CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLABORATION IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A PROGRAM EVALUATION INFORMING CHANGE LEADERSHIP AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Daniela Fountain

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss

Part of the Educational Administration and Supervision Commons

Recommended Citation
Fountain, Daniela, "CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLABORATION IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A PROGRAM EVALUATION INFORMING CHANGE LEADERSHIP AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS" (2019). Dissertations. 414.
https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss/414

This Dissertation - Public Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons@NLU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@NLU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@nl.edu.
CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLABORATION IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A PROGRAM EVALUATION INFORMING CHANGE
LEADERSHIP AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Daniela Fountain
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Doctor of Education in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education
National Louis University
September, 2019
CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLABORATION IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A PROGRAM EVALUATION INFORMING CHANGE LEADERSHIP AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Dissertation Hearing

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Education in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

Daniela Fountain
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Approved:

[Signatures]
Chair, Dissertation Committee
Program Director
Member, Dissertation Committee
Dean's Representative
Dean, National College of Education

Date Approved: 9/17/19
ABSTRACT

Educators must be provided with quality conditions for effective and meaningful collaboration. This, with teachers’ collective commitment to student learning, is necessary for all students to achieve high levels. The professional learning communities’ (PLCs') framework is examined and researched around the characteristics of collaboration using three critical attributes; learning, collaboration, and results. PLCs require a change in both teachers’ belief systems and school leaders’ ability to design and deliver professional development that improves teaching and learning. Wagner et al.’s 4Cs model is used to examine current practices and develop a vision to improve collective inquiry through collaboration. After an in-depth analysis of qualitative data, strategies, and actions; a research-based model was developed, including implications for policy.
PREFACE

Historically, one-room schoolhouses were often led by one teacher who brought minimal perspectives to the interactions and learning of the students in the school. Currently, schools may have several teachers of the same grade level who bring various strengths to the team, expanding the knowledge and skill set of the collective staff, ultimately increasing learning opportunities for students who may not have otherwise been afforded to them if only one teacher provided instruction. This program evaluation reviews the challenges and benefits of collaborative efforts among teachers in a team organized through professional learning communities. As a district-level leader, I have the responsibility to ensure that all employee needs are met in the district and to provide guidance, recommendations, and supports for each stakeholder to be highly successful in the work for which they are responsible with students in our schools.

As a student in college, I spent some time grappling with where I wanted to focus my professional efforts and was ultimately reminded by the photo of my summer-camp children hanging on my dorm bulletin board that I needed to pursue my passion. I went into education because teaching was a calling that I could not avoid. The endless opportunity and possibility that I see in a child’s future is what drove my purpose as an educator. However, another component that really motivates my work is determining how educators can collectively support students in learning at high levels and studying implementation of instructional, curricular, and assessment practices/decisions. The role of a teacher is a critical component to a child’s academic and social success; however, I also believe strongly that school districts must remove barriers for educators and provide teachers with the resources (time, materials, and professional learning) to be successful in meeting the needs of all students.
The purpose for my study on professional learning communities was to evaluate the structures and conductions we can provide for educators. In my school district, we have large teams per grade level, and I think it is critical that all leaders, teacher leaders, administrators, and students reflect on the conditions needed to implement a highly successful learning experience for all students. Given that each district has challenges, whether that be small or large teams or the lack of curriculum or professional development, etc., I believe it is critical that we reflect on what can be done for continuous improvement.

Throughout the experience, I have learned that teams also need to learn about teachers’ specific beliefs and norms in order to work successfully on implementing student learning. Teams that worked effectively together had a common understanding of their individual purpose and the impact that their collective team could have on their students, therefore adopting and living the all-means-all mentality. I also learned how important it is for educators to understand the adult learning process and incorporate strategies to collaborate. I also discovered the need for a guaranteed and viable curriculum that allows for educators to rally around a common concept for student learning expectations and obtain the resources to implement and analyze student performance effectively.

As a result of this program evaluation, I advocate for school districts across the state to be afforded with a schedule that allows for uninterrupted time for educators to collaborate on behalf of meeting the needs of all learners within the grade-level team or school.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Teamwork is the combined action of a group of people on a common mission. This dissertation was written in full with the premise of teamwork, which was exhibited by my National Louis University professors and cohort members on a mission to impact and influence education in a positive manner. The sharing of ideas, problem solving, and wisdom of the cohort was truly an influence on my educational career. The feedback from my professors pushed my thinking and grew my perspective on educational leadership and advocacy for the profession.

The lyrical words “we got this together” from the *My Little Pony Movie* have more meaning to me than my daughters and husband will ever know. This song played on repeat in the background as I worked on my dissertation and felt inspired by the message, “you don’t have to do it on your own.” I would like to express my gratitude to my husband Luke for inspiring our daughters to demonstrate the message of “teamwork,” which is at the heart of my purpose for writing this dissertation.

I’d also like to thank my parents for immigrating to the United States before I was born. I have no doubt that they made tremendous sacrifices for our family to live the American dream. They have modeled hard work and dedication and as a result, I have experienced an education that has afforded me the opportunities to make a greater impact in the school system.

Teamwork: the combined action of a group of people, especially when effective and efficient.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this “book” to my daughters, Mila and Clara, who have shown me how to find happiness in all aspects of my life. I encourage them to find joy in everything they do, to look for the positive, and embrace their journey, living a life fulfilled with hope and happiness.

“For untold generations, we have been led to believe that happiness orbited around success. That if we work hard enough, we will be successful, and only if we are successful will we become happy. Now we are learning that the opposite is true.” (Achor, 2010, p. 37)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: Review of Literature</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Focus on Learning</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Collaboration</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2 sub header 1: Collaborative leaders</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2 sub header 2: Conditions and culture structures</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Focus on Results</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development for Continuous Growth</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: Methodology</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design Overview</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data-Gathering Techniques</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation and field notes</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus-group interviews</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archival data</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data-Analysis Techniques</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation/field notes</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus-group interviews</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archival data</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: Results</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS-IS Analysis</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditions</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Focus-Group Interview Results ................................................................. 46
Theme 1: Focus on Learning ................................................................. 47
Theme 2: Collaboration ........................................................................ 50
Theme 3: Results .................................................................................. 54
Additional Questions ............................................................................. 54
Archival Data Review ............................................................................ 55
Area 1: Norms ....................................................................................... 56
Area 2: Consensus Through Disagreement ........................................... 58
Field Notes/Observation ....................................................................... 61
Interpretation ......................................................................................... 62
Judgment ................................................................................................. 64
Recommendations ................................................................................... 66
CHAPTER FIVE: TO-BE Framework ...................................................... 70
Introduction ............................................................................................ 70
Envisioning the Success: TO BE ........................................................... 71
   Context ............................................................................................... 71
   Culture ............................................................................................... 73
   Conditions .......................................................................................... 74
   Competencies ..................................................................................... 75
Conclusion ............................................................................................... 76
CHAPTER SIX: Strategies and Actions .................................................. 78
Introduction ............................................................................................ 78
Strategies and Actions ........................................................................... 79
Leadership Lessons .............................................................................. 83
Conclusions ............................................................................................. 83
CHAPTER SEVEN: Implications and Policy Recommendations ............ 85
Introduction ............................................................................................ 85
Policy Statement .................................................................................... 86
   Policy 5:340 ....................................................................................... 87
Analysis of Need .................................................................................... 89
Educational Analysis .............................................................................. 89
Economic Analysis ................................................................................. 89
Social Analysis ....................................................................................... 90
Political Analysis ................................................................................... 91
Legal Analysis ......................................................................................... 91
Moral and Ethical Analysis .................................................................... 92
Implications for Staff and Community Relationships ......................... 92
Conclusion ............................................................................................. 94
CHAPTER EIGHT: Conclusion ............................................................... 95
Introduction ............................................................................................ 95
Discussion .............................................................................................. 96
Leadership Lessons .............................................................................. 98
Conclusion ............................................................................................. 99
References ............................................................................................ 103
APPENDIX A: FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ........................................ 110
APPENDIX B: AS-IS ANALYSIS ..................................................................... 111
APPENDIX C: TO-BE ANALYSIS .................................................................. 112
APPENDIX D: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS ............................................... 113
1. Survey Response Statement: We have an agreed-upon set of meaningful norms in our PLC team .......................................................... 57
2. Survey Response Statement: We follow our meeting norms consistently at PLC .......................................................................... 57
3. Survey Response Statement: I feel a strong sense of attachment to my team .............................................................................. 58
4. Survey Response Statement: During our PLC time, team members sometimes disagree about ideas or practices .................................. 59
5. Survey Response Statement: When team members disagree about ideas or practices, we discuss them in depth ........................................ 59
6. Survey Response Statement: When I disagree with something a member on my PLC has said, I almost always voice that disagreement .... 60
7. Survey Response Statement: Within PLC meetings, we try to avoid emotionally charged or difficult topics/conversations ...................... 60
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Interview responses regarding district PLCs ................................................................. 48
2. Interview responses regarding consistency ................................................................. 49
3. Interview responses regarding student learning ......................................................... 49
4. Interview responses regarding roles of the articulation leader .................................. 50
5. Interview responses regarding disagreement ............................................................. 51
6. Interview responses regarding effective collaboration ............................................... 52
7. Interview responses regarding additional needs to improve effective collaboration ...... 52
8. Interview responses regarding the role of the principal ............................................. 53
9. Interview responses regarding PLC resources needed .............................................. 54
10. Interview responses regarding PLC concerns and additional considerations ............ 55
11. Strategies and actions that incorporate the change process ....................................... 81
What is a team? It is “a group of people working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are held mutually accountable” (All Things PLC, 2018, p. 1).
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

To be an educator in modern-day schools requires intentionality in planning for differentiated instruction within the classroom, as well as a broad awareness of the needs of the students within the school community, not just the students on each class roster. Teachers contribute to the greater organization by supporting learners in the entire grade level and/or school setting through collaborative dialogue and implementation of core learning experiences to provide a high level of expectations so students can surpass the possibilities of the instructional objectives determined by the team. The school district I serve is comprised of three grade centers that have 9-10 core grade-level teachers on a team. I am fascinated by the necessary commitment to others that supports a learning process for all students who are on the team, and the program review allowed for me to study conditions for creating settings that are most conducive to effective collaboration.

Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2007) published *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World: What Teachers Should Learn and Be Able to Do* in an effort to bring about a movement in teacher education programs for making a foundational change in preparation programs that equip educators with the knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary for continuous learning improvement efforts. The demands of teaching are multifaceted and stretch beyond a classroom’s four walls, calling for better systems and structures within the school setting and stronger educators to create powerful learning environments for the professionals that drive learning in a school. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2007) believe that PLCs are the key to changing school culture. They claim that teacher education programs should help teachers learn
ways in which to work on the improvement of practice as members of collaborative communities. School leaders must address the lack of program preparation around collaboration and becoming a teacher that is coordinated with grade-level colleagues so that experiences for all students in the school are equitable and of high quality.

Typically, educators at the K-5 level are responsible for one set of students and work individually to make daily decisions on how to serve their class of students. According to Wagner (2007). most professions have discovered the value of teamwork as a better way to solve problems and that groups of people are more likely to come to a deeper understanding, and to better solutions, than are individuals working alone, no matter how talented. Additionally, Wagner believes that collaboration is one of the most critical attributes for student learners, along with critical thinking, communication, and creativity. If the education profession values collaboration as a critical skill for students to take with them in their future interactions, it must provide teachers also with the opportunities to engage and interact with similar experiences, as through the practice comes transfer to the student level.

