and themes. After such themes or similarities emerged, “crystallization” took place in which the text was organized to foster reportable connections and interpretations (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Finally, after the written responses were organized into the coding manual, highlighted to identify common language, and chunked to crystallize connections, I was able to analyze the data for a clearer understanding of the context, culture, competencies, and conditions that surrounded the PLC structures within District ABC.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I will examine the research related to the functions of professional learning communities (PLCs) within school systems, and the components necessary for their effectiveness. I will begin by grounding the professional learning community construct in organizational theory, after which, I will utilize the research to discuss the impact of PLCs and the necessary leadership, structures, and protocols that promote greater effectiveness.

### **Organizational Theory**

Although there may be no single, agreed-upon, definition, Organizational Theory relates to the systems intentionally developed and put in place to achieve organizational goals (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2016). Organizations are structured to meet systemic goals and include such natural elements as human relations, participants, and teams (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2016). Organizational Theory supposes that organizations operationalize divisions of labor, project goals, and coordinated outcomes (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2016). Organization Theory focuses on the power structure, the delineation of labor, planning, staffing, controlling, and resourcing (Eden & Spender, 1998). Organizations create an arrangement to perpetuate the accomplishment of a mutual purpose while allocating functions, synchronizing activities, and coordinating the forces of two or more people (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2016).

Professional Learning Communities relate to organizational theory in that they represent a coordinated organizational design for shared leadership, collaboration, shared instructional strategies, collective inquiry, and nurture adult development (Eaker & Keating, 2008; Drago-Severson, 2009; Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Dufour & Eaker, 2005;

Fullan, 2011, Shafritz, et al., 2016). The effectiveness of PLCs relies on organizational structures, conditions, and normative behaviors to achieve intended outcomes (Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Greeny, et al., 2013; Kanold, 2011). Those specific structures and organizational components that lead to PLC effectiveness will be further examined in this research review.

### **Impact of Professional Learning Communities**

Professional Learning Communities lead to teacher collaboration, shared ownership, common purposes, shared leadership, and decreased teacher isolation, which in turn, lead to school and student success (Drago-Severson, 2009, Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Eaker & Keating, 2008).

Effective schools are designed to promote and increase teacher collaboration while decreasing teacher isolation (Dufour & Eaker, 2005, Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2012). PLCs, as an organizational construct, are designed to lead to school improvement and increased teacher collaboration (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). Schools which are high performing and have high student impact have a dedicated focus aimed at teacher collaboration for improving instruction for all students (Kanold, 2011).

Teacher collaboration creates a successful organizational environment because it allows teachers to work together to improve student learning and create a viable and consistent curriculum (Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Farris-Berg, 2015). When teachers collaborate on curricular development, they can take ownership of the curriculum and gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge and skills students are required to obtain (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). Being able to work together allows teachers to be more focused and consistent in setting student educational outcomes (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). PLCs

ensure a focused attention on curriculum alignment and student outcomes, while enabling teachers to collectively identify student proficiency levels and expected learning outcomes (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). Collaboration provided by PLCs allows for curricular consistency when teachers can collectively establish what students should be taught, position the scope and sequence, aligned resource materials, and create student assessments (Dufour & Eaker, 2005).

Teacher collaboration is essential to improving instruction and creating a consistent and viable curriculum (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Dufour & Eaker, 2005). All teachers participating in the work of the PLC should be able to determine what is essential for students to learn (Dufour & Dufour, 2013). Teachers working together allow for the continuous and ongoing process of determining essential learning and developing common formative assessments to gauge the effectiveness of their curriculum and teaching practices to improve student learning (Dufour & Dufour, 2013). According to Dufour (2013), it is not enough to simply have teachers collaborate. Collaboration should be a means to a more focused and meaningful end. That end is that teachers have been able, through their PLC, to answer the four driving questions of the PLC. PLC's should be able to ask and answer: 1) What is it we want our students to learn? 2) How will we know if each student has learned it? 3) How will we respond when students do not learn it? 4) How will we extend and enrich the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency? (Dufour & Dufour, 2013, p. 119)

The organizational design of the PLC leads to collaboration, which is a powerful tool in that the collective sharing of practices can lead to the construction of new knowledge for teachers (Katz, Earl & Jaafar, 2009). The collaboration that the PLC

construct enables can foster quality interactions among educators in that they can share their educational philosophies and instructional practices leading to inquiry and debate. This dynamic interaction among educators leads to enhanced professional practice (Katz, et al., 2009). When teachers are involved in inquisitive dialogue, asking questions, and sharing ideas, it leads to the creation of new knowledge which may lead to new practices, teaching tactics, and a larger collective knowledge acquired by the PLC (Katz, et al., 2009). The driving force behind the improvement of schools is the PLC and its focus on collective inquiry, which drives the acquisition of new knowledge, new methods, and challenges the status quo (Dufour & Eaker, 2005).

The PLC not only allows for teacher collaboration, but it also decreases teacher isolation (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). Teaching, as a profession, is often viewed as a personal act (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). Dufour (2005) explains that teachers feel that they tend to barely know their colleagues and that they report a sense of dissatisfaction from their feelings of isolation. The best structure for decreasing such feelings of isolation is the professional learning community which allows teachers to share ideas, grow their level of expertise, foster discussion, develop a sense of ownership, allow for a safe place for instructional risk taking, and reinforce school culture and commitments to improvement (Dufour & Eaker, 2005).

Professional Learning Communities also lead to a sense of shared purpose (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). PLCs individually and collectively, foster a shared or common purpose for school improvement (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). Shared purpose within the school binds the mission of the school and concretizes the expectations for standards of practice (Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2012). Organizations that are increasingly successful

have a culture of shared purpose and commitments (Fullan, 2011). PLCs lead to the success of the organization in that they provide a foundational purpose and a drive toward common goals (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Katz et al., 2009). PLCs share in their purpose the collective effort to ensure that all members of the team are working towards ensuring that all student can learn (Eaker & Keating, 2008).

PLCs, in their design, foster a culture of shared and distributive leadership which is critically successful to their design (Katz et al, 2009). PLCs require a team leader (Kanold, 2011). Team leaders provide direction for the PLC by way of asking questions, encouraging participation, and seeking clarity of knowledge and understandings for the PLC (Kanold, 2011). Team leadership is vital to the team in that it fosters the clarification of shared learning, sets team agendas, and moves the PLC toward the shared goals of the school (Kanold, 2011). Katz (2009) explained that the shared leadership that a team leader provides fosters colleagues supporting colleagues; it supports participation of others within the group; and leadership reinforces the sharing of expertise among colleagues.

Leadership roles within the PLCs can include several tasks. Katz (2009) suggested that team leaders serve to encourage and motivate others. Team leaders drive the agenda setting process, they ensure that the team is monitored, and they ensure that the team is focused on the vision and priorities of the individual team and the larger school organization (Katz, et al.,2009). Team leadership broadens the base of overall leadership within the organization, which in turn builds the overall leadership capacity of the organization (Katz et al., 2009).

Drago-Severson (2009) explains that shared leadership furthers transformational learning for adults and supports the development of the human capacity to advance change. PLCs that embody team leadership foster the collective responsibility for student learning by way of building a shared purpose and vision (Drago-Severson, 2009). Supporting leadership roles within the PLC and school organization have been shown to lead to school improvement, teacher growth, increased teacher retention, and improved morale (Drago-Severson, 2009; Dufour & Eaker, 2000; Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2012). Drago-Severson (2009) argues that leadership roles foster adult learning and development in that leaders encourage the sharing of ideas and expertise, support collective responsibility, and ensure open communication among members. Leadership roles help develop school culture, increase organizational consciousness, and support increased decision-making authority (Drago-Severson, 2009).

According to Farris-Berg & Dirkswager (2012) high performing organizations foster a sense of ownership where the members of the organization take responsibility for decision making and welcome being accountable for student outcomes. PLCs, by the very nature of their structures, lead to a sense of ownership in that they provide for shared decision making and accountability (Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2012). PLCs support teacher ownership in that PLCs make important decisions that relate to student learning and outcomes, curriculum and assessment, professional norms of behavior, and their purpose, mission and goals (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Eaker & Keating, 2008; Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2012).

Because one of the primary functions of a PLC is curriculum development, PLCs provide teachers with a sense of ownership in the curricular creation process and enable

teachers to improve implementation (Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Kirk & McDonald, 2001). Giving teachers voice and ownership in the process of curricular development strengthens their participation in the group (Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Kirk & McDonald, 2001). Giving teachers an authoritative position in the work of PLCs and the development of their curriculum fosters their growth and expertise in content and implementation while supporting their ownership of the process (Kirk & McDonald, 2001).