Lollie School District, a pseudonym used throughout this study, services approximately 2,150 students in preschool through eighth grade. The district is home to three schools that incorporate a grade-center approach. Students in Grades PK-2 attend the primary building, which is connected to the intermediate building, servicing students in Grades 3-5. The middle school is down the street and houses students in Grades 6-8. The demographics of the school’s students are comprised of 83% White, 9% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 2% two or more races and 1% Black. Lollie School District sits about 30 miles outside a major U.S. city in one suburban community and a small unincorporated neighboring town. Fifteen percent of students are considered low-
income, and 11% of students have individualized education plans. The district has 7% English language learners (ELLs), predominantly among students speaking Eastern European languages. The school district is a separate district from the high school in the community, but all the students feed into the one local high school, which ranks among the top 50 schools in the state.

The district is large enough to have a need for system- and district-wide protocol for all the students and school staff to follow and engage in the same, consistent experiences. There is currently one additional school that is not in use but was formerly used as a middle school before a new school was built in 1997. In 2010, the school district was on financial watch according to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). During this time, an intermediate school was closed and another school was put in use by a parochial school within the community. As a result, the three current buildings are at capacity, and two additional sections of first grade and kindergarten opened in 2017, three days before the start of the school year due to new families moving into the community or transferring to the public school from the private sector. In the primary school building, there are five kindergarten teachers who run a half-day program, nine first-grade teachers, and nine second-grade teachers. In the intermediate building, there are nine teachers for each section at third, fourth, and fifth grade. At the middle school, there are about two to three teachers per grade-level content area, with the exception of singletons at the exploratory or support staff role.

Given that there are larger teams at the K-5 level, it is critical that the learning experience is developed and evaluated by the entire team so that there is a consistent approach and experience for students. At Lollie School District, parents of multiples or children who are close in age often find that there are differences in programming that their children experience because
of being assigned to different teachers. Although teaching styles may differ, the curricular experience should be consistent for students within the same grade level, school, and district for the coherent building of foundational skills. One of the most significant factors that impacts student achievement is that teachers commit to implementing a guaranteed and viable curriculum to ensure that no matter who teaches a given class, the curriculum addresses certain essential content (Marzano, 2003).

The driving vision of the district is innovative learning, collaborative communication, and responsive citizenship. All staff are advocates for all learners; they focus on academic achievement and build on student successes by committing to continuous instructional improvement and providing an environment that supports the social development of all students. Teachers at PK-5 participate in collaboration time, where PLCs occur three times a week. On Mondays, each grade-level teacher meets for 30 minutes before the start of the school day for “nuts and bolts” time. The purpose of collaboration during this time is to provide flexible time for conversations that need to happen with the team over the course of the year with regard to logistics, including student enrichment opportunities such as planning field trips. Collaboration time for PLCs occurs on Tuesdays and Thursdays for an hour prior to the start of the school day. The purpose of this time is for grade-level teachers to engage in planning for and analyzing instruction and assessment outcomes. Special education teachers and specialists in math and reading also join the collaboration time, and the grade-level support depends on the majority of the students that they service. These opportunities and various types of collaborative, job-embedded professional learning activities can improve teacher practice and student achievement (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).
Purpose

Lollie School District has implemented collaboration time to support teachers and student learning for the past two years, an opportunity that hasn’t been present for a long time. Prior to the recent update in collaboration minutes, teacher contracts decreased planning minutes to fulfill the needs of teaching the minimal state required content during a financial crisis. With several years of limited collaboration, teachers grew more independent in their practice. As a result, a critical goal is now to create a culture in which it is the norm to solve problems through collaboration and for teachers to reflect collectively on their practice (Wagner et al., 2012).

During the 2016-2017 school year, teachers worked without a contract until February 2017. One of the topics that took a considerable amount of time to negotiate was time for teachers to prepare, plan, and collaborate. Teachers were previously required to meet for 30 minutes before the start of the school day every day of the week. Feedback from the teachers was that as soon as they had started the process of their time together and the flow of the collaboration, it was time for them to stop. Additionally, with the larger number of teachers on a team, groups have been challenged by the number of people collaborating in the short amount of time. To address the balance of time, the updated schedule included planning twice a week for an hour of collaboration time and once a week for a half hour (“nuts and bolts”) to take care of logistics or other school business.

During the time of financial crisis, time for collaborative planning was one of the services that were removed from staff. Additionally, professional development opportunities were put on hold. This occurred during the release of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and implementation of new shifts in instruction by the ISBE. As a result, the curriculum maps,
assessments, and instructional scopes are currently at the beginning stages of curriculum development through the use of the backwards design framework. Using the work of McTighe (2004), teachers have met collectively to identify desired results, determine acceptable evidence, and plan learning experiences and instruction through the backwards design process. During contract negotiations, teachers expressed the need for having all teachers participate in curriculum development rather than just one or two representatives per grade level. At this time of financial crisis, teachers completed trimester unit plans, but they were not implemented successfully due to the lack of resources for implementation. Therefore, collaboration time is currently utilized to develop units of study using the backwards design process rather than to reflect on student performance. This problem calls for a change in providing teachers with the resources, including materials, time, and efforts, to improve student learning at each grade level and content throughout the school district.

At the time of this study, I had been serving the district under two overarching capacities—personnel and teaching/learning—and I had been in the position for five weeks. Informally, I have already heard perceptions of teachers regarding the reasons for conducting collaboration time in such a way to complete units of study, and the purpose is unclear based on these conversations. I have also become acutely aware of the need to focus on collaboration through effective PLCs since I began to observe collaboration before meeting the staff and transitioning into my new role. Last year, a team of administrators and three teachers attended a professional learning community summit as they embarked on the journey of collaboration time. This year, I brought a team of administrators and teachers that totaled close to 20 participants for training efforts around PLCs. Building capacity for collaboration is a district goal that aligns to the
strategic plan. Teachers who attend the PLC summit by Solution Tree are also articulation leaders and this is a new stipend role for the upcoming school year. The role of the articulation leader is an additional position for which teachers apply to serve as facilitator during collaboration time.

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) described the definition of a professional learning community as “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 11). The purpose of this program review was to determine the characteristics of collaboration through a PLC model. Upon determining characteristics that can lead to effective collaboration, I was able to inform teacher, school, and district leaders of conditions that were necessary for implementing effective collaboration and identifying strategies for supporting educators in the process.

Some of the nuances incorporated have been the current progress of unit development and the support roles of teacher articulation leaders in the process. Given that I have been new to the role, I have engaged in participatory action research (PAR) with the articulation leaders in order to build on the collaboration through professional learning communities. According to Alana, Milenkiewicz, and Bucknam (2008), “Whenever educational leaders wish to build sustainable results, communication is key---among participants, within their communities, and with all stakeholders” (p. 24). The PAR process allowed participants in the program review to gain perspectives of stakeholders by problem-solving to answer the questions the organization had with regard to collaboration through PLCs. Additionally, this program review of PLCs is connected to student achievement and improving student learning outcomes. Robert Marzano
(2003) has been well known for his claim on identifying a guaranteed and viable curriculum as the variable most strongly related to student achievement at the school level. Therefore, schools can enhance student achievement opportunities by creating a condition for collaboration and conversation around specific content that is taught in specific courses and grade levels, collectively impacting student-learning outcomes for the grade level.

**Rationale**

Given that I am new to the district, selecting the PLC program is important to me because collaboration has become the means to accomplish the curriculum, instruction, and assessment work that I support with the staff. Collaboration has been critical in organizations because multiple opinions about a subject were presented to form a collective approach. When people have been invested in various portions that contribute to the education of a child, educators have created an environment in which everyone has contributed to the mission and purpose. This has become an area in which all stakeholders have been invested from the board perspective; the longevity of supporting staff and budgeting funds to support the work of staff. From a teacher’s perspective, time is of the essence and having a collegial partnership to support the work of teaching could ultimately enhance a child’s learning. Conducting a program review involving stakeholders and aligned to the district strategic plan has been meaningful work that has directly impacted my practice and leadership.

The research revealed an evidence-based approach to identifying the successful conditions that support collaboration for teachers during a PLC. These conversations allowed for each individual to share perceptions that could be built upon to inform structures and supports for the buildings and district. From the Illinois state perspective, teachers have been developing
more curricula and analyzing assessment results than what had previously been accomplished. Through our collaboration, we have increased student achievement in the core content areas.

Goals

The intended goal of this research on PLCs was to increase the effectiveness of educators within the respective community and school or district and to build capacity for implementing instructional practices and curricula to raise achievement for all students. School schedules and plans for professional development should critically analyze the amount of time available for teacher collaboration to have a positive influence on learning that occurs in these communities. Additionally, school leaders who develop structures and systems to support collaboration could provide the means for teacher-to-teacher professional development to strengthen and grow effective teaching practices. Murray and Zoul (2015) argued that leaders need to listen to teacher voices by allowing opportunities for teacher choice, considering factors such as current knowledge and skills, motivation, life and career experiences, and beliefs and confidence. As a result of this research, I presented the knowledge and strategies needed to create effectively the conditions to support PLCs that impact educators professionally and students academically. Successfully implemented PLCs tied to areas of teacher growth with professional development by matching skill sets, dispositions, and instructional practices ultimately align to improve specific student learning outcomes. (Guskey 2003).

Research revealed that collaboration as a skill valued by employers and social organizations and tied to improving job satisfaction (Morel, 2014). By the end of the program evaluation, I hope to have accomplished an evidence-based approach to successful conditions that support collaboration. These conversations should allow for each individual to share
perceptions that can be built upon to inform structures and supports for the school buildings and district. In Illinois, districts are allowed to select curriculum and learning experiences as long as they are implementing the adopted state standards. Therefore, teachers have been developing more curricula and analyzing assessment results in local school districts, especially those that are smaller with limited supports for curriculum departments. Ultimately, and as a result of collaboration, implementation of teaching practices and instructional learning outcomes that have been collaborated on and analyzed have increased student achievement in the core content areas.

**Research Questions**

I believe that, at the root of improving self and others, educators must collectively find a way to collaborate. Therefore, the primary and secondary research questions guiding this inquiry have been as follows.

**Primary research questions:**

1. What are the characteristics of collaboration in PLCs?
   a. What does it mean to collaborate?
   b. What structures best support teacher collaboration in schools?
   c. Who is responsible for supporting the development of PLCs?

**Secondary research questions:**

2. How do articulation leaders support the development of PLCs?
3. How and why do educational leaders advocate for PLCs to change practices for efficiency and effectiveness and advocate for policy related to collaboration efforts?
Conclusion

The ultimate goal of this research is to impact positively the current implementation of PLCs at Lollie School District and study conditions and characteristics of effective PLCs to implement strategies for improving collaboration and student learning objectives as a result of intentional learning communities planning, assessing, and reflecting on student performance. The change plan and research questions can be used as a guide to assist other school districts to reimagine designing a framework for quality PLCs. On a larger scale, the change plan has the potential to impact the larger school community of students and educators through a policy recommendation that advocates for collaboration time for educators.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

Introduction

This section examines relevant literature and research that has been conducted to inform practitioners on the implementation of PLCs and the ability to sustain the practice in school organizations. This synthesis is divided into three major sections, incorporating related subcomponents embedded within each section. The literature review utilizes the framework with DuFour’s (2014) three big ideas; focus on learning, collaborative leaders, and results. These three key themes emerge and are interwoven when considering implementing structures for teams. Each focal area is as important as the others, as the collaborative nature of the process relies on the three themes; without one, the process is hindered.

The educational philosophy of “all means all” is derived from the common mission and collective efforts among a team, as outlined in PLCs (Muhammed, 2017). This view suggests that all stakeholders are equally involved and held accountable to student learning and improvement. Educational teams are formed in a variety of ways, including content, grade level, and role, depending on the school structure, grade levels, and sections. The adult learners who make up a team in a school setting have a wide variety of differences in learning preferences and styles, which creates various perspectives, approaches, and mindsets through the learning process. Adult learners have various developmental capacities for learning (Drago-Severson, 2009), and, therefore, require different experiences to support their transformational growth.

In the educational landscape, the growing popularity of the term “professional learning community” has changed over time but also exudes various meanings for various stakeholders.
The term has become so common and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning (DuFour & DuFour, 2013).

Questions embedded within this research study focus on the general topic of collaboration, specifically regarding characteristics and conditions school systems should examine to incorporate into their organization. Drawing on these sources, major researchers have common understandings of the eight characteristics of effective PLCs, which are examined throughout to answer the questions regarding effective characteristics and conditions schools should examine to implement PLCs. These characteristics include shared leadership, shared mission, collaboration, collective inquiry, action orientation, experimentation, continuous learning, and results orientation (Hannaford, 2010). Not only do the data outline the organizational structure, but perspectives on the teacher's role, protocols, change agents, lesson study, curriculum mapping, data analysis, common assessments, and confronting challenges are also examined (Erkens et al., 2008).

The fundamental components of this particular literature review are based on the most popular PLC framework as compiled by DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008), addressing four essential questions at the core of all effective PLCs:

1. What is it we want our students to know?
2. How will we know if our students are learning?
3. How will we respond when our students do not learn?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?
The research leads toward answering these four questions, presented with various syntax but having the same connotation, and the questions are often embedded in mandatory team agendas.

**Theme 1: Focus on Learning**

An emphasis on learning is the most critical alignment among PLCs because of the direct alignment to student learning and standards expectations. In Illinois, public school districts utilize the identified learning standards from the ISBE, which has adopted the College and Career Readiness framework and the CCSS. These standards specify what students should know and be able to do by the end of 12th grade to succeed in college and the workplace. The purpose of focusing on learning as a collaborative team is for teachers to analyze the CCSS, develop assessments, plan for instruction, and learn from each other (McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012).

According to Moss et al. (2011), when students understand what they are supposed to learn during a lesson, they are more likely to learn it, knowing the clear expectations. PLCs that are aligned can craft and share common learning targets that tell students what they need to learn, how well they need to learn it, and how to demonstrate that learning. If learning is the fundamental purpose of schools, educators must examine all their practices in light of their impact on learning (Muñoz & Branham, 2016).

Outlining learning expectations for a common content area or grade level of learning is the first step of a PLC, as it lays the foundation for what the team should strive for regarding student learning. "The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student" and educators must work within "the moral purpose and collective
responsibility that clarifies why their day-to-day work is so important" (DuFour & Eaker, 2008, p. 184). Standards are often interpreted variously among educators, which can lead to conflicting ideas (Gorlewski, 2013). Therefore, teams must collaborate on the instructional objectives derived from standards to make sense of the teaching points during a lesson or lessons (Moss et al., 2011).

A guaranteed and viable curriculum is one of the five school-level factors in the research of what works in schools. A PLC should be afforded the opportunity to commit to a guaranteed and viable curriculum, for the learning of all students of a common grade level or content area. This includes essential content for all students to learn that has been communicated to or selected by the team of educators. The educators then discuss how long it takes to master the content and what opportunities are provided to students to explore the essential learning experiences (Marzano, 2003). A guaranteed and viable curriculum addresses the extent to which a school can “guarantee” that no matter who teaches a given course or a given grade level, certain content will be taught, as determined and vetted by the PLC. In addition, the curriculum is “viable” in that teachers can adequately address the guaranteed content in the instructional time available to them (Marzano, 2006).

Collective beliefs, common vision, and clear learning expectations are the first tenets to effective PLCs. Curriculum goals and objectives that are publicly shared and discussed are more likely to be monitored, leading to effective student learning practices among the members of the team (DuFour & Eaker, 2009).
**Theme 2: Collaboration**

The second major theme within the research is the common interpretation and art of collaboration. When a team understands where it is going, given the grade-level standards and learning targets as determined by focusing on results, the collaborative efforts toward meeting the standards occur. Frey and Fisher (2011) claimed that the importance of teacher clarity, specifically around when students understand clearly the learning goals and the teachers’ methods of evaluating their learning, creates a stronger potential for success because students and teachers know the expectations. In a grade-level team, teachers are responsible for meeting consistently to establish purpose, increase motivation, and set goals throughout the process of learning. When each factor is attended to carefully, students take a more active role in their learning. In effective teams, teachers commit to the adoption or development of learning targets on behalf of the students in the school. They also interact more deeply and meaningfully with colleagues and other stakeholders as they continue to learn, teach, lead, and adapt as the world changes and evolves (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018).

Strong teams within a school are essential to sustaining teacher retention and steady, consistent school-home relationships among students. Determining key characteristics of collaboration is critical as there is no single recipe that outlines one way to follow for effective teams. However, there are common practices that the research draws from to establish common strategies. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2007) argued that in medicine, legal engineering, and architecture, there is shared consensus about what professionals need to know and be able to do, to engage in dialogue and better perform and serve their practice. Improvement is a
continuous developmental process that requires various types of knowledge and skills at successive developmental stages (Elmore, 2005).

The art of collaboration is a skill set that is easily influenced by outside contexts but critical in understanding PLCs. A community becomes united through collaboration and a sense of belonging, keeping several stakeholders engaged over time. The formation of explicit organizational values requires the creation of settings in which those values can be discussed and agreed upon through the exercise of collective agency (Elmore, 2005). How do teams become collaborative? It is through leadership, including the facilitators of the process, and sustained conductions and intentionally designed structures that the art of collaboration is implemented effectively. The second theme of PLCs among the literature is collaboration, which is separated into two subheadings: exploring the relationship of collaborative leaders and determining the necessary conditions and cultural structures to establish effective PLCs.

**Theme 2, sub header 1: Collaborative leaders.** In general, a leader can be defined by someone who commands a group of people with some commonalities. The leader of a school has traditionally been seen as a building principal, but in PLCs within the school, the principal is no longer the leader. An effective collaboration that is structured to operate through grade-level or content teams analyzes the role of the leader with this process. DeMatthews (2014) studied distributed leadership effects among principal and teacher collaboration within PLCs to find that principal leadership is critical in overcoming barriers with PLCS because of their ability to manage, influence culture, and express expectations using a variety of resources. It is not the role of the principal to take charge of the PLC but rather to lead and support the leadership that is distributed among the team. This best occurs when teachers have a common belief set in
supporting each other and the principals play a critical role in distributed leadership due to their ability to support a building and district mission through resources at hand and cultivate and influence expectations within the culture of the building. Principals must not neglect to address misunderstandings about collaboration, lack of flexibility with staff, and ignoring those who avoid collaboration (Marzano et al., 2016).

DuFour and Eaker (2009) attempted to resolve the paradox of the competing values of effective principals: strong, forceful instructional leaders who impose their vision on their schools compared to more effective facilitators who empower teachers to make many of the important decisions regarding their student experiences. Additionally, Murray and Zoul (2015) challenged administrators from perceiving their role as “sage on the stage” to “meddler in the middle” (p. 62). Partnering with teachers for professional learning, rather than providing a prescriptive or top-down approach, is the philosophical shift for school leaders. Additional questions have been added to the traditional four PLC questions, which lead to an emphasis on teacher development or leadership, such as: How will we increase our instructional competence, and how will we coordinate our efforts as a school? (Marzano, Heflebower, Grift, & Warrick, 2016). These additional questions can be transformational for leaders of the team to address through the power of collective efficacy. Success lies in the critical nature of collaboration and the strength of believing that, together, administrators, faculty, and students can accomplish great things (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018).

Although school leaders engage in distributive leadership, they must also work on creating schedules for teams, organizing staff into meaningful teams, and clarifying the work the teams must accomplish. Leaders need to provide the expectation for staff to remain hyper-
focused on student learning and clarify the expectations and process for what should occur during the PLCs (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). It is important to note that research has also argued that the role of a principal has shifted to agent of change, system player, and lead learner (Fullan 2014) and the role should promote, structure, and model collaborative inquiry and communication. The role of the building principal is critical in developing collaborative teams. DuFour and Eaker (1998) outlined critical conditions, including that of principals of PLCs, who should:

1. Lead through shared decisions and values rather than through rules and procedures;
2. Involve faculty members in the school’s decision-making process and empower individuals to act; and
3. Provide staff with the information, training, and parameters they need to make good decisions.

The research outlined the importance of distributive leadership among educators within the team. Distributed forms of leadership among the wider school staff is likely to have a more significant impact on the positive achievement of student/pupil outcomes than that which is largely or exclusively top-down (Bell, etc.al 2003).

**Theme 2 sub header 2: Conditions and culture structures.** Public education structures and organizations vary across the U.S, and even within neighboring communities in Illinois. Districts are allowed to determine if their schools are grade-centered or community-based, and often, common practitioners have the capacity to meet. The National Council on Teacher Quality (Jarmolowski, 2017) indicated that more planning time, and specifically more collaboration time, is an often cited reason for countries such as Finland and Japan outperforming the U.S., which is
an added layer of stress for U.S. schools that are underperforming in the global market. Schools need structures such as strong teams to cultivate educators’ emotional resilience and ability to perform successfully all required duties of educators in the current profession. The following values, conditions, and structures have been synthesized to inform practitioners in the process of implementing PLCs.

Wilson (2016) conducted a study to determine if the roles of a team, its value orientations, and its team collegiality were related and to what extent they were related when explaining team collaboration. Key findings in this quantitative research determined that team collegiality was a significant and positive predictor of team collaboration. This offers educators new information on ways in which to align collective approaches rather than rely on an individual leader, to align values and instruction, and to determine the importance of providing supportive conditions that are cultivated within the team.

Servage (2009) sought to determine the ways in which the language of professional learning communities may be misused or interpreted differently among educators or professionals within the education world. When the emphasis is on the word “professional,” there are implications for teachers in a PLC. The term “professional” is emphasized to draw attention to which sets of behaviors or learning priorities are made in collaborative professional development initiatives. When the collaborative nature of a teacher recognizes his or her role in the social process, then the term “professional” can be a norm within a local structure. Servage (2009) argued that it is not the emphasis on educational policies and reforms that moves teachers to have a true professional collaboration but rather teachers seeing this work as something that research shows to be good practice or new initiatives within a school or district.
Furthermore, Dallas (2006) proposed that relationships can have a positive effect on retention and resilience because PLCs provide support and problem-solving. With regard to resiliency, Bobek’s (2002) research (cited in Dallas, 2006), indicated that characteristics such as problem-solving skills, confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and a sense of humor support resiliency among adults. School reform supports an idea that everyone is a learner and everyone within the whole school is a part of the process. It can be concluded that collaboration among teachers can support resiliency, retention, and reform. PLCs provide a platform for encouragement and support to work through difficult situations or complex tasks. To make a change on a greater scale, professional learning and persistence takes time, and a whole school to move forward.

Rönnerman, Edwards-Groves, and Grootenboer (2015) make a strong claim that middle leaders are crucial in the process of supporting PLCs. The defining characteristics of middle leaders that are incorporated throughout the study exist in these frames; positional (practice in both groups of teaching and leading), philosophically (working side by side), and practically (focus on sayings and doings). Project Aristotle was a research project conducted to determine the most influential contributions a successful team at Google learned to form a productive team. Duhigg (2016) concluded that understanding and influencing group norms were the keys to improving Google’s teams. Specifically, on strong teams, participants spoke in roughly the same proportion. “As long as everyone got a chance to talk, the team did well,” Woolley stated. “But if only one person or a small group spoke all the time, the collective intelligence declined” (cited in Duhigg, 2016, p. 1). Additionally, strong teams exuded social sensitivity and could determine others’ emotions based on their tone of voice and nonverbal cues.
Mutual trust and support is a common theme in the research. Gray and Summers (2015) conducted a quantitative study of enabling school structures, trust (both with principal and colleagues), and collective efficacy. The key finding was that PLCs were more likely to be developed according to teacher perceptions if enabling school structures, trust in principals (highest rated), trust in colleagues, and collective efficacy routines and habits were established. The explicit or implicit definition of trust must include willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is competent, reliable, open, and concerned (Sun & Leithwood, 2015).