PLCs are dynamic organizational constructs for school design and school improvement; and the research supports that PLCs lead to greater collaboration, teacher ownership, shared purpose and shared leadership, while decreasing teacher isolation (Drago-Severson, 2009, Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Eaker & Keating, 2008; Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2012).

### **Structures and Protocols for Effective Professional Learning Community**

Wagner (2006) concluded that schools perpetuate change by examining the four arenas of change i.e., context, culture, competencies and conditions. In this section, I will employ Wagner et al., (2006) framework to examine the research which supports the utilization of structures and protocols necessary for effective PLC implementation.

Wagner (2006) described conditions as the time, space, and resources. For Professional Learning Communities to thrive, they must be given the time to do so (DuFour & Dufour, 2013; Drago-Severson, 2009; Eaker & Keating, 2008). Dufour & Eaker (2005) explain that in order for PLCs to be effective, schools and districts must make it a priority that PLCs be given the opportunity to meet throughout the school year.



If school or district leadership desire to have effective PLCs, that harness the impact of collaboration, specific time for such work must be set aside (Dufour & Dufour, 2013).

There are several manners in which a school or district can set aside time for the work of PLCs. Dufour (2013) offers several recommendations as to how schools and districts may approach portioning time for PLCs:

1) The approach that is most often implemented is common plan time i.e., there is a common time embedded into the schedule for teachers of same grade or content areas to plan and collaborate together (Dufour & Dufour, 2013).

2) Dufour (2013) also suggests parallel scheduling in which specialists receive the same planning times as the grade level or content PLCs to ensure their participation in the work of the PLC.

3) Adjusting the start and end times of the school day can also support setting aside time for PLCs. Having one day a week where students start later or leave early allows for the functions of PLCs to be embedded into the contractual day (Dufour & Dufour, 2013).

4) Combining classes is another way to extract time from the school day. Teachers from one subject can take the students while teachers from the other are given time to collaborate (Dufour & Dufour, 2013).

5) Dufour (2013) also suggests banking time for teachers i.e., allowing the student instructional time to be extended for several days, therefore, banking instructional time to allow for the late arrival or early release of students to be used for PLC work.

The research is clear in that ensuring that time is set aside for PLC work is critical to creating the conditions for effective professional learning communities (Dufour & Dufour, 2013, Wagner et al.,2006).

Wagner (2006) explains that school and organizational change occurs through improvements in the culture and competencies of the organization. For PLCs to improve their effectiveness, from both a cultural and a competency perspective, they must employ several protocols; one effective protocol includes establishing their purpose (Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Eaker & Keating, 2008) PLCs require the establishment of a collective purpose to construct goals with the aim of student achievement and school improvement (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). By establishing a purpose, PLC participants are forced to answer fundamental questions relating to their purpose for existence, how they plan to do business together, and what their future outcomes are to be (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). Establishing a purpose allows PLCs to design a clear and consistent future together, one that is more clear, concise, and attractive (Dufour & Eaker, 2005).

Eaker & Keating (2008) explain that leaders of PLCs must be crystal clear about the purpose of the PLC and the expected outcomes the PLC should produce. PLCs are to establish a clear purpose in deciding what content should be taught in each course (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Eaker & Keating, 2008). Further, PLCs, at the root of their function, must establish common assessments to determine if students are achieving desired outcomes (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Eaker & Keating, 2008). PLCs are also purposed to create common learning targets i.e., what the students are expected to know, understand and do (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Eaker & Keating, 2008, Wiggins, & McTighe, 2005). PLCs also must establish in their purpose the action of sharing their

individual expertise and instructional practices for the intent of improving overall practice (Eaker & Keating, 2008).

Dufour & Dufour (2013) expand upon the necessity of establishing a PLC's purpose by identifying the four pillars of a PLC, i.e., mission, vision, values, and goals, which are designed to solidify a PLC's purpose. PLCs, in their effort to establish a collective purpose, must clarify their mission; they must establish the priorities that guide their decisions (Dufour & Dufour, 2013). PLCs also require a vision which focuses their specific actions toward the achievement of those priorities. A vision solidifies for a PLC the programs, strategies, and procedures that must be employed in order to reach their goals (Dufour & Dufour, 2013). PLCs also require a collective set of values to establish their purpose. Values are established by asking and answering the questions, such as: How do we behave as a PLC? How do we participate as individuals? What are we collectively committed to? How do we ensure all members of the team are sharing those commitments (Dufour & Dufour, 2013)? Finally, Dufour & Dufour (2013) state that goals must be established to gauge the PLCs effectiveness toward their priorities; i.e., teams need to be able to measure their progress and be able to determine their effectiveness. At the center of the PLC must be its established purpose (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Eaker & Keating, 2008).

Additionally, PLCs require other such protocols for effectiveness such as the setting of PLC norms and group commitments toward agreed upon behaviors (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Kanold, 2011). At the foundation of an organization is the way people interact and the procedural rules which guide their behaviors (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). When people begin to act collectively, using the same language, they work more

effectively, reduce miscommunications, and gain a sense of mutual understanding (Heifetz et al., 2009). Teams improve their effectiveness when they are committed to clarifying the rules, responsibilities, procedures and habits that govern the group (Dufour & Dufour, 2013). Organizations move from good to great when they have established norms for collective practices (Fullan, 2011). Establishing norms allows for PLCs to build a consensus as to how to plan to work together, address challenges, clarify responsibilities, and develop skills as a team (Drago- Severson, 2009; Dufour & Eaker, 2005).

Norms can be developed by employing protocols also known as structured or guided questions (Drago-Severson, 2009; Dufour & Eaker, 2005). PLCs can utilize protocols for establishing norms by simply asking one another: How will we operate together? What are the expectations for our team (Dufour & Eaker, 2005)? Dufour & Dufour (2013, p. 138) developed a specific protocol for establishing norms. See Figure 4.0

Figure 3 Establishing Norms

When Establishing Norms, Consider:	
<b>Time:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● When do we meet?</li> <li>● Will we set a start and ending time?</li> <li>● Will we start and end on time?</li> </ul>	<b>Listening:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How will we encourage listening?</li> <li>● How will we discourage interruptions?</li> </ul>
<b>Confidentiality:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Will meetings be open?</li> <li>● Will what we say in the meeting be held in confidence?</li> <li>● What can be said after the meeting?</li> </ul>	<b>Decision Making:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How will we make decisions?</li> <li>● Are we an advisory or decision making body?</li> <li>● Will we reach decisions by consensus?</li> <li>● How do we deal with conflict?</li> </ul>
<b>Participation:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How will we encourage everyone's participation?</li> <li>● Will we have an attendance policy?</li> </ul>	<b>Expectations:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What do we expect from members?</li> <li>● Are there requirements for participation?</li> </ul>

Dufour & Eaker (2005) also recommend establishing norms by having the members of a PLC discuss items related to articulating commitments, determining consensus, carrying workload, valuing individual voice, respecting other's perspectives, assuming others have good intentions, attendance policies, and commitments to shared decisions. The establishment and adherence to group norms within the PLC is essential to the effectiveness of the PLC (Dufour & Dufour, 2013).

Agenda setting and taking meeting minutes is developed out of creating normative behaviors. Agendas are a structure that effective PLCs utilize for making efficient use of time (Kanold, 2011). Agenda usage, as a normative behavior, ensures that individuals participate. Asking for individual input from PLC members when creating the agenda ensures such participation (Kanold, 2011). Agendas and minutes also

allow teams the ability to delegate responsibilities, capture decisions, and remember historical topics (Kanold, 2011). Additionally, agendas and their corresponding minutes allow PLCs to communicate to the organization at large to inform others (Kanold, 2011).

In sum, Drago-Severson (2009) explains that teaming is one of the most effective mechanisms for teacher growth and professional learning. PLCs, in their organizational structure, are a team. According to Drago-Severson (2009), successful teams must be given the time to meet during the school day and year to support the work of their specific tasks. They must also define their specific purpose and the outcomes of their collaboration (Drago-Severson, 2009). Additionally, teams must establish their norms by determining how they will work together, develop consensus, resolve conflict, and assess their work (Drago-Severson, 2009). Wagner (2009) explains that school improvement occurs by focusing on the culture, conditions and competencies of the organization; concurrently, the research supports that effective PLCs require time structures and the protocols for developing purpose and normative behavior, which align with Wagner et al., (2009) arenas of change.

### **Leadership for Effective Professional Learning Communities**

The PLC, as an organizational structure, requires effective leadership to be effective. Wagner (2009) would consider leadership to be a *competency* within the PLC, such as the knowledge and skills. Schools and districts that want to ensure the effectiveness of their PLCs require leadership from the district level, school level, and the teacher leader level (Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Eaker & Keating, 2008). PLCs are structures that lead to school improvement by way of shared commitments, collaboration, collective inquiry and a common purpose (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). For PLCs to be

effective to such ends, teachers need leadership to guide the training to be effective collaborators within the PLC (Dufour & Eaker, 2005). Leaders must be clear about the work of a PLC, how the teams will operate, and the expected outcomes of their work together (Eaker & Keating, 2008). Successful schools and districts provide leadership by clarifying the purpose for the work of the PLCs and the importance of the collaborative process as it relates to curriculum, assessment, student targets and instructional practice (Eaker & Keating, 2008).

Principals must ensure that teams are monitored for their effectiveness and that PLCs are supported in doing the correct work at a high level (Eaker & Keating, 2008). Kanold (2011) explained that the role of the leader is to create the conditions, structures, and culture, for high quality collaboration. School and district leaders need to clearly communicate detailed expectations for how teams should collaborate and what collaboration should look and sound like (Kanold, 2011). Leaders must provide support in the use of agendas and protocols for establishing norms and collective commitments (Kanold, 2011). Effective leaders must also support the members of the PLC by encouraging all members to contribute, ask questions, clarify action items, and ensure that members have collective understandings (Kanold, 2011).

Katz et al., (2009) explained that leadership is a key component of effective PLCs.

Leadership within the PLC serves to support collaboration and promote the learning and sharing of ideas (Katz et al., 2009). Katz et al. (2009) state that there are four main leadership roles within the PLC: First, PLC leaders are to encourage and motivate the members of the team. Second, PLC leaders serve to set and monitor the agenda ensuring

it is aligned to the goals and priorities set forth by the school or district. Third, PLC leaders are to support an environment that leads to the sharing of ideas and expertise. Finally, PLC leaders are to serve to build capacity and support within and for the PLC.

In sum, district, school, and teacher leadership are critical to the effectiveness of PLCs (Drago-Severson, 2009; Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Eaker & Keating, 2008; Kanold, 2011). Effective leadership promotes shared ownership and purpose, collaboration, and shared responsibility (Drago-Severson, 2009). PLC leadership ensures that teams are operating with intention by setting agendas, motivating individuals, and focusing on priorities (Katz et al. 2009).

Finally, in relation to Wagner et al., (2009) four arenas of change i.e., context, competencies, culture, and conditions, research demonstrates effective PLCs rely on the assurance of time, setting agendas, developing norms, creating a shared purpose, and supportive leadership.



## DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

This change plan is designed to improve the *context, competencies, culture, and conditions*, described by Wagner (2006), of the professional learning communities within District ABC. The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the history of District ABC as it relates to Wagner et al., (2006) four arenas of change, in order to inform future improvements within our PLCs. Within District ABC, there had been a history of neglect in terms of PLC development, resources, and leadership. To substantiate that perspective, I employed a qualitative research method entitled the PLC Survey to gauge the thoughts and opinions of the teachers within the school district.

As mentioned in the Methodology Section of this Change Plan, the PLC Survey consisted of 13 open ended survey questions that aimed at assessing the historical context, culture, conditions, and competencies of the PLCs within District ABC. The PLC Survey questions allowed for teachers, through written statements, to provide input into the historical reality of District ABC PLCs, as well as suggestions for improved practice. The PLC Survey participants were the 10 members of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) who were described in greater detail within the Methodology Section of this Change Plan.

### **PLC Survey Responses**

In this section, I analyze each survey question and provide an interpretation as to how the responses informed future implementation of this Change Plan.

The first question on the PLC survey focused on the historical context of the PLCs within district ABC. Wagner (2006) described context as the social and historical factors that relate to a specific issue or challenge. Question 1 asked: *Prior to the 2015-*

*2016 School Year, describe how grade level teachers collaborated to develop grade level curricula, assessments and provide consistent grade level curricular implementation.* It was clear from the responses that curricular collaboration and assessment development was inconsistent or nonexistent among grade level teams. Six of ten respondents provided a contextual understanding, indicating that curricular collaboration could only be described as lacking, inconsistent, and isolated.

Examples of Respondent's (R) statements include:

- Respondent 1: "This was not done."
- R2: "It was inconsistent. Staff was usually alone...Teachers preferred to be alone."
- R4: "Implementation was not always uniform.... Teachers tended to go their own way. There was no discussion of common assessments."
- R5: "These conversations were relatively unspecific in nature and rarely resulted in any firm collaboration."
- R6: "Groups did not have the same direction"
- R7: "teams did not have collaborative times incorporated throughout the day. Honestly, there was no grade level consistency or common assessments ever created."
- R10: "We didn't have a lot of time to collaborate with our teams. Grade level teams did not have time to meet during the day and collaborate."

Questions 2-5 focused on the historical cultural reality of the District ABC PLCs. Culture, according to Wagner (2006) refers to the, "shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors related to students learning, teachers and teaching,

instructional leadership. Culture refers to the invisible but powerful meanings and mindsets held individually and collectively throughout the system” (Wagner et al.,2006, p.102). Question 2 asked: *From your perspective, prior to the 2015-2016 school year, what had been your grade level’s experience with working collaboratively in grade level PLCs/Teams?* It was clear that from eight of the ten ILT responses that there was a lack of a PLC structure, and teams were not experienced in working as teams as PLCs.

Examples of Respondent’s statements include:

- R1: “Team meetings were just for housekeeping”
- R2: “It was inconsistent. PLCs were discussed but not followed through.”
- R3: “This did not happen. We did not have time.”
- R4: “The agendas for these meetings were usually focused on nuts and bolts rather than student data.”
- R5: “We did not have any PLC teams.”

Question 3, also related to the historical culture, stated: *From your perspective, prior to the 2015-2016 school year, describe how team norms, agendas, or behavioral protocols guided your team interactions.* Based on ten of ten responses, it was apparent that norms, agendas, and behavioral protocols were not used to guide team interactions.

Examples of Respondent’s statements include:

- R6: “There were none.”
- R8: “We did not have them.”
- R9: “We did not have norms, agendas, or behavioral protocols.”

Question 4, also related to PLC culture, asked: *From your perspective, and in your professional opinion, how can District ABC utilize grade level PLCs/Teams to*

*prevent teacher isolation?* The theme of the responses by seven of ten of the ILT members was that PLCs provide teachers with an opportunity to collaborate, have a voice and take ownership in decision making.

Examples of Respondent's statements include:

- R1: "This gives us time to interact and review what we are doing so that all teachers are able to feel supported."
- R2: "PLCs make it so that all members of the team are included, have a say, and give people ownership in what is being discussed."
- R3: "make decisions as a team..."
- R4: "PLCs would help teachers feel like they have a voice..."
- R7: "PLCs provide the very needed time to have discussions with team members and include everyone in the decision-making process."
- R10: "Working in PLCs provides teachers with a much-needed voice to participate in various topics."

It should be noted that at the time this survey was distributed, the development of District ABC PLCs was already underway. It is also important to note that because I am the Associate Superintendent, and I asked the teachers to complete this survey, they may have been inclined to feel greater pressure than from their previous responses to answer this question in a positive manner. Because the previous questions related to the past, when I was not employed with the district, they may have felt less pressure to provide a favorable response.

Questions 5, 7, 11, 12 and 13, related to input into the future of District ABCs PLCs. Therefore, respondents may have felt some pressure to respond in a way that could

be perceived as favorable to me and my efforts. Despite the potential pressure, however, the respondent feedback is useful for future planning and considerations.

Question 5 concluded the cultural PLC questions by asking for input for improvements. The question stated: *How can District ABC improve the Culture (i.e. shared beliefs, values, mindsets and behaviors) of PLCs?* The respondents did not provide one clear theme for improvement but did provide suggestions related to continuing our efforts and recognizing our need for growth.

The following statements touch upon continuing our efforts:

- R2: “I think we are on our way! I have seen tremendous growth in these areas...”
- R3: “Continue to give us time for collaboration.”
- R4: “I think we need to have to continue to implement the meeting norms...”
- R6: “Continue open, honest communication of expectations as well as encouragement.”

Within the responses to question 5, members also touched upon other areas of growth such as leadership and reflection:

- R10: “Appointing a positive team leader would be important to the culture of the meeting.”
- R7: “Establishing positive grade level team leaders who respect every member of their team is incredibly important.”
- R2: “...I feel if we continue to reflect and reestablish areas of growth we will be even better!”