Additionally, Bryk and Schneider (2003) conducted longitudinal research across 400 schools in Chicago over four years to examine relational trust and the ways in which educators maintained both an understanding of their individual role’s obligations and expectations about the obligations of the other parties, including teachers, administrators, and parents. As stakeholders in an educational system interact, they are constantly discerning the intentions embedded in the actions of others. They consider how others’ efforts advance their own interests or impinge on their own self-esteem or beliefs. Bryk and Schneider (2003) found that these discernments tended to organize around four specific considerations: respect, personal regard, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity.

Time restraints, isolation, divergent views, conflict resolution, and collaborative culture improvements are the key findings that arose within the research on roadblocks that occurred with PLC implementation and sustainability (Lujan & Day, 2010). Survey participants indicated that when teams met on a regular basis, their meetings were structured, focused, and effective. They also shared that the regular meetings promoted collaboration and relationship-building.
among the teachers. Teachers indicated that they had a process in place to resolve conflict and that norms supported their work. Although the time, collaboration, and opposing viewpoints were roadblocks that had been addressed, the area for growth was identified in the collaborative culture with regard to sharing authentically and meaningfully with each other.

**Theme 3: Focus on Results**

The third major theme or key idea that drives the work of PLCs is the conceptual framework of teams focusing on results. In order to assess the effectiveness of educators in helping all students learn, we must focus on the evidence of student learning and use results to inform and improve professional practice. The use of this evidence allows teachers to respond to students who need intervention and enrichment.

In a summary of research, Wei et al. (2009) stated, “Research . . . suggests that professional development is most effective when teachers engage actively in instructional inquiry in the context of collaborative professional communities, focused on instructional improvement and student achievement” (p. 58).

Now more than ever, the accountability systems in education are focused primarily on summative state or national assessments, but an emphasis has also been identified in the area of classroom assessment. John Diamond (2012) reviewed accountability policy, school organizations, and instructional practice in K-8 schools in Chicago. Although proponents of accountability policies have argued that in creating tighter links among academic standards, curricular content and pedagogy, and standardized testing, student outcomes and reductions in educational inequality will improve. However, Diamond argued that the accountability gap still occurs because relationships vary across subject matter, as do instructional dimensions through
various social organizations among schools. He also argued that the differential responses to accountability policy across high- and low-performing schools and unequal distribution of resources across schools shape the relationship between policy and instruction and have important implications for educational inequality. These are important considerations for educational policymakers, leaders, and stakeholders to consider when aligning results with school reform and accountability.

Common classroom assessments are created and scored by classroom teachers but although educators often have resistance to teacher-created tests, the strongest connection to these assessments comes not from the defenders of national testing companies but from the classroom teachers themselves. The review of assessment data is often taken personally; therefore, the trust built among teams is critical in analyzing these results. In a team with high psychological safety, teammates are safe to take risks around their team members. They are confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea (Bariso, 2018).

PLCs can maximize an assessment beyond providing individual students with grades as measured learning targets by standards. However, in effective PLCs that administer common assessments, teachers can pool their collective wisdom in making sound instructional decisions based on results (Stiggins & DuFour, 2009).

Data-driven decision-making is a considerably common practice in the school setting. Some research indicated a strong connect between data analysis and professional development in that staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous
improvement (Johnson, 2011). The work of Jennings (2007) focused on committees and applied its findings to PLCs, which, in essence, are a small form of a committee. A collective group should consider its impact by evaluating its effectiveness, presenting results, and demonstrating appreciation for the group’s efforts. As educators collaborate within a group, the opportunity to be exposed to various mindsets, approaches, and perspectives deepens, increasing awareness of self and others (Severson, Blum-DeStefano, & Asghar, 2013).

**Professional Development for Continuous Growth**

An effective analysis of the team setting in PLCs is to consider the five dysfunctions of a team as outlined by Lencioni (2002). These dysfunctions are areas in which teams hinder the trusting, collaborative process of continuous growth, and should any of the factors (inattention to results, avoidance of accountability, lack of commitment, fear of conflict, absence of trust) be evident in an evaluation of the team, the provided conditions and structures in this literature review can be considered as means for professional development and continuous improvement. Schools can utilize Darling-Hammond’s (2013) review of national surveys and empirical studies on professional development that have identified factors that pay off when planning for adult learning to combat dysfunctional teaming. First, professional learning is most effective when it is intensive, ongoing, and connected to teachers’ practice. These attributes support specifically the connectivity to the collaborative work in which teachers engage with consistent, ongoing PLCs that focus on the teaching and learning of specific academic content and connect to other school initiatives. Hammond (2013) continued to claim that strong networks of teachers enhance their professional learning when there is a focus on collaboration and professional relationships.
Also, as mentioned earlier, adults have various ways of knowing, including instrumental (concrete orientation to life), socializing (enhanced capacity for reflection and understanding others’ feelings/judgments), and self-authoring (generating internal value systems when comparing expectations of others) (Severson, 2008). These three “ways of knowing” influence the ways in which educators view themselves and others as teachers, leaders, and learners, and what makes them effective. Severson (2008) indicated four pillars for success when planning learning practices to support growth; teaming, providing leadership roles, collegial inquiry, and mentoring. Each pillar practice centers on adult collaboration and creates opportunities to engage in reflective practice, two key indicators of professional development that make an impact when implementing PLCs.

**Conclusion**

The research cited throughout the review of literature suggests that a focus on learning, collaboration, and results are critical for teams to engage effectively in PLCs to impact student learning. Although a PLC is a widely used definition and structure, there are areas for improvement and implementation clarity, which can be addressed by incorporating key conditions and problem-solving implementation strategies. Educators need to revamp the current structures that teachers participate in to collaborate and make improvements on behalf of student learning in their schools. To date, most work on PLCs has focused on the challenges of collaboration, given the constraints of school finance, leadership, material, and time resources. An area to consider is on introverts at the table and how personalities impact collaboration. A TED talk by Cain (2012) highlighted that one third to one half of co-workers are introverts, and are, for the most part, subject to a bias for not collaborating due to social stimulation responses.
Cain argued that schools are designed for extroverts and it is critical for educational institutions to consider extroverts and introverts in the design process.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Design Overview

The purpose of this section is to describe the methodology, research design, and procedures used for this study. This section also describes the ways in which the research design was carried out throughout the study, a description of the survey instrument, data-collection procedures, the population sample identified for research, analysis procedures, and study limitations. The evaluation goal of this research is founded upon a utilization-focused approach, not assuming either high or low expectations, but rather finding out what the expectations of intended users are and negotiate a shared understanding and mutual commitment to implement PLCs within the school district in a meaningful and impactful way, according to Patton (2008).

This research is aligned to a shared goal among educators in the district so that the organization can use collaboration time effectively. I evaluated the PLCs at Lollie School District for the purpose of identifying areas of strength and areas that could be improved by determining characteristics of high-functioning teams. As assistant superintendent for the district, I share responsibility for the professional growth and support of the teaching staff. Additionally, this was the first year an articulation facilitator role was available for all grade levels to support PLCs, and gathering insight from these leaders could provide insight into improving collaboration to meet student learning.

Relationships among teachers in a grade level or building can be dynamic in the school system, and I am also conducting my research to determine the ways in which relationships that work together develop and implement a cohesive learning experience for all students. The teams
in grades first through fifth grade range from 8 to 10 teachers, not including specialists that participate in the collaboration. Teaching staff experience learning opportunities in a variety of ways, just as students learn in various capacities. It is important to consider structures for adult growth or transformational learning in the PLC process (Drago-Severson, 2008). I begin this program evaluation with a district conversation on ways to structure collaboration to foster peer-driven change effectively for the benefit of students. The conversation leads into building and maintaining professional relationships with colleagues for the betterment of student learning. I am interested in reflecting on ways in which teachers and administrators can create structures that lead to teachers using their time purposefully to discuss and plan for curriculum, instruction, and assessment opportunities by being intentional in determining student needs and monitoring learning.

**Methodology**

The program evaluation incorporated qualitative and quantitative methodologies by incorporating both surveys and interviews with teachers within the district. Research uses descriptive statistics gathered from existing data sources to draw conclusions and support hypotheses. By gathering data on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of professional learning in my district, my research can inform a cycle of reflection or continuous improvement (Patton, 2008). The first research that was conducted was the observational data through field observations and notes, which provided me some context prior to conducting the focus group interview. From there, I reviewed archival data, having the perspective from the staff before drawing on my analysis of survey data. Ultimately, this process can guide the work of the staff development committee and provide a strong vehicle for teacher voice. Patton stated “being
knowledgeable about patterns of program effectiveness allows evaluators to provide guidance about development of new initiatives, policies, and strategies for implementation. Such contributions constitute the conceptual use of evaluation findings” (p. 134).

My inquiry utilized archival data, including previously sent surveys that were sent out to the staff focused on the central ideas of PLCs to answer the question of which characteristics of collaboration are found in PLCs that support collaboration. The three areas that DuFour, Eaker, Karhanek, and DuFour (2004) used to guide the work of PLCs, which include a focus on learning, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results, is used as the framework for the information gathering and analysis outlined in my research. Additionally, the articulation leaders participated in focus group interviews that supported the survey analysis to gather in-depth information regarding collaboration characteristics among PLCs. To paint a full picture of the PLC evaluation, the hybrid quantitative and qualitative study is appropriate for this research.

**Participants**

Participants included all teachers who engaged in collaboration opportunities consistently over the course of the week and teachers who served as articulation leaders. Articulation leaders are facilitators of collaboration time for a particular grade level or content area. The sample set included six teachers from the primary and intermediate buildings in the district, representing grades kindergarten through fifth grade. As articulation leaders, the representatives were liaisons among the teams, which were comprised of approximately 10 teachers and communicated agendas in advance, facilitated meeting conversation, and monitored progress during collaboration or PLC meetings. Two of the representatives served as support specialists or instructional coaches, supporting student learning on a differentiated progression and supporting
educators in facilitating learning efforts. The research collected represented a variety of
participants from within the school district. Participants included certified teachers who engaged
in PLCs in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. The participants interacted with the
researcher during natural observation during PLCs and teacher collaboration, focused group
interviews. Field notes of these interactions and existing data collection that routinely occurs in
the district regarding PLC comprised the written records of the research. Each of these methods
is outlined below and includes additional information regarding the context of the collective
participants. These methods employed purposeful sampling, logic, and random samples
sufficient in size to permit valid generalizations and appropriate tests of statistical significance.
According to Patton (2008), qualitative inquiry involves small "purposeful samples of
information-rich cases" (p. 458).

**Data-Gathering Techniques**

Educators often see initiatives or programs as one more new thing that does not last
within an organization. The purpose behind incorporating the three big ideas into my data
collection is to align with the Consortium for Educational Change system assessment visit that
also uses a focus on learning, culture of collaboration, and focus on results. Making the
connection to the previous assessments as they relate to current practices connects the dots for
our staff. Incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis supports the reader with
evidence from multiple viewpoints to help drive the next steps intentionally. The data collected
can further implementation and sustainability of PLCs within the district, as outlined in the
following recommendations.