In sum, from a historical, contextual, and cultural standpoint, respondents provided input that confirms that PLCs have been absent within the district. PLC structures were not in place, and norms, agendas, and protocols were not a part of the daily life of PLCs. Further, the respondents provided insight into the benefits of PLCs in that they provide teachers an opportunity to collaborate, have a voice, and take ownership in decision making.

Questions 6-8 of the PLC Survey aimed at gathering the historical understanding of the *conditions* of the PLCs within District ABC. Wagner (2006) described *conditions* as the time, space and resources that impact student learning. Question 6 asked: *Prior to 2015- 2016 School Year, how much time was your grade level team given to work on curriculum? Describe your ability to meet weekly, monthly or yearly?* Based upon seven of the ten responses of the ILT members, grade level PLCs were not consistently given time to meet for curricular purposes, and when curricular meetings did take place, not everyone on the grade level team was informed of the outcomes.

Examples of Respondent's statements include:

- R2: "We never met if we didn't absolutely have to."
- R5: "There were district wide curricular committees, but the information was not dispelled to the teams."
- R7: "We were not given time. Committees were formed but there were only representatives from grade levels and everyone was never in the loop"
- R8: "The entire team was never given time to meet..."

- R10: “There were curriculum meetings for designated team members, but it was not useful to teams.”

Question 7 sought input from ILT members by gauging their need for time in order to develop and implement curricula. Question 7 asked: *In the future, in order for grade level teams to be effective in developing and implementing curricula what time resources are needed i.e. how often do you need to meet? Weekly, Monthly, Yearly?* ILT members responded inconsistently to this question, not giving a definitive parameter for time needs. Some respondents mentioned they appreciate weekly plan time, however, some mentioned that weekly was not enough. Others stated that they preferred 3-4 full days, while others preferred half days per month. Question 7 does not provide for a clear direction in terms of actual time allocation, however, responses validate the need for regular time for curricular development.

Examples of Respondent’s statements include:

- R1: “Weekly for at least 30 minutes.”
- R4: “I think 3-4 times per year is sufficient to continue our curricular development”
- R5: “½ Day each month to discuss how the curriculum has been working and to project going forward.”
- R7: “Weekly meetings are helpful as well as one or two days per trimester.”
- R9: “It would be nice for the team to meet monthly or every other month perhaps for a half day to go over any adjustments we may need to make.

Question 8 continued to gauge the historical conditions of PLCs by asking: *Prior to 2015-2016 SY describe how your grade level teams commonly planned.* Based on ten of ten participant responses, it was abundantly evident that grade level teams did not have a regularly scheduled, designated plan time with a clear purpose.

Examples of Respondent's statements include:

- R1: "Cliques did occur but the whole team did not plan"
- R2: "On an as needed basis. Usually it was a quick meeting to see where we were at and what needed to be done. It was not formal."
- R3: "It did not happen."
- R5: "They didn't"
- R6: "They were not planned."
- R7: "We did not plan as a team"
- R8: "We did not."
- R10: "We didn't. Everyone did their own thing!"

In sum, from a conditional standpoint, the respondents provided clear statements that confirmed that PLCs were not previously given time to meet consistently. Teams did not formally plan together, and when people did meet, it was informal without clear structure or purpose. Further, respondents validated the need for common plan time and made several recommendations related to meeting weekly, monthly and on a regular basis for full day curricular collaboration.

Questions 9-13 aimed at gauging the historical perspective of the PLC competencies within District ABC. Wagner (2006) defined *competency* as the skills and knowledge that impact a specific area of needed change. Historically, as the respondents



have mentioned, there were not deliberate PLC cultures or consistent conditions. Therefore, as respondents will note, the competencies for conducting effective PLCs were not embedded into the daily life of the district.

Question 9 asked: *Prior to 2015-2016 SY, describe the district's focus on professional development in the area of Professional Learning Communities?* To this question, five of ten respondents provide a definitive answer in that professional development was not focused on PLCs.

Examples of Respondent's statements include:

- R1: "Groups were trained but time was not given to put this in place."
- R3: "This was not a focus."
- R4: "I do not recall this being a main focus of PD."
- R5: "There was none that I am aware of."
- R10: "We didn't have much time for professional learning communities.

There were communities that changed representatives often. This was difficult for the continuity of what we were working on. As a result, what was worked on was re-created time and time again."

Question 10 sought to gauge how grade level leadership was enacted. The question stated: *Prior to 2015-2016 SY, describe how grade level team leadership was implemented?* Respondents provide a relatively clear picture in that many describe how leaders were self-appointed or; people took leadership roles informally, based on experience and/or simple desire to do so. Again, it is reasonable to state, based on eight of the ten responses, that PLC leadership was not clearly defined, and roles and responsibilities were not assigned.

Examples of Respondent's statements include:

- R1: "People took these roles, but it was due to their personality not job title."
- R4: "There has always been "Team Leaders" but this role has not always been clearly defined"
- R5: "Teachers self-appoint themselves as team leaders."
- R6: "There was no grade level leadership."
- R7: "Staff members self-appointed themselves as team leaders."
- R8: "Sometimes there was none, occasionally someone offered to take the lead on things."
- R9: "There was no leadership. Depending on the team, some were self-appointed, others just worked together."

Question 11 sought to gauge the Grade Level Teacher Leaders thoughts and opinions as to how current PLC leadership has impacted District ABC in the 16-17 SY. The question stated: *How do you feel grade level leadership impacts grade level PLCs/Teams?* Respondents provided very positive feedback to this question by stating that PLC leadership was providing focus and direction to grade level team meetings. Leaders were ensuring the use of protocols and agendas and teams were operating more cohesively now than in the past.

Examples of Respondent's statements include:

- R1: "I think it helps give focus to meetings"

- R2: “This has improved our team this year!” Having protocols, agendas out ahead of time, collaboration and having all team members buy-in. We have truly grown as a team!”
- R3: “I feel they help the team stay more focused, we are also trained on how to be better leaders...”
- R5: “I think the leadership within the team makes a huge difference in how the team functions and makes positive progress.”
- R6: “The communication between ILT and grade levels has been amazing with grade level leadership. That has made an impact on teachers understanding the big picture.”
- R7: “I feel that it gives teams a purpose and direction. Team leaders provide discussion points and keep things moving forward.”
- R8: “I feel it has brought our team together with curriculum.”
- R9: “It is very important in order to have cohesiveness and organization and has made a positive impact.”
- R10: “I think it determines the whole feel and environment of the team.”

Question 12 sought input on how District ABC could support grade level teacher leaders. The questions asked: *How can the district support grade level team leaders?* From ten of ten responses, it is clear that the ILT members were in support of the new leadership structure within the PLCs during the 2016-17 SY. ILT members wanted to continue the work being done and also want to ensure that principals and administration stay involved in grade level PLCs.

Examples of Respondent’s statements include:

- R1: “They have given a great deal of support MUCH more than in the past.”
- R2: “Keep doing what we are doing!”
- R3: “Continue to give us time to collaborate.”
- R4: “I think current practices are sufficient.”
- R5: “Team leaders definitely need to be supported... with training”
- R6: “Attending grade level team meetings as observers is important.”
- R7: “It is also helpful for the principals to meet with the team leaders”
- R8: “Having administrators present at team meetings and being involved in conversations...”
- R9: “I think we have a great amount of support this year.”
- R10: “Continue to work as an ILT and to meet monthly with Principals...”

The final question of the PLC Survey focused on gaining an understanding of the ILT teacher’s historical experience in developing curricular roadmaps and seeking input for future professional development and improvements. Question 13 asked: *Prior to 2015-2016 SY describe your training in developing curricular roadmaps. What training do you feel would be beneficial for future curricular roadmap development?*

Question 13 is in two parts, each of which requires specific attention. The first part of the question looked at past curricular roadmap training. Respondents offered several responses that give slight, but not definitive, clarity of past practice. From the statements provided, it can be gleaned, that committees did the work of curricular road mapping, but that the format of the roadmaps were not usable or practical. Also

mentioned was that the committees created KUDs (Know-Understand-Do), but they were not trained in how to create or utilize them.

Examples of Respondent's statements include:

- R1: "Groups were given training, but it was not shared"
- R2: "The Superintendent... had us create a document that no one understood or used. There was not much training"
- R5: "We spent a lot of time writing... KUD statements that we were not trained on how to write."
- R6: "There was no clear direction because even the consultant did not direct each grade level in the same way or direction."
- R7: "We did not have formal training in the creation of curricular roadmaps."
- R9: "There was no training. I was lost."
- R10: "I was on the math committee, but we were not given time to collaborate with our teams and what we did was thrown out and we were asked to repeat the process over and over again."

The second part of question 13 asked ILT teachers about what training they felt would be beneficial to creating curricular roadmaps. The second part of the question was scarcely answered. Only a few teachers responded to this portion of the question. It can be gathered from the few responses that there is a need for continued time, professional development and collaboration in the curricular road mapping process.

Respondents stated:

- R7: "Training on roadmap design would be helpful."

- R8: “I think it is important for specialists to be involved in roadmap development as well.”
- R9: “Just continuing to support the teachers during grade level curricular days like we have had these past two years would be great.”
- R10: “I think what we are doing right now is very helpful. I think it is important to create enough time for teams to meet. I also think we need to have the continued support from administration.”

In sum, and in accordance with Wagner et al., (2006) four arenas of change, the PLC Survey provided historical understanding of the context, conditions, culture and competencies of the PLCs within District ABC. Based on the responses of the ILT members, prior to the 2015-16 SY, PLCs lacked structures such a regular meeting times, common plan times, or curricular collaboration meetings. Prior to the 2015-16 SY, PLCs did not follow consistent behavioral protocols or utilize agendas. Grade level curricular collaboration was inconsistent, and participation varied with some teachers participating, while others were not. Leadership within the PLC structure was inconsistent, and a clear purpose for PLCs had not been established or defined for teachers or informal teacher leaders. Further, professional development was not provided to enhance the understanding or operationalization of PLCs within the district. District PLCs were not intertwined, and communication from one group or committee was not disseminated to others throughout the district. Additionally, PLCs were not consistently trained in how to create curricular roadmaps and clear purpose and direction was not provided for curricular teams or committees.

The respondents did provide feedback and recommendations for how to improve or maintain the improvements begun within the District ABC PLCs. Teachers mentioned that the PLCs that have begun in District ABC in the 2016-17 SY, as a result of this change plan, have allowed teachers to provide input into the curricular process thereby taking ownership of the curriculum. Also, teachers felt that they were now a greater part of the curricular decision-making process and had a more shared understanding of the curricular process and their purpose within the team. ILT members also recommend greater involvement by the building principals to support grade level leaders in direction, collaboration, and decision making. ILT members also recommended collaboration time to further the work of their PLCs. Although the time allotment recommendations were inconsistent the ILT members did reinforce the need.

The PLC Survey, because it was an open-ended electronic survey, did not leave room for follow up. For example, when questions were asked about needed collaboration time, responses were inconsistent. With such inconsistent responses, it is difficult to get a clear understanding of the cultural or conditional needs of the ILT members. In the future, I would share the contents of the survey with the ILT to gain consensus and clarity around some of the questions within the PLC Survey, and would seek additional information and recommendations.

## A VISION OF SUCCESS

In this section I will bridge the *Assessing the 4 C's* Section of this change plan to a *Vision of Success*. This section is designed to provide a clear vision of the future of the Professional Learning Communities within District ABC related to Wagner et al., (2006) four arenas of change i.e., context, culture, conditions and competencies. I will begin, as I did in the *Assessing the 4 C's* Section with *Context*.

### **Context**

Wagner (2006) described the change arena of *context* as the social and historical factors that relate to a specific issue or challenge. In the past, there were several social factors that led to the inconsistent operationalization of district PLCs and the lack of teacher collaboration. In the future, however, the vision is to operationalize PLCs in such a way that the past social and historical factors no longer impact their effectiveness.

In the future, PLCs would serve to significantly alter normative behaviors within District ABC by creating an overall culture of collaboration, cooperation, shared practice, and shared leadership. The social conditions that would permeate district PLCs would improve teacher collaboration and cooperation. Grade Level PLCs would include well equipped grade level teacher leaders who are prepared to lead a team and foster team participation, collaboration, and cooperation. Team leaders would impact the social factors by adhering to prescribed protocols and norms that would lead to intentional behaviors that promote inclusion and shared decision making.

In the past, teachers would often work in isolation and implement curricula according to their own design and pacing. In the future, teachers would be collaborating on grade level curricula, developing common assessments, and sharing instructional



ideas. Teachers would work in cooperation on a regular basis, under collaborative social norms, to ensure that curricula were consistent and that all students were receiving a viable and consistent curricular experience tied together by common assessments.

The future of PLCs within District ABC would, if realized contextually, lead to an entirely new social system that would be a driving force for change and improvement. All PLCs within the district would be effective due to cultural and structural changes that would lead to PLCs being able to regularly collaborate under effective social conditions that lead to viable curricular experiences for all students.

## **Culture**

Wagner (2006) described the culture of an organization as the, “shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors related to students learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership. Culture refers to the invisible but powerful meanings and mindsets held individually and collectively throughout the system” (Wagner et al.,2006, p.102).

Due to structural and organizational deficits in the past there was not a clear culture within professional learning communities. Consistent purposes, structures, norms, protocols, and expectations for PLCs were missing within the culture of District ABC. In the future District PLCs would be culturally rich with shared purpose, collaborative spirit, shared ownership of curricula, high expectations for students, consistent use of protocols and grounded in normative professional behaviors.

Future PLCs would have a clear understanding of their purpose and be charged with creating, reviewing and refining their curricula. As Dufour and Dufour (2013) mention, teachers will know why their PLCs exist. Our PLCs will be able to answer the

four basic questions of PLCs: What do we want students to learn? How will we know they learned it? How will we respond when some students have not learned it? How will we extend to enrich when students have demonstrated proficiency? (Dufour & Dufour, 2013). With a clear sense of purpose related to student learning, teachers will be able to collaborate knowing they have a goal in mind i.e., what we expect students to be learning.

Having a clear purpose is essential in driving PLC culture; additionally, having behavioral protocols is also imperative in implementing effective PLCs. In the past regular use of agendas and protocols was absent within daily life of PLCs. In the future, however, PLCs will be accustomed to utilizing agendas and being pre-planned for PLCs meetings. Team culture will be such that agendas will be prepared in advance and they will guide the PLC meeting, ensuring focused behaviors. Teams will not only use agendas to guide their work, but they will also make data meeting protocols, reflection protocols, commitment protocols, and renewal protocols, part of their normative cultural behaviors. I will elaborate more on these protocols in the *Strategies and Actions for Change* section of this change plan.

With purpose and protocols guiding the future work of the PLCs, District ABC teams will also be charged with developing norms. Norms are essential to the cultural health of PLCs and are a foundational component of their effectiveness. (Drago-Severson, 2009; Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Kanold, 2011). In the future, teams will be charged with developing their group norms to ensure group commitments, participation and consistent behaviors and culture.

With a clearer sense of purpose, consistent use of agendas and protocols, and established norms of behavior, PLCs within District ABC will share a more collective mindset that leads to greater cultural integrity. Collectively, the district will have a clearer cultural understanding of the purpose of collaboration, a focus on curricular outcomes, and will have developed professional norms ensuring consistent behaviors. Teams will understand their work more thoroughly and be able to openly share ideas, develop rigorous curriculum and ensure teachers do not operate in isolation.

### **Conditions**

Wagner (2006) describes conditions as the time, space, and resources that impact student learning. Historically, District ABC had not made the structural investments that support PLCs in terms of time, space, and resources. With a lack of PLC investment in terms of time and monies, PLCs were rendered inconsistent and ineffective. In the future, however, the goal will be to make significant investments to improve the conditions of the professional learning communities within District ABC.

First, for PLCs to thrive they need time (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Eaker & Keating, 2008). Our future goal is to have regular PLCs meetings on a weekly, monthly, and yearly basis. Regular meetings will help to ensure consistent communication, the establishment of regular routines, the adherence to professional norms, consistent participation, the development and review of curriculum, and the regular use of data.

To ensure weekly PLC collaboration time, building level administrators will build their master schedules to accommodate weekly grade level common plan times. With teams being able to meet weekly they will be able to have focused discussions on the week's curricular goals and expected student outcomes.

In addition to weekly meetings, the future will bring monthly grade level PLC collaborations that will be extended to 90 minutes and require a late start for students. Once a month grade level PLCs will meet in the morning for an extended 90-minute collaboration meeting that will allow teachers to delve more deeply into curricular roadmaps, common assessments, data analysis, and student interventions.