A mixed-methods approach is taken in the program evaluation by utilizing both
quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. I planned to gather data to answer my research questions, which considered the needed conditions and characteristics of an effective PLC process, through a focus-group interview and existing data on team considerations of collaboration and observation, which allowed me to incorporate quantitative and qualitative analysis. I used an interview protocol structure to gather data in a qualitative way. I planned to start my research process with the support of a district leadership team and the articulation leaders, who were also participants in the interview protocols.

According to Creswell (2017), qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (p.4).

For the qualitative aspects of my research, data were analyzed using a coding method. Notes were available for all existing data that were used, so once complete, data used were put into a table and coded according to various themes. Organizing data using multiple codes facilitated filtering and arranging in various chunking patterns and themes and allowed for grouping common information together. These were then arranged so all responses could be analyzed easily.

Using the philosophy or approach described in participatory action research models, the school district leadership team (DLT) influenced the research conducted within the district. The purpose of the DLT is to advise and steer the school district on various initiatives, data reflection practices, and leadership structures throughout the organization. Given that collaboration time
was in place for all certified staff members as part of the weekly schedule, the DLT reflected on implementation by sharing celebrations or success stories of productive PLCs and acknowledged challenging components of implementation. As a researcher in my own district, I observed relationships of the stakeholders implementing collaboration time, which might be a sensitive topic for some participants. With regard to utilization-focused evaluation, Patton (2008) shared the significant importance of buy-in with regard to change and adult learning: “Perspectives and value commitments imply stakes, which leads to stakeholders, which leads to involving stakeholders to represent their stakes, even in method decisions, or should we say, especially in methods decisions, since those decisions determine what findings will be available for interpretation and use” (p. 391).

I shared my dissertation purpose and protocol with the DLT during the fall of 2017. Collectively, we determined a way to engage interested staff members participating in the process of providing information so that I could gather data regarding our driving factors. We also discussed the selection process to ensure that the process was fair and clearly defined for the entire staff, not just for those participating in the research. The research occurred across two grade-centered schools that were all represented, as a balanced participation from each of the grade spans K-2 and 3-5 is a critical factor in the participation selection process.

**Observation and field notes.** As a researcher in my own district, I observed relationships of the stakeholders implementing collaboration time through participation observation data-collection strategies. I interacted with PLCs naturally in my everyday tasks as I collected information. This method for investigating my research question allowed for real-world, complex and diverse experiences of educators in their natural state (Jorgensen, 1989). As
an educational leader within my organization, my professional knowledge and experience throughout the process supported the data collection on effective collaboration and the necessary supports for successful implementation. Observation notes from articulation-leader meetings across the district also influenced my work as I studied the art of collaboration among educator teams. Through this qualitative approach, other information surfaced that informed me.

**Focus-group interviews.** Following the collection of existing survey data, focus-group participants were invited from each of the three school buildings. These groups were limited to no more than 10 teachers. The elementary focus groups each consisted of up to 10 certified staff members (primary grade teachers, intermediate grade teachers, student services teachers, and exploratory teachers). I intended to separate the focus groups by grade span because the conditions and structures of the collaboration time were different in each of the buildings. The K-5 teaching staff met twice a week before the school day for one hour to collaborate. It could be difficult for the grade-level team to meet during the day because there are between 8 and 10 teachers in first through fifth grades, not including special education, reading specialist, and English language learning staff who participate in the learning community. The articulation facilitators participated in extensive professional development through the PLC conference during July 2017. Patton (2002) supported the small sample size of the focused-group interviews, as purposeful sampling, which supports the data pulled from this narrow-focused group that is most involved with the implementation of PLCs.

The focus-group interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. The intent of the interviews was to discover how teachers and articulation leaders come to understand and implement PLCs. Using a semi-structured approach allowed for information to be shared from
the interviewees' perspectives, and follow-up questions from the researcher allowed for more open and honest conversation in a comfortable setting. Through the dialogue, evidence was gathered on each participant’s level of understanding of the purpose of a PLC and roadblocks or successes that could support or hinder the model. Additionally, the interview drove at what teachers and articulation leaders need to be effective, whether that be tangible or intangible resources. The focus-group interviews consisted of five to seven questions aligned to these two topics and allowed for open-ended responses to have participants express their own experiences and beliefs. It was estimated that the interview would last approximately 45 minutes. A list of focus-group questions can be found in Appendix A. Invitations were sent electronically to teachers in each of the three school buildings, and volunteer participants were selected based upon sampling criteria. Informed consent was obtained before the group interviews were scheduled. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous. They were told that the group interviews would be recorded for the purpose of transcript analysis and given the option to decline participation.

Archival data. Principals have requested that their staff participate in feedback regarding PLCs during staff meetings during the past and current school year. The survey included questions regarding critical attributes of collaboration so that building principals would have a better sense of staff perceptions of the productivity among grade-level/content-area teams. Knowing the information provides leverage for building principals and teams to reflect on current realities of teacher participants during collaboration. Surveys are also implemented multiple times to allow for data analysis to reflect on growth and change in responses over time. Forty-eight participants engaged in the survey for the elementary building, and 41 participants
engaged in the survey at the intermediate building, and the respondents were representatives of the grade-level team and student-services team. Because all certified staff were actively involved in the district’s professional learning activities, it was deemed important to sample as much data as possible, and the survey tool was consistently implemented in each of the buildings. Survey results included information from content-area teachers or grade-level teachers, support teachers, and special-area teachers. Permission was granted by the school district to review archival data as quantitative data to gather information that influenced my research. I chose to incorporate archival data because the teams were naturally reflecting on PLC critical attributes through building surveys as presented by principals. As a district administrator, I was cognizant of the number of requests for survey/data collection that are posed to staff and felt that the use of archival data would be a natural collection of information.

**Ethical Considerations**

This research that was completed was in compliance with institutional ethical standards in conducting research. All collected data have been reported in the aggregate and stripped of any information or labels that could be used to identify individual teachers or students. The purpose of using archival data was to study the natural behaviors and responses of the data presented in the district, allowing for accurate perspectives to rise to the top in the natural environment (Jol & Stommel, 2016). Informed consent was provided to those who participated in the structured interviews. The research was conducted in a district in which I currently served as a new administrator. Maintaining anonymity and privacy in the data aggregation was essential to maintain confidentiality and respect among my colleagues.

The potential risks to participation in the focus-group interviews were minimal. The
identity of participants were kept confidential on all interview transcripts and coding sheets. Participant names were replaced with alphanumeric labels. Only I had access to the audio-recordings, as they were housed on my password-protected personal computer. I planned to destroy the recordings following the analysis of results. However, the volunteer participants were entering into a group conversation about their perceptions, experiences, and opinions on their professional learning. There were opportunities for disagreement or differences of opinion among colleagues within this interview format. There was also a chance that participants could violate the guidelines and share responses of their colleagues with people outside of the focus group.

The potential benefits of this data collection are significant. This program evaluation provided a unique opportunity for teachers to voice their perceptions and opinions about the PLCs in which they were participating within the school district and to drive the systemic needs for developing the PLC structures to be successful. They were able to contribute to improvements in the design of their own professional development and growth for the betterment of the students served in the district.

Therefore, the risks involved relationships within my current organization, but the benefits outweighed the risks, including a comprehensive analysis of implementation and professional development to support adult leaders through collaboration. Additionally, those who volunteered to participate in the research were also given the option to opt out of the study at any time. The Internal Research Review Board provided consent for the study and declared it exempt from the human subject protection regulations.

Additionally, my university dissertation chair reviewed all methods applied in this study
to ensure that applicable measures had been taken to ensure ethical implementation. Data were stored on a password-protected computer and password-protected software. Data collected were beneficial to the organization as teachers continued to implement PLCs as means of supporting student learning.

**Data-Analysis Techniques**

The analysis was conducted with coding for emergent themes and in preparation of analyzing the data, I used the three core ideas of a PLC to organize responses based on common topics. Patton (2008) argued that “thoughtful consideration of how the data will be used, grounded in common sense and pragmatism, is a decision that should be made by intended users with intended uses in mind” (p. 389).

**Observations/field notes.** In the observations I conducted, I utilized personal notes and team agendas to reflect on common trends and real-life experiences in which I engaged with the staff. I recorded as much detail as possible in the moment, but I also reflected after the fact so that I could be fully present. Although these observations were generalizations, it was a critical research component as a natural participant in the learning environment.

**Focus-group interview.** The focus interview was analyzed by transcribing the recording and looking for similar trends and themes of the results. By focusing on a specific moment in the campaign and conducting it in a timely manner, this method gathered in-depth and real-time information and kept the interaction targeted, practical, and relevant (Patton, 2008). After the results and program evaluation was concluded, the focus group had the opportunity to come back together to analyze the results and data.

**Archival data.** In the survey analysis, I utilized the central tendencies methods for
survey results. Carroll and Carroll (2002) claimed that “one of the most useful expenditures of time is to construct a frequency distribution” (p., 17), which allowed me to interpret a procedure for reviewing the count of each response. Utilizing this component helped me analyze data and steer participants for interview protocols. The main focus was to look for frequency and patterns that were representative of the entire district and then broken down by grade-level spans of Pre-K-2 and 3-5 based on each represented building within the district. To help execute statistical analysis used, I also utilized the coding strategy to analyze the data by reviewing trends and outliers among the pattern of responses in the interview protocol, as qualitative data were collected.

As a result of this study, Lollie School District engaged in supporting educators and additional professional development on the PLC process and model. The use of various information from the teachers as key stakeholders supported the goal of providing optimal conditions to implement effective PLCs within the district. It was the responsibility of school leaders and educators in the district to conduct program reviews and evaluations for the work that is conducted within the school settings and report results. The program review served in this capacity for PLC and collaboration time at Lollie School District.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This results chapter outlines my studies of the implementation of PLCs in two grade-centered elementary schools, PreK-2 and 3-5, in one school district. To evaluate the conditions of the effectively run PLCs at Lollie School District, I collected and analyzed three types of quantitative and qualitative data: archival implementation surveys, a focus interview group, and direct observations of PLCs within the school district. By utilizing three different data entry points, the process provided me with the opportunity to analyze and identify patterns and themes in the responses received. According to Patton, such triangulated evaluation findings about principles of effective programming have become the knowledge base of the evaluation profession. Being knowledgeable about patterns of program effectiveness allows evaluators to provide guidance about development of new initiatives, policies, and strategies for implementation. Therefore, the findings collected through evidence and research during this process may influence and impact the workplace organization at Lollie School District, which is further discussed in the TO-BE section.

AS-IS Analysis

The findings presented in this section are influenced by the AS-IS diagnostic tool, and the following includes an explanation of the factors in each of the four arenas of change (context, culture, conditions, and competencies, i.e., the 4Cs) that are in need of change. Using Wagner et al.'s (2012) Change Leadership: A Practical Guide for Transforming Our Schools, I developed a plan that considered organizational changes to improve the implementation of PLCs (the AS-IS
in Appendix B). Wagner values organizational change and considers achieving improvements in teaching and learning to be the foundational purpose for engaging in a change plan (Wagner et al., 2012).

Research suggests that positive school reform occurs when teachers participate in authentic PLCs, with improved student achievement as a by-product (Wilson, 2016). As a practicing educator and administrator in the district, my ability to identify common themes and patterns affords me the opportunity to identify potential change recommendations to improve the current PLC implementation practices that are occurring at Lollie School District, which may ultimately lead to increased student learning. After explaining each area of change using the 4Cs (Wagner et al., 2012), I present the data results in a format that reveals the patterns and themes of the results presented.

**Context.** The influence of context references the skill demands that help educators understand who the current stakeholders are and their expectations, both formally and informally. The context encompasses culture, conditions, and competencies, using the realities of global, state, and communities to wrap around them. The following provides readers with an understanding of the context of Lollie School District and the ways in which stakeholders work within this context to improve PLCs. The two critical components of context are

- Community high expectations for student performance, and
- Overcoming reduction in force, reduced programming, and limited professional development from five years ago.

As previously discussed in chapter one, it is evident that there is a strong community connection in Lollieville. Members gather for state-of-the-village community events for each
taxing body to reflect and share opportunities, future plans, and challenges to overcome. The school district found itself in a financial crisis about eight years ago when, in the spring of 2011, the district did not pass a referendum and needed to make close to $700,000 in cuts. This included closing one of the schools in the district and moving the students and staff to the other buildings. It also meant that, at the time, staff was reduced by about 70 teachers, from programs including band, art, and music.

In addition to the internal challenges of maintaining the district, Lollie School District found that the state of Illinois had adopted the CCSS, and due to the budget cuts, little professional development was provided to the staff. This occurred at the same time that educators across the U.S. were studying and implementing the shifts in instruction as a result of the updated standards and student learning expectations. Understanding the need to support teachers in implementing the CCSS, educators and researchers provided these principles or changers as a result of the standards (Student Achievement Partners, 2012a). During this time, districts were exploring what the standards and shifts meant for the curriculum and ways in which increased expectations for student learning could be met. The district adopted a math curriculum that claimed it was CCSS-aligned and implemented it for a few years with limited consistent professional development for all. Rather, teacher leaders attended professional learning, or the staff engaged in optional sessions to support the implementation.

The community has high expectations for student success and opportunities for students to receive a well-rounded education. The community has various organizations and foundations to support student learning and well-being within the school district and in the community. The students feed into one public high school, which was recently awarded National Blue Ribbon
status. The board, administrative team, and certified staff envision the elementary district to also be the top school district in the state.

**Culture.** As a result of the lack of resources and finances and of dramatic staffing changes, there has been a lack of dialogue on instructional leadership, and the building principals have served in more managerial positions than instructional leaders. The assistant superintendent filled the superintendency as interim for several years during multiple transitions of the district leader. Therefore, teachers have had a great deal of autonomy to make decisions in the process of curriculum development and for student learning. In the effort to lead the school, principals have been given the autonomy to make building-based decisions, which has caused three school districts to run as separate entities, compared to the cohesive and coherent school district. Although this has become the acceptable culture over the past five years, the teams are growing trusting relationships over time due to the newly added collaboration time. The two critical components of culture are

- Inconsistent expectations of holding each other accountable on behalf of student learning, and
- Distrust within the team, including smaller groups of relationships.

DuFour (2002) described the impact that principals and instructional leaders can have on learning when they shift both their own focus and that of the school community from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results. The shared beliefs of the school relationships must include the analysis of results as a collective team to support a shared expectation and mutual accountable approach for all students in the grade level, not just those in each of the classrooms.
**Conditions.** Wagner et al. (2012) defined conditions as “the external architecture surrounding student learning, and tangible arrangements of time, space, and resources” (p. 101). Therefore, Lollie School District must consider which structures are in place for collaboration, including space, time, human resources, instructional resources, and outcomes. At Lollie School District, the following conditions are implemented at Grades K-5:

- Collaboration two times per week for one hour,
- Eight to 10 core team members, and
- 1 articulation leader per grade level.

Collaboration time was brought back into the day for teams last school year. The teams for first to fifth grade include 8 to 10 core grade-level teachers. The large team sizes are due to the fact that there is only one grade center in the district, serving approximately 700 to 850 students at each building. With grade levels of 200-250 students, class sizes are about 25-27 students per classroom. One of the challenges schools encounter when serving one grade center per district is the development of the school schedule so that it allows for natural collaboration and touch points. When specialists such as English language learner (ELL) and special education teachers join the team, the size increases to a team of nearly 15 people. The more people in a team, the longer it takes to share ideas and the more difficult it becomes to find a space conducive to a team meeting.

Another major influence in conditions that is critical to note is that teachers have been developing English language arts (ELA) units of study from scratch. During collaboration, teachers are working on establishing their grade-level curriculum due to the lack of curricular updates that have been developed over the past five years. As a result, one condition that is
impacted is the lack of ELA resources provided for teams to decipher, in addition to the time, effort, and energy needed to develop these critical instructional resources.

**Competencies.** Teachers within the district are equipped with technical, social, and leadership skills and knowledge. These competencies are looked at through the lenses of "hard" and "soft". The hard competencies can be considered the actual skills and knowledge required to carry out specific tasks, and the soft competencies might be the personalities, dispositions, leadership styles, and communication styles of individual people. The hard skills that articulation leaders have acquired occurred as a result of training on the topic of what a PLC is and ways in which to implement the process. However, this intensive three-day professional development has been provided only to a small group of people who are leading the charge. Using the skills needed to facilitate the structured PLC process, the challenge has been ensuring the dispositions of the teams engaging in the process all align with the notion that all students can and will achieve at high levels of learning. At Lollie School District, the competencies as they relate to PLCs are

- Articulation leaders’ attendance of the Solution Tree professional learning conference,
- Limited professional development, and
- Collaboration used for curriculum development rather than reflective of the four PLC questions.

Because the teams are new to having collaboration time for all teachers to meet at the same time on a consistent basis, there has not been enough time for teams to engage in professional development on engaging in a collaborative environment. Teams also have not been
able to implement the four professional learning community questions because collaboration has occurred for curriculum development.

**Findings**

An intensive review of the data presented revealed three predominant themes. The first theme is the need for dedicated time and implemented PLC structure for everyone on the team to be a part of the PLC process. The second theme is the coherent curriculum, focused on learning that is critical in the PLC process. The need for an established set of learning objectives by grade level and content is a critical component for teams to have established to implement the PLC process. The third theme revolves around trust and the importance of establishing a trusting relationship among the team members to engage in the process. The data analysis presented began with the focus interview group results, then presented the archival data review and analyzed field and observational notes.

**Focus-Group Interview Results**

The focus group I conducted used the three overarching themes of PLCs, including focus on learning, collaboration, and results. Five teachers participated in the focus-group interview that lasted for approximately 65 minutes. The teachers represented each grade level from K-5 and included teachers from two different schools. Three of the participants were classroom teachers, one was a reading specialist, and one was an instructional coach. The roles of the reading specialist and instructional coach afforded these teachers to present the perspective of all grade levels K-5, as they are part of the PLC process for more than one grade level.

In the following section, the results of the focus interview are presented by stating the question asked of the group. Following the question, I clarify the purpose of asking the specific
question and what is intended on learning from the participants' responses. Furthermore, the reader can see the responses from the teachers summarized, or paraphrased, and I include a synopsis that precedes a figure of responses of each participant. The results of the interview are transcribed within the figure and interpreted by being coded into major themes on PLCs. The coding process allowed for the interpretation of large segments of text and portions of information in new ways by assessing the ways in which the responses were linked to themes (Michael, 2018).

**Theme 1: Focus on Learning**

*Question 1: How does the district’s structure for PLCs impact your grade-level team?*

All teachers in Grades K-5 engaged in a collaboration time three times a week. The first was on Mondays for 30 minutes, and it allowed for a “nuts and bolts” time and conversation so that teachers could be afforded the time to discuss logistics for the grade level. The purpose of asking this question was to determine the perceptions of the teacher participants on the structure the district had in place for collaborative efforts (see Figure 1).

When asked a follow-up question regarding any negative impacts of the structure, the teachers discussed the importance of separating out a time for "nuts and bolts" and PLC and that when those times bled together, it could overpower the opportunity to use the PLC process. To summarize the responses, teachers expressed the frustration of having another meeting from the building administration or district administration being called in during the "nuts and bolts" because it would shift previously scheduled agenda items. On a professional and personal matter, the inconsistent start time had taken some getting used to because every day was a different start to the school day, for the teachers, not the students.
Teacher | Response
--- | ---
A | "Timing is now afforded since we meet three times a week. In the past, by the time we got started, then it was time to go. This helped us with what we needed to get done and question if should be consistent."
B | "At certain times, it is nice to have nuts and bolts because we have things to take care of other than the PLC process; like field trips."
C | "We just need to ensure we are committing the other time to be targeted toward PLC and not have nuts and bolts."
D | "Having the time paired with time to do curriculum development/release has been very beneficial."

Figure 1. Interview responses regarding district PLCs.

**Question 2: Are all members of your team on the same page and consistent in instructional implementation?**

To tie together the purpose of a PLC with what the teams are teaching, this question regarding a guaranteed and viable curriculum was asked of the teams. Commonly, the teachers discussed the challenge between the need for grade-level teams to make a collective decision about the core learning experience as opposed to the need for a classroom teacher to make an autonomous decision for his or her own classroom.

Overall, the participants described that the disposition of the collective teams was that everyone was putting in their best efforts to be consistent to implement the core curriculum, but that they were challenged by trying to move forward through the pacing and curriculum together, because it took each class a different amount of time (see Figure 2). Therefore, having the time to review the data could be difficult.

There is no argument that respectful disagreement is a critical component of challenging and stretching a collective group's understanding and decision-making. This question invites the participants to discuss challenges that arise when working together in a group and participants do
not see eye-to-eye on a specific action or decision of the collective group. I asked this question to garner a deeper understanding of the needs of teacher leaders in a PLC to practice decision-making strategies and skills that support hearing from all participants, even when the group does not agree (see Figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| A       | "It could be helpful to bring the conversation when reviewing student progress. We have to remember the ultimate goal to teach to the standards."
"During the first year of implementation of the ELA curriculum, the teams spent the entire time collaborating around writing their own units and deciding what they were going to teach in the near future." Therefore, participants described that although the time was available, the PLC process remained in Stage 1, determining what students should know and be able to do. |
| B       | "In Year 1, we spent time writing units so there was not as much time to talk about what worked." |
| C       | "In our team, we like having our own autonomy to make some decisions about the core curriculum, but if we want to determine where success lies if we are all doing different things, can we really measure that? We are all using same material but may be going about it in a different way. In our curriculum folders, we have so many things in our plan, and you can choose, but we wonder, was one material or the other the best?" |

*Figure 2. Interview responses regarding consistency.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>&quot;Sometimes we agree just to move on, and then people would complain about the decision, and then after it is made, it’s, like, what were we thinking?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;It's like trial and error.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>&quot;Everyone has to say something about it. We used to be a team that could never make a decision, but this year, once we made a decision, it was a done deal. Sometimes it would have to come down to a vote---go around and try to get consensus. The part we haven’t gotten to is evidence of student data, and we need more consensus on that.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3. Interview responses regarding student learning.*
Theme 2: Collaboration

Questions 4 and 5: What is the role of the articulation leader during collaboration time?

How do colleagues perceive the role of articulation leaders?

To frame this question, it is critical for readers to understand that teachers at Lollie School District responded to a posting for articulation leaders as a stipend position. The position was developed to create agendas and facilitate PLCs. Those who have served as articulation leaders also have engaged in regular meetings about the process and attended the Solution Tree conference on All Things PLC over the summer.

Based on the responses of the participants (see Figure 4), there was a varied perception of the team’s understanding of an articulation leader. Some articulation leaders were the sole leader of the collaboration, but others had distributed leadership among the team members to run in the event of their absence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>&quot;Each articulation leader has their own spin, and I am able to see that across all teams, but teams rely too heavily on artic leader to facilitate.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>&quot;Sometimes my team will joke that you’re the one getting paid, so then the perception then is, well, then you can do the work. You get paid so you can do the work. Even though the team and I listen during the meetings, if someone doesn’t like the desired outcome, I often have others coming to me before or after about a topic, and then I have to bring it back to the team at a later date.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;The role is to be a facilitator and ensure that I get all voices heard. I love what Jack Balderman said, that all teachers are leaders on the team and we are working toward a common goal.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| E       | "Sometimes people will come to the artic leader, and I feel put on the spot, because there’s an essential question of what is a person issue versus a team issue? How do I be a listener on this information?"
Consistently, the responses included creating the agenda with input and incorporating teacher restatements or rephrasing to get the message out.