Finally, in terms of time, we will schedule 6 days of curricular development each school year. Each grade level team will be able to meet for 2 extended days during the fall, spring and summer semesters. This will allow teachers to develop yearlong unit plans in ELA, Math, Social Studies, and Science. Curriculum development days will include developing curricular scope and sequence, student learning targets, and common assessments. This will also allow teachers to develop rubrics to gauge student outcomes and plan interventions for students who are proficient and for those who need additional support.

To support such conditional changes, several financial and structural changes must take place. First, to create weekly plan times, principals must allocate resources to allow grade level teams to meet. This will require the use of teacher's assistants and instructional specialists to provide alternative learning experiences, once a week, to grade level students allowing those grade level teachers to meet. Additionally, to have monthly 90 minute late starts to accommodate for extended planning, the District must adjust the yearly calendar; develop a communication plan to parents, community, and the board of education; and plan for morning care for students who will be arriving at the regular school hours. Finally, for PLCs to have 6 full curricular collaboration days for each grade level team, monies must be set aside for substitute teachers and summer stipends. Each

of the above-mentioned changes will be explained in greater detail in the *Strategies and Action for Change* section.

### **Competencies**

Wagner et al., (2006) fourth arena of change is *competency*. Competencies refer to the skills and knowledge that impact a specific area of needed change. Historically, there has been a skill deficit in the district, related to PLCs. Professional Learning Communities did not have the requisite skill set leading to effective PLC behaviors. Teams were not trained in the use of agendas or the taking of minutes to guide team meetings. PLCs were not versed in the purposes of PLC work, causing meetings to be unfocused and ineffective. Additionally, PLCs lacked leadership; teams operated informally without clear guidance by a trained teacher leader. Further, teams were not trained in the use of protocols. Teams did not use guiding questions to analyze data, solve problems, build team norms, or establish purpose.

The future of PLCs within District ABC will include the development of competencies that will lead to more effective professional practice and focused outcomes. First, the future will include trained PLCs leaders. Team leaders will need the professional development to know and understand how to develop team norms, agendas and utilize protocols. Team leaders will guide teams by being well prepared and having agendas available to the grade level teams in advance. Agendas will guide discussion and keep teams focused on the goals and objectives of the meeting.

Leaders will also receive training in the use of protocols to better guide teachers in data analysis and norm development. In establishing effective team culture and behaviors, grade level PLC leaders will need to be trained in how to utilize protocols to

establish team norms. Team leaders will guide the development of collectively established norms and commitments. Individual team members will provide input as to how the team will operate, make decisions, and build consensus. This process will require training and modeling to be effective.

Further, when analyzing data, solving problems, or engaging in instructional inquiry, leaders must utilize protocols to guide questioning toward desired outcomes. Leaders will need to be provided with specific professional learning that models successful data meetings and problem solving. Leaders will be given training in how to approach problem solving as a team and inquiry based professional learning. Such techniques will be discussed in greater detail in the *Strategies and Actions for Change* section.

Grade Level PLCs will also need significant training and development in creating curricular roadmaps, student learning targets, and common assessments. Grade Level Leaders and PLC members will need professional training in the development of a curricular scope and sequence. Teachers will be trained in the Understanding by Design approach from Wiggins & McTighe (2005) to be able to better create curricular roadmaps, common assessments and learning targets.

In sum, when this change plan is realized, there will be significant improvements in the context, culture, conditions and competencies that exist within District ABC. The weekly, monthly and yearly calendar will include time set aside for common plan time, curricular collaboration and curricular development. PLCs will have developed socially and culturally; that is, teams will operate under the guidance of specific norms of behavior and commitments to one another. Further, PLCs will be able to solve problems,

analyze data, and engage in professional inquiry by knowing how to establish and utilize protocols. The future of PLCs within District ABC will be guided by a PLC leader that is trained in establishing team culture, utilizing agendas, employing protocols, and leading curriculum development. Finally, all grade level PLC members will be knowledgeable in the development of a curricular scope and sequence with student learning targets that are tied to common assessments ensuring a viable and consistent curriculum for all students within District ABC. With such a change plan realized, grade level PLCs will operate more effectively by way of sound collaborative practice, teacher ownership, team autonomy and a shared purpose, all leading to more engaged teachers and teams.

#### STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS FOR CHANGE

In this section, I will bridge Section Two: Assessing the 4 C’s to Section Six: A Vision of Success, by providing strategies and actions that will lead to improved PLC culture, context, competencies, and conditions in accordance with Wagner et al., (2006) arenas of change. Figure 4 provides an overview of the strategies and actions that will be explored further within this section.

*Figure 4 Strategies and Actions*

Strategies	Actions
Develop PLC behavioral structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) will employ and develop PLC:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Meeting Norms &amp; Commitments</li> <li>○ Agendas Usage</li> <li>○ Data Analysis Protocols</li> <li>○ Critical Friends Protocols</li> <li>○ Reflection and Renewal Protocol</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Develop structures that allow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop a master schedules that allows for common</li> </ul>

for consistent collaboration	<p>grade level planning time at least once a week</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Create a school calendar to allow for monthly late start times to implement PLCs</li> <li>● PLC collaboration dates focused on curriculum and instruction</li> </ul>
Developing Leadership Capacity of Grade Level Teacher Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Grade level teacher leaders will receive professional learning opportunities focused on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Meeting Norms &amp; Commitments</li> <li>○ Agendas Usage</li> <li>○ Data Analysis Protocols</li> <li>○ Critical Friends Protocols</li> <li>○ Reflection and Renewal Protocol</li> <li>○ Curriculum and Assessment Development through Wiggins &amp; McTighe (2005) Understanding by Design</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Before I continue in this section, I would like to provide some context for our progress in District ABC in implementing this change plan. Writing this change plan took the duration of the 2016-2017 School Year. During that time, I have worked closely with the District ABC Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) to assess PLC effectiveness and seek suggestions for improved practice. The Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), as described in Section Three: Research Methodology, is the curriculum, instruction, and assessment engine of the school district. The ILT consists of grade level teacher leaders and instructional specialists in advanced programs, reading, dual language, and special education. This team provided the historical perspective within Section Five: Data Analysis and Interpretation and has been a driving force for our district improvement. With that said, it should be noted that although this change plan is in part theory, the amazing members of the ILT have already made many of these strategies and actions a reality.



## **Behavioral Structures**

Greeny et al., (2013) explained that if organizational leaders desire specific outcomes they must build the organizational structures and human capacities that will lead to those outcomes. If educational leaders are seek specific results, they must build the systems that move them toward those results (Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2012). Organizational theory posits that organizations are designed and organized for coordinating efforts to meet organizational goals and objectives (Eden & Spender, 1998). Organizational theory provides the foundation for this change plan; the structures and systems we develop as an ILT will lead to greater PLC effectiveness and improve our curriculum, assessments and instructional practice for the purpose of providing our students with a viable and consistent curriculum.

To improve the context and culture of each district PLC it is imperative that PLCs create effective social environments through the development of PLC norms. Leadership is an iterative process that requires engagement between leaders and people (Heifetz, 2009). For our PLC leaders to develop team norms they must engage the individuals on their teams in the norm development process. Dufour & Eaker (2005), explained that effective PLCs require the management of team norms and the adherence to the ground rules for interaction. PLC norms serve as the system and/or structure that will guide the behaviors of the participants within each PLC.

Dufour & Dufour (2013, p. 138) developed a specific protocol for creating norms (See Figure 5). This protocol provides the Grade Level Leader a set of questions to ask and answer of their grade level teams when developing their individual team norms. Team leaders can guide their teams through the answering of these questions and use the input from their team members to establish their individual PLC norms. Dufour & Eaker

(2005) suggested that each team develop their own unique team norms to guide their behaviors and set the standards for team interaction.

*Figure 5 Establishing Norms*

When Establishing Norms, Consider:	
<b>Time:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● When do we meet?</li> <li>● Will we set a start and ending time?</li> <li>● Will we start and end on time?</li> </ul>	<b>Listening:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How will we encourage listening?</li> <li>● How will we discourage interruptions?</li> </ul>
<b>Confidentiality:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Will meetings be open?</li> <li>● Will what we say in the meeting be held in confidence?</li> <li>● What can be said after the meeting?</li> </ul>	<b>Decision Making:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How will we make decisions?</li> <li>● Are we an advisory or decision making body?</li> <li>● Will we reach decisions by consensus?</li> <li>● How do we deal with conflict?</li> </ul>
<b>Participation:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How will we encourage everyone's participation?</li> <li>● Will we have an attendance policy?</li> </ul>	<b>Expectations:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What do we expect from members?</li> <li>● Are there requirements for participation?</li> </ul>

(Dufour & Eaker, 2005)

In addition to creating team norms, creating team commitments among PLC members serves to solidify a team's culture and make desired behaviors more intentional. Dufour & Eaker (2005) suggested the following protocol when establishing commitments (See Figure 6). Grade Level Teacher Leaders within District ABC will be able to review the suggested commitments and seek input from team members as to which commitments they may wish to adopt as part of their team culture.

Figure 6 Establishing Commitments

Developing Commitments
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. We will articulate our specific commitments to the team and will fulfill those commitments.</li><li>2. We will work towards consensus.</li><li>3. We will solicit, consider, and value the input of each team member.</li><li>4. No individual will be allowed to dominate the discussion, nor will one individual be expected to carry the workload of the team.</li><li>5. We will be candid and will seek to understand one another by articulating and investigating the reasoning behind our respective positions.</li><li>6. We will assume our colleagues have good intentions even if we disagree with them.</li><li>7. We will attend all meetings.</li><li>8. We will support a decision once it is clear that there is consensus for it.</li></ol>

Developing team norms and commitments is vital to the cultural and contextual health of PLCs and serves as the groundwork when developing effective PLCs (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Kanold, 2011).

In addition to developing team norms and commitments, other structural changes are required when implementing effective PLCs, such as the use of agendas to keep PLCs focused on desired outcomes. Kanold (2011) posits that PLCs must utilize agendas for keeping minutes, capturing decisions, and providing direction. District ABC, in accordance with organizational theory, has begun the cultural shift of utilizing agendas in all grade level team meetings. As mentioned earlier, this change plan was written over the duration of the 2016-2017 school year and during that time the ILT developed an agenda template that all grade level PLCs now utilize. In accordance with Kanold (2011), agendas are provided to team members in advance and team members can provide input into the agenda topics. When teams meet, the agenda serves as the tool and/or structure that guides our PLCs toward their objectives. The use of agendas within

team meetings serves to strengthen the culture of the PLC, capture historical meeting information, and improve the competencies of the team leader and their members.

Dufour & Dufour (2013) established that the primary purpose of PLC work is to determine what students will be learning, a gauge for that learning, and how we as educators will respond when students are or are not learning. To meet those basic purposes, the ILT grade level leaders lead grade level PLCs through the curriculum development process. As the grade level teams embark on the curriculum development process they must also begin to determine how they will use assessment data to guide and inform instruction. In doing so, the ILT has begun, developing a data meeting protocol to guide PLCs through the analysis of their student assessment data. The ILT, in developing the data meeting protocol, examined several protocols that other schools and districts used and crafted its own out of those examples (See Figure 7). The process of developing this protocol as a team was one that led to the sharing of ideas, discussion around the topic of assessment, and consensus building. To complete this protocol ILT members conducted a planning meeting in which they examined various examples and determined which elements would be most useful. In doing so, the ILT determined that it was imperative to provide expectations for individuals prior to the meeting. The ILT wanted to ensure that the members of the grade level PLCs were conducting preparatory work prior to their data meetings. Additionally, the ILT discussed and decided that it was important for data meetings to conclude with proposed solutions and actions plans. Providing proposed solutions and actions plans would serve to produce an element of accountability and clarify expectations moving forward. This protocol is now serving as a structure that is guiding PLCs to examine assessment data and determine what actions are

necessary in light of that information. The protocol also serves to clarify expectations for PLC members and creates guidance for how team members interact with the data.

*Figure 7 District ABC Data Meeting Protocol*

District ABC Data Meeting Protocol	
Topic	Notes
Prior to meeting:	<p>Review data prior to meeting.</p> <p>Develop a hypothesis about what the data is saying?</p>
Data dissemination:	<p>Discuss the implications of the data:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What are the general implications of the data?</li> <li>● How will we respond to students who are not learning?</li> <li>● How will we respond to students who are exceeding?</li> </ul>
Integrity of data/Efficacy of results	<p>Determine how conclusive the data point is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are more data points required?</li> </ul>
Proposed solutions:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Proposed or Possible Solutions:</li> <li>● Determine Viability of Solutions:</li> </ul>
Action Plan:	<p>Set Goal and Action Steps for Student Needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Establish timeline for implementation of action plan</li> <li>● Establish timeline for assessing the results of the action plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Determine next steps based on the results of the current action plan</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Another proposed structure designed to improve the competencies and culture of the PLCs within District ABC is that of the Critical Friends Protocol. The Critical Friends Protocol serves to be a structure designed to improve instruction and provide

feedback and support (Bambino, 2002). Further, the Critical Friends Protocol has served as a conduit for school improvement in teaching and learning, culture and climate, and the effectiveness of professional learning communities (Bambino, 2002). The National School Reform Faculty provides several Critical Friends Protocols and establishes that the purpose of the Critical Friends Protocol is to promote school improvement through the examination of practices in teaching and learning

([https://www.nsrffharmony.org/system/files/protocols/cfg\\_purpose\\_work\\_0.pdf](https://www.nsrffharmony.org/system/files/protocols/cfg_purpose_work_0.pdf)).

Figure 8 provides portion of the Critical Friends Protocol for establishing purpose.

*Figure 8 Critical Friends Protocol*

Critical Friends Protocol
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What important tasks can't my students accomplish?</li><li>2. Why can't my students accomplish these tasks?</li><li>3. What does the student work tell us? What evidence do I have of student understanding?</li><li>4. What have I done in the past the address this issue?</li><li>5. How can I help my students accomplish this task?</li><li>6. What multiple measures can we use to demonstrate student mastery/growth of understanding?</li></ol>

This protocol posits that adults learn through interaction and dialogue

([https://www.nsrffharmony.org/system/files/protocols/cfg\\_purpose\\_work\\_0.pdf](https://www.nsrffharmony.org/system/files/protocols/cfg_purpose_work_0.pdf)).

Utilizing such a protocol, PLCs within District ABC can engage in rich dialogue focused on teaching, learning and student achievement. It will be the future goal to introduce this and the other critical friends' protocols offered by the National School Reform Faculty to the ILT for the purpose of adoption and usage within the grade level PLCs. Utilizing these protocols will provide a structure that will lead to more pointed discussions about how to solve educational challenges and improve student achievement.

The final structural protocol is the Continue-Start-Stop protocol designed for the purpose of reflection and renewal. The ILT, as well as the building leaders, have informally adopted this protocol for the purpose of reflecting on team strengths and weaknesses. <https://www.retrium.com/resources/techniques/start-stop-continue> provides a step by step process for completing the Continue-Start-Stop protocol. This protocol has been used within the ILT to reflect on what things we want to continue doing as a team, what things we want to start doing as a team, and what things we want to stop doing as a team. The Continue-Start-Stop protocol is designed to encourage team interaction for the purpose of teams based improvement (<https://www.retrium.com/resources/techniques/start-stop-continue>). PLCs in the future will utilize this protocol to examine and strengthen their grade level PLCs. As an ILT we have used this protocol, therefore, training the grade level teacher leaders to take this to their grade level PLCs for reflection and renewal.

In sum, to improve the effectiveness of our district PLCs we will employ structures that lead to intentional behaviors thereby improving the competencies of our grade level leaders and their PLC teammates while improving the cultural and contextual conditions of our PLCs. Effective schools and organizations are purposeful in developing structures and systems that lead to desired goals and objectives (Dufour & Dufour, 2013; Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Eden & Spender, 1998; Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2013; Greeny et al.; 2013). For the purpose of creating effective PLCs, the ILT and I will and have created structures and systems for PLC improvement. The inclusion of team norms and commitments, the consistent use of meeting agendas, the utilization of data meeting protocols, the employment of critical friends protocols, and purposeful reflection

and renewal protocols will serve to improve the context, culture, conditions and competencies of PLCs within District ABC.

### **Collaborative Structures**

For this change plan to be realized it is imperative that the PLCs of District ABC are given the time to meet for curriculum collaboration, sharing instructional strategies, and analyzing student data. Dufour & Eaker (2005) posit that for school improvement to take place through the establishment of PLCs, time must be set aside within the contractual school day for such collaboration. Dufour & Dufour (2013) offer several suggestions that create structures within the school day and year to allow for consistent collaboration such as utilizing support staff, parallel scheduling and adjusting the school day. In accordance with organizational theory, structures and systems must be established to allow for PLC collaboration within the school day and school year. To that end this change plan will explain the changes District ABC has established for the 2017-18 SY.