Figure 4. Interview responses regarding roles of the articulation leader.
Question 6: What does your team do when there is disagreement?

Although this question is similar to Question 3, the intent of asking about disagreement is to recognize the confidence participants having in working through a difficult conversation (see Figure 5).

Participants expressed the importance of making a decision and sticking to it as a team, even if all parties involved were not in agreement. This mindset is representative of the collective commitment from all team members. No participants expressed any challenges with navigating disrespect as a result of disagreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>&quot;We give it time to think about it and come back to it. It is always a hard time making a decision or moving forward. When we made a decision, we kept to it as a done deal, and that made a difference to us; everyone’s voice heard first.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>&quot;It is a parking-lot conversation with people venting, but the fact is that the person brought it up with the team and that helps the team with coming together.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;Sometimes we vote, and the artic leader facilitates that.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>&quot;We have an open conversation brought to the team.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Interview responses regarding disagreement.

Question 7: What makes PLC collaboration effective?

Various stakeholders would respond to this question based on their individual opinions and mindsets, given their role. Therefore, it was critical to ask this of the articulation leaders in order to recognize the needs the teachers presented in order to be successful (see Figure 6). Leaders of the organization must recognize what staff needs to do the work without outside factors getting in the way.
A: "Time so it's not start and stop, and that the time is protected, meaning no other people can be pulled at this time. I’m not splitting up the team because it's not seamless or it’s a lot of catching up."

B: "Time is important, but we struggle with when do we have the time to review the data, etc."

C: "Time and togetherness."

D: "Action planning, we [the team] need to know where we are going, have focus and agenda, and sticking to it together, not separately."

**Figure 6.** Interview responses regarding effective collaboration.

The results are consistent regarding the need for time and the efficient use of the time teams have together to collaborate.

**Question 7: Follow-up: What other resources are needed?**

As a researcher, I asked the follow-up question to determine what resources are needed in order to be effective. I wanted to know what else our teachers need in order to do the work of a PLC effectively; therefore, I followed up with hearing this opinion and their voice for future support (see Figure 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>&quot;We just need you [the researcher] to be there with us for grade-level data. We need support on what to focus on student data strengths but weaknesses and how to focus.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>&quot;We need to embrace the idea that all really means all and are we really there. We’ve been focused on reviewing classroom data by class but need to get to all students in the grade level.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>&quot;I want more vertical articulation. I think we are still a little segregated in our grade-level thinking.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;We need to start the year knowing we’ll do these things and not add new things later in the year.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>&quot;We need a person to help with data collection.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 7.** Interview responses regarding additional needs to improve effective collaboration.
I recognized two major needs from the responses to this question. The first related to shifting the thinking that all learning means all in a collective efficacy for learning among grade-level content areas. The second one was a need for supporting the data-analysis process, whether that would be a tool or a system to collect the data or a person to support the process of data collection and analysis.

*Question 8: What are some actions that principals can take to increase teacher leadership and increase capacity for professional learning?*

The purpose of asking the participants this question was to know how the instructional leaders at the building level could support the process within their schools (see Figure 8). In the model at Lollie School District, it is not the responsibility for the principal to lead every PLC but rather to engage in supporting teacher leaders in the process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>&quot;Be there, be a listening ear, share their time with the grade-level teams. Lead us and give examples.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;Support us, know we are trying, and support our efforts.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8. Response regarding the role of the principal.*

Participants expressed an interest in support from building principals as well as leading by example and modeling the work of a PLC so that articulation leaders could emulate the process.
Theme 3: Results

**Question 9:** What additional resources (e.g., time, materials, staff) are needed to improve PLCs in the district?

This question was asked during Question 6 follow-up previously in the conversation. Therefore, the question was not discussed much further, other than one participant stating that data collection was an area of need and the other participants nodded.

**Question 10:** Which student data should be collected to evaluate the effectiveness of PLCs?

Given that Lollie School District had been in the initial phases of implementing PLCs, it was important to ask the participants how the district will know the implementation has been successful. The response (see Figure 9) related to the archival data surveys that were used as part of the evaluation of this program review. The perspective the respondent shared outlined the need to go beyond collecting data but extended to sharing results with the staff.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>&quot;We did the surveys from PLC, but it is important to share the results with our teams. Maybe we don’t need to share at a staff meeting but with each grade level.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 9. Interview responses regarding PLC resources needed.*

**Additional Questions**

**Question 11:** Are there any other issues related to PLCs in our district that we have not touched upon that you would like to discuss?

**Question 12:** Is there anything else that I should consider in my study of professional learning in our district?
The two questions above were asked to ensure that the participants had an opportunity to share anything else on their mind that they had not had a chance previously to respond to in the interview (see Figure 10). Looking closely at these results from the focus-group interview, it is clear that the art of collaboration is an iterative process that is built upon a framework for curriculum development, collaboration, and data analysis to drive decision-making and improve student learning. Individuals on a team are at various parts of the process, and even within a school, various teams have various needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>&quot;I’d really like to get into data analysis and what does it look like as a grade level.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;I am glad to be on the journey. In a short amount of time, I have seen the positive impact on it and am excited for future results.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>&quot;I’d like to work on how to involve other staff members in PLCs more than just the grade-level teachers. The singletons, like PE teachers, reading specialists, special workers, etc.&quot; &quot;I’m so proud of the work we’ve done this year; we’ve come a long way, and we should celebrate that.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 10. Interview responses regarding PLC concerns and additional considerations.*

**Archival Data Review**

The archival data was gathered after the implementation of the PLC process had begun, allowing enough time for teams to establish themselves within the school year. The archival data reviewed included 41 data responses from trusting collaborative relationships and PLC survey questions, as outlined below. A 5-point Likert scale was used to allow the individual participants to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement.

The two key ideas are aligned mostly to the second major theme of the program review on collaboration. When considering teams gather to determine student learning and analyze data
to take action, they engage in a process about student learning, and the art of collaborative environment is a result of the process. The two areas to consider in the archival data analysis are group norms and establishing consensus and comfort ability through disagreement.

Area 1: Norms

Questions regarding norms or commitments to the team are outlined below. Team norms are not considered rules, but commitments among the members. DuFour and DuFour (2013) stated that when done well, norms can help establish the trust, openness, commitment, and accountability that move teams from the trivial to the substantive. Survey data regarding norms in the PLCs at Lollie School District are provided in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

In the responses to the first statement on whether teams have agreed upon norms, nearly all respondents were aware of established norms, including 95.1% of participants. In response to the statement on following regular norms, 80.5% of participants agreed that their teams followed protocols consistently; 19.5% respondents were neutral, which would indicate that there is a lack of confidence in whether or not norms are implemented and maintained. Members of a team must ask themselves and each other why they are here together and what is the commitment they have to each other through the process. Based upon this data, I ascertained that the grade-level teams had established norms that they were confident in implementing, as identified in the answers to Survey Statement 1 (see Table 1). However, there is a likeliness that the teams may veer from adhering to the norms through routine collaboration, which is highlighted by the responses shown to Survey Statement 2. As previously mentioned, norms help teams define their commitment, and the responses to Survey Statement 3 show that 73.2% of the respondents experienced a strong sense of attachment to their team.
Table 1

*Survey Response Statement: We have an agreed-upon set of meaningful norms in our PLC team.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Survey Response Statement: We follow our meeting norms consistently at PLC*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Survey Response Statement: I feel a strong sense of attachment to my team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>73.2%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Area 2: Consensus Through Disagreement

When organizations do not address crucial conversations, the collaborative efforts remain stagnant. Crucial conversations include conflicting opinions and can be highly emotional; stakes run high (Patterson, 2002). As evidenced in Tables 4-7, disagreements occur among the teams, and when they do, participants believe that the teams spend time discussing the particular disagreement. The reason the teams spend time on the disagreement is unclear as to whether the resolution is found in consensus or whether the team spends time disagreeing without determining next steps. The responses have the greatest curve with neutrality in the middle regarding Survey Statement 7 about avoidance of difficult conversations. This question uses the term "avoid" in the response; therefore, one may question whether it was interpreted in a way of teams avoid the dialogue or not.
Table 4

*Survey Response Statement: During our PLC time, team members sometimes disagree about ideas or practices.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

*Survey Response Statement: When team members disagree about ideas or practices, we discuss them in depth.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>73.2%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey Response Statement: *When I disagree with something a member on my PLC has said, I almost always voice that disagreement.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Response Statement: *Within PLC meetings, we try to avoid emotionally charged or difficult topics/conversations.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Field Notes/Observation

During the 2017-18 school year, I personally attended 35 PLC meetings for teams in Grades K through 5. I observed teachers interacting among the teams in a collaborative process to better prepare and serve the students. The greatest observation I made over each of the visits was that although all team dynamics were different, all teams were doing the same work. All the teams had implemented the first question of the PLC process: "What do we want students to know and be able to do?" During some of my interactions, the teams engaged in data analysis and review of the question: "How do we know if students are learning?" However, during few collaborations (approximately three) did I observe the last stage of the PLC process. The greatest challenge I observed was the logistics on ways in which to gather the data in a systematic way that monitors student-learning standards by standard and student-by-student.

What really stood out to me was the dedication of the staff who worked together to make decisions for students. If each person on the team had an opportunity to speak for one and a half minutes, in most cases, that would take approximately 20 minutes of the team’s time during a collaboration. Therefore, it was inevitably challenging to stay committed to the intent of the PLC agenda, to support student learning. Even personal interactions such as, "How are you?" or "What are you doing this weekend?" would deter the collaborative efforts. Because the collaboration visits I refer to were dedicated to math or ELA, rarely did I observe a team get off topic. The "nuts and bolts" time was separated out to a different day, and teams adhered to their commitments and agenda but mostly remained committed to each other.
Interpretation

The results from my surveys, interviews, and observations gave me an understanding of the effects of implemented PLCs within Lollie School District. There were several opportunities for participants to respond to the obstacles that get in the way of teams fully implementing the PLC process. One of the first themes the results provided was the confirmation that teachers need to have an established agreement on what students should know and be able to do in order to collaborate using the PLC model. To create a PLC, teachers should focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold each other accountable for results (DuFour, 2004).

I obtained data from the focus groups by coding responses and noticed that teachers grappled with the idea of how much consistency they needed to have regarding implementing the core curriculum. Respondents discussed the difference between making a decision about what to teach and why teach specific targets, which is different from how each teacher delivers a lesson. I observed that the core curriculum was an important component of the initial agenda items for collaboration.

Teachers expressed challenges with the amount of time it has taken to create the curriculum lessons, saying that it had prohibited their teams from answering the PLC Questions 2-4, considering what teams will do when students meet a particular learning objective. This is a significant consideration for districts to determine whether or not teams can develop their own curriculum or utilize a common set of published curricular tools/resources. Patton (2008) argued that interpretation goes beyond the data to add context, determine meaning, and tease out substantive significance.
I believe it is important to describe the phase of curriculum development the teachers were in during the time of this program review. Teams had been utilizing various tools and curricular materials that were not in full alignment with the updated CCSS. Rather than purchasing a core curriculum from the start, teams began the curricular review process of analyzing the standards and aligning resources to support the delivery of instruction with the standard learning progression. The teams articulated and interpreted the standards together before they could develop their scope and sequence and select instructional tools. During the interview, Teacher C described the challenge with having the autonomy to make instructional decisions in the classroom while balancing the consistency to determine what was working and what was not. Without the consistent implementation of learning materials, the reflective data analysis and action step was limited because of the different variables that would impact student assessment results.