District ABC has developed a future weekly, monthly and yearly PLC calendar to allow for regular PLC collaboration and consistent curricular, instructional, and assessment analysis. Starting with a weekly structure, principals and district administration have worked together to develop building-level master schedules that allow all K-5 teachers to meet on a weekly basis for 45-60 minutes. In accordance with Dufour & Dufour (2013), Principals are utilizing their support staff to allow for grade level PLCs to meet each week. Principals will utilize their physical education, art, music and teacher assistants to supervise students during what they are terming a *Power Hour*. Students at each grade level will receive Power Hour once a week. For example, students



in grade 2 will start every Tuesday with the teachers who supervise the Power Hour. During the Power Hour, students will have the opportunity for organized physical activity, ELA/ Math enrichment, art projects and play. While the second grade students are in their Power Hour, the second grade teachers will meet in their grade level PLCs; these will be focused on curriculum and instruction, utilizing some of the behavioral structures mentioned above. This structure will allow for each grade level team to meet at least once a week within the contractual school day for consistent grade level PLC collaboration.

Beyond the weekly schedule, the District ABC Administrative Team has developed a yearly school calendar for the 2017-18 SY that includes monthly late starts. Monthly late starts will occur on the first Monday of each month allowing teachers to meet in grade level PLCs. For students, the school day will start 90 minutes later than a regularly scheduled school day. This structure will allow for teachers to meet consistently to focus on curricular development and data analysis, while utilizing agendas and the data meeting protocols the ILT developed.

The busing of students will remain unchanged on late start days to allow consistency for families needing school supervision. Students will be supervised by teacher assistants in the cafeteria and the gymnasium. Depending on student grade level, students arriving before the start of the school day will be allowed to eat breakfast, do arts and craft, complete homework, and play. This structure will allow teachers the needed PLC collaboration time with minimal disruptions to students and families.

Finally, the district administrative team has developed a curricular collaboration calendar that allows each grade level team four full days throughout the school year and

two full days during the summer months for curricular development which includes curricular road mapping and the development of common assessments. Full day curricular collaboration days will be led by the grade level teacher leaders and me. These days will include curriculum and assessment development in accordance with the Wiggins & McTighe (2003) *Understanding by Design* model. Additionally, Grade level leaders will utilize agendas and the data meeting protocols.

Full curricular collaboration days will be funded with Title I monies. Because over 50% of District ABC's students qualify for Free/Reduced Lunch, the district receives Title I monies; these funds are for curricular development in support of teacher professional learning and growth.

In sum, District ABC, in realizing this change plan, has developed the structures that will allow for weekly, monthly, and yearly PLC work. In alignment with organizational theory, because we value PLC work and a collaborative culture, we are building the systems and structures to achieve those ends.

### **Developing Teacher Leaders**

The final strategy required to realize this change plan includes developing the leadership capacities of our District ABC grade level teacher leaders. Dufour & Eaker (2005) explain that PLC leaders require training to be able to implement the change process, facilitate inquiry and effectively lead PLCs toward their desired goals. Leadership roles are required to facilitate the cultural conditions, motivations and eliminate teacher isolation (Kanold, 2011). Providing PLC leadership opportunities allows for distributive leadership that fosters collaboration and collegial inquiry (Katz, Earl, & Jaafar, 2009). Additionally, building in leadership roles for teachers allows for

increased teacher growth, greater teacher retention, and higher morale (Drago-Severson, 2009).

Grade level teacher leaders are members of the district's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) which serves as the engine of curriculum, instruction and assessment development. Each grade level teacher leader, in turn, serves as the leader of their corresponding grade level teams which typically include 5-7 team members. As the Associate Superintendent, I adhere to John Maxwell's (2011) philosophy that good leaders are charged with investing their time and energy into the growing of other leaders. The leader's role is to examine each person for their potential leadership development (Maxwell, 2011). Additionally, developing and growing others ensures that organizational change and improvement can be sustained (Maxwell, 2011). Allowing individuals to be empowered as leaders allows them to share in the responsibilities of leadership (Maxwell, 2011).

In this change plan my role, as the Associate Superintendent and leader of the ILT, is to foster the growth and development of the PLC leaders through the development and use of the behavioral structures above. As the ILT leader, I will realize this change plan by developing and modeling the development of norms and commitments. I will model and utilize agendas. Also, as an ILT, we will utilize our reflection and renewal protocols. Further, as an ILT, we will utilize the data meeting protocol within our ILT meetings and PLCs. Finally, I will continuously use and model protocols to assist grade level leaders in leading their teams in instructional inquiry.

In developing teacher leaders, I will utilize a gradual release framework that creates a gradual cognitive shift from myself, the teacher, to the ILT members i.e. the

learners (Fisher & Frey, 2013). Utilizing the gradual release method allows me to model behavioral structures for teachers for their eventual independent practice (Fisher & Frey, 2013). To develop norms and commitments, I will model the creation of norms and commitments with grade level teacher leaders. As mentioned earlier, some components of this change plan are underway. I have, at this point, utilized the norms and commitments protocols mentioned in this change plan for the development of norms and commitments for our ILT members. The ILT members and I have walked through the norms and commitment protocols and developed norms and commitments for our ILT. As we developed these norms and commitments together, the grade level team leaders had the opportunity to participate in a simulation for norm and commitment development. In the 2017-18 SY those grade level teacher leaders will begin utilizing those protocols to develop norms and commitments for their own grade level teams. Grade level teacher leaders feel comfortable enough in our modeling the development of norms to move to their independent practice with their own teams.

In accordance with the gradual release model, I will also ensure the use of agendas for all grade level PLCs and ILT meetings. In modeling their use, I have sent out agendas one week prior to all ILT meetings for input and review. ILT members and I created a branded *District ABC Agenda Template* for their use within grade level team meetings. Grade level team leaders have begun and will continue to utilize the District ABC Agenda Template for their 2017-18 SY grade level PLC meetings.

I will also utilize and model the continue-start-stop protocol within the ILT to allow grade level teacher leaders to reflect and renew within their own PLCs. As an ILT we simulated the Continue-Start-Stop reflection tool focused on the question of how

grade level teams are currently working together i.e.; What do they need to Continue doing? What do they need to Start doing? What do they need to Stop doing? The ILT produced some enlightening realities surrounding the need for improvement for their grade level PLCs for the 2017-18 SY. In the future, grade level teacher leaders can utilize the Continue-Start-Stop protocol for reflecting and renewing with their own teams.

Heifetz & Laurie (1997) established that the work of leadership is to give work back to the employee for the purpose of developing self-confidence, responsibility, and independence. In utilizing the gradual release method to build the leadership capacity of the grade level teacher leaders, I am seeking to establish the self-confidence, independence, and leadership capacity of the grade level teacher leader. In creating those independent practices of leadership, the ILT created the District ABC Data Meeting Protocol as mentioned above. The District ABC Data Meeting Protocol (Figure 7) serves as a tool that grade level teacher leaders can utilize during the 17-18 SY with increased collaboration time. With the 2017-18 SY allowing for common plan time and monthly late starts, grade level PLCs will be able to more consistently utilize the data meeting protocol to examine student data and develop action plans to meet student educational needs.

Finally, this change plan includes the use of the Critical Friends protocol for school improvement. Although the ILT has not yet begun using this protocol, I will model its usage during the 2017-18 SY. The ILT will examine a problem using the protocol to encourage the grade level PLC leaders to take a collaborative approach to solving challenging educational issues. As an ILT we will learn and simulate the Critical friends process together for the purpose of independent practice with grade level PLCs.

Jim Collins, in *Good to Great And The Social Sectors* (2006), established that great organizational performance comes from establishing disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action. In this change plan I have sought to create more disciplined people, thought, and actions by establishing organizational constructs, structures, and systems that will make professional behaviors routine and normative within the professional learning communities of District ABC. By allowing PLCs consistent meeting time weekly, monthly, and yearly, along with instituting research-based behavioral structures and protocols, my hope is to improve the social context, culture, competencies, and conditions of our District ABC PLCs for the sole purpose of improved student learning.

I want to share one final thought prior to closing this change plan. It is my personal, spiritual, and professional purpose to invest in the lives of others, to make their lives better. I realize that this change plan is formally steeped in organizational theory and behavioral development. Despite that fact, however, this change plan is designed for engaging people's hearts in their work to make their lives more meaningful, independent, and purposeful. Henry Cloud (2013) asserts that as leaders, it is essential to create the right emotional environment for people to thrive. This change plan is designed to provide people with the constructs, habits, and routines to lead them to find greater ownership, purpose, and meaning. Ultimately, I hope this will lead them to improve their lives and, in turn, the improve the lives of their students.

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