A second theme that emerged from the data is that of time for staff to engage in PLCs that is uninterrupted and consistent. Teachers described the challenges when a PLC was interrupted with another meeting that would prohibit agenda items to be reviewed. Teachers expressed frustration with administrators who would schedule a topic or meeting on short notice because it caused items on the PLC agenda to be left off, although the team had previously committed to completing them. I discovered that the PLCs were at various stages of PLC implementation. When defining the role of an articulation leader, the issue of time constraints was evident. This issue included time for the articulation leader to prepare for meetings as well as to ensure that there is adequate time for the teams to meet and engage in the PLC process. A facilitator is a factor of the time in which teams meet because of his/her role in developing an
agenda and continuing to move through the agenda during the collaboration. The organization of minutes and follow-up is a critical component in maximizing the time.

The third theme revolves around the trust that is built within each team and its members as well as among the various teams within the entire school setting. Muhammad (2012) made a statement about a critical component of social and trusting awareness:

We know that people who have their trust violated become apprehensive at the start of a new relationship—some of them because of the ones that didn’t go so well, and some because they had a good relationship with the previous leader and the new person has to measure up. Everybody’s need for trust is different. People don’t tend to go along with a change if they don’t understand what needs to be done or if they don’t trust the system or the people leading the system. (p. 20)

Although the teachers expressed that difficult conversation and dissenting viewpoints are discussed during PLCs, the feeling of discomfort during disagreement may create a tense environment within the group. The participants in the interview described that sometimes their colleagues would vent during a meeting or that they would stop collaborating when a topic became heated. However, what the participants did not share was the way in which they responded in the heat of a moment. As an observer of PLCs, I have witnessed an articulation leader and/or a teacher leader on a team ask an administrator what his/her viewpoint was of a topic when there was a disagreement or different viewpoints. However, one must note, that what occurs when no administrator, including myself, is present has not been observed.

Judgments

Answers to the primary and secondary research questions of this study arose from the responses of the participants and data collected and have generated new wonderings about PLCs. The primary research questions of this study are:

- What are the characteristics of collaboration in PLCs?
What does it mean to collaborate?

What structures best support teacher collaboration in schools?

Who is responsible for supporting the development of PLCs?

- How do articulation leaders support the development of PLCs?

- How and why do educational leaders advocate for PLCs to change practices for efficiency and effectiveness and advocate for policy related to collaboration efforts?

The data presented illustrate a response to the first question about what is needed to engage in PLCs. Knoster, Villa, and Thousand (2000) described the conditions needed to manage complex change. This correlation can be compared to determining the needs for implementing PLCs. First, teams need to have a clearly established curriculum in which to discuss acceptable and common student evidence across the grade level to demonstrate student learning. Collaborative efforts require trust within the team and support from the team itself, as well as from teacher and administrator leaders to conduct the work. This includes having a structured time to meet, materials to engage in the delivery of instruction, and professional development to support the process.

The results of these data revealed new wonderings, such as, how long do schools have to establish trusting relationships before moving into PLCs? Must the establishment of high-functioning teams occur before one can begin working on the process of analyzing student learning and responding to needs, or does the establishment of team commitment and trusting relationship grow through the implementation of the process? In the program review, there was insufficient information given on the consistency of the makeup of participants on a team; for
example, how many of the participants were new to the team or school, and how did that impact how the collective team functioned?

**Recommendations**

As a result of the findings, intentional action should be developed to focus on defining the purpose and intent of PLCs for all staff. Specifically, a PLC should not be defined as just a noun, verb, or action but as an “ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010, p. 11). As a collective staff, common language that is utilized is an important driver for consistency when implementing the PLC process.

Of all the areas to focus on, the one area that I believe needs to be implemented further is that of data analysis among the collaborative group to determine if students are meeting the committed learning objectives of each grade-level content team. Leveraging student results can allow for the greatest impact on student learning because the focus solidifies the why, what, and how of improving student learning. This is a selected goal area because over the past two years, the core curriculum has been solidified, resulting in common frameworks, mindsets, and beliefs for student learning that is consistent across the greater grade-level teams and coherent in building from grade to grade throughout a student's academic progression in the district. Therefore, when the "what" has been identified, student learning should be monitored to determine how staff needs to respond when students are mastering the objectives or not meeting the learning objectives.
Wagner et al.’s (2012) AS-IS framework (see Appendix B) described consistent themes based on the implementation of PLCs that are relevant to the recommendation for data analysis through collaboration. When considering the contextual impact of making this change, the constituents at Lollie School District must recognize that maintaining high expectations for oneself and others is a critical component of increasing student achievement. Although state assessments may not always be indicative of the capabilities of student learning and achievement, I recommend that the schools at Lollie School District strive for the highest level of implementation among the five essentials in the survey. This is defined in schools with strong ambitious instruction, where classes are challenging and engaging. The instruction is clear and well-structured and encourages students to build and apply knowledge. With regard to the competency of culture, vulnerability is a necessary trait and component in engaging in professional dialogue regarding student performance in individual classrooms as it relates to student performance across a grade-level team.

Lollie School District has the time to implement collaboration consistently throughout the course of the school year. Teachers are dedicated to the learning process and to supporting students. However, the collaborative efforts for a content grade-level implementation should focus on the analysis and answering the question regarding what to do when students are not demonstrating or meeting learning objectives and what to do when students have mastered the standards.

One of the main reasons for my selection of studying PLC implementation was to determine ways in which to effectively use the most valuable resource of time teachers have
together in collaboration to improve student learning outcomes and analyze ways in which to foster a supportive environment to provide educators with the necessary conditions to make a successful impact. Because data analysis is a lever for improving student achievement, I can put into action the use of PLC data facilitation questions and prompts for the teams engaging in collaboration. As teams address questions that are deeper and take the time to review what they do and the ways in which their actions affect student learning, it becomes clearer which action should be taken. Venables (2013) offers the following questions to probe the data review process:

- What do you think that implies?
- Do you think we have evidence to support this statement? Where?
- Can you point to specific evidence?
- Why? How do you know?
- Do you think this is something systemic or specific to particular student populations?
- What do you think we should do to address that?
- What are the big issues here, as opposed to secondary or ancillary issues?
- Can we see root causes, based on evidence, that give rise to secondary symptoms we are seeing? What are the root causes? (p. 113)

I recommend providing teams with these question stems so that opportunities for data review and reflection are meaningful and supported, offering choice to facilitate the dialogue.

As a new district-level administrator at Lollie School District, I have a professional responsibility to ensure that PLCs are implemented within all core areas across the district to leverage time, resources, and human support to increase student achievement. This is my
ultimate goal. As a driver of organizational change, I follow the guidance of Kegan (2009), who identified that, in managing change, adult learners need both support and challenge. Therefore, in our organization, we must continue to challenge our beliefs and actions as we support the staff in the process in order to maintain continuous improvement and increase the level of mental complexity among the staff. Dweck (2015) argued that our intelligences can be developed and can lead to implementing a desire to learn from criticism, accept challenges, persist through the unknown, problem-solve, and find inspiration in the success of others. Through goal-setting and professional development, Lollie School District can continue to influence the mindsets of all stakeholders for continuous improvement by means of monitoring PLC implementation.
CHAPTER FIVE

TO-BE Framework

Introduction

The opportunity for growth at Lollie School District is through professional learning communities is within the ability for teams to review and reflect on student data in a way that provides feedback that drives action to improve student learning. In this chapter, I attempt to detail the components and operations at Lollie School District that must be implemented to engage in effective PLCs. Kotter (2011) stated, “Establishing a sense of urgency is crucial to gaining needed cooperation” (p. 36). The realization of next steps and the actionable professional development needs of teachers can ultimately lead more students to demonstrating mastery of learning standards and increasing results on state and local assessments. This vision has been captured using the 4Cs of the “TO BE” chart (Wagner et al., 2012; see Appendix C) and by providing details with regard to the four arenas of change (competency, conditions, culture, and context).

As an assistant superintendent, my role is to support the articulation leaders, instructional coaches, and building administrators through the data evaluation and review process by providing guiding questions for teams to walk through while reviewing local assessment data. I am also responsible for the oversight of PLC learning model, delivery of framework, and support and maintenance of the implementation process. The ability for grade-level teams and school buildings to review data allows for the collaboration during PLCs to bring a team together with the focus on and purpose of student learning.
A careful consideration of the 4Cs—context, culture, conditions, and competencies—assisted my work in the design process (Wagner et al., 2012). All four of these dimensions should be engaged in order to design and achieve powerful, effective, and sustainable adult learning through PLCs.

**Envisioning the Success: TO BE**

PLCs are built on relationships and a common set of commitments to improving student learning. When implemented well, the structure of these learning communities can lead to reliable growth in student learning. In envisioning the success, I considered the following question: "How can all stakeholders improve this work?"

**Context.** In an effort to describe change that should be implemented in what is, three statements for the ideal context are outlined below and further examined. The context is that of which culture, conditions, and competencies are interwoven, and the context includes external influences that impact the school district. These elements often seem beyond educators' control but deeply impact the work of the organization. Schools should seek to achieve

1. Increasing performance scores in core content areas to be one of the top schools within the county,

2. Strong curriculum and instructional experiences for students, and

3. A well-developed and sustainable system of supports for professional development.

Lollie School District continues currently to implement PLC time for all grade levels and hold the importance of collaboration. One of the greatest political and community contextual beliefs are that Lollie School District should be higher performing that the test results show. As a result of the implementation of core curriculum, high-leverage instructional practices, and
assessment frameworks, student performance scores should increase, highlighting the academic efforts of PLCs and their impact on student learning. Materials and resources that are thoroughly reviewed, vetted by a team, and extensive need to be provided for teachers to implement and students to engage with a repertoire of learning experiences.

A schedule for ongoing professional development that is sustainable, supported, and monitored along the way needs to be available, with various choice options in which staff can engage. With regard to context, this looks like reserving dedicated time and space in which educators can engage for professional learning.

One opportunity for growth for the teachers at Lollie School District is to collaborate beyond the identified collaboration time with honesty, respect, and an open mind to try others’ suggestions for the betterment of the entire grade level. When teams have a genuine interest in considering each other during decisions and collaborate beyond the designated collaboration time, their performance improves to a sustainable system. Building camaraderie, developing consensus, and working through common approaches for procedures and protocols is critical for collaboration. In highly effective teams, this looks like teams that identify barriers to collaboration and address them. Williams and Hierck (2015) stated that when a PLC has not caught on with deep implementation, it often means that the school has focused too much on developing the structures of a PLC and not embraced the challenging, essential cultural changes involved. Therefore, it is critical that leaders take on the challenge and embrace managing emotional intelligence of self and others when moving beyond going through the motions of meeting during collaboration to deepening the relationships and efficacy of the team.
**Culture.** Culture contains the patterns, shared assumptions, and interpretations that shape behavior within an organization. The ideal culture needed for established PLCs to flourish are outlined below and are likely to change as a result of my leadership plan. One of the most critical components of the cultural aspect in implementation is the consistent delivery of core curriculum for all content areas and grade levels. Ultimate collaboration occurs through positive support when one member has seen success based on a strategy and the courage to try the strategy. Additionally, clear expectations and functions of the PLCs are understood, when all members honor each other in the process.

As a leading educational-leadership author who focuses on obtaining results for student achievement, Schmoker (2010) stated,

Let's be clear about what we mean by "curriculum." The word refers to those things that are taught in common by teachers of the same course in a school or district. It doesn't mean lockstep, air-tight, day-by-day conformity to a scripted program but rather what most parents already think it means: an adequately defined set of essential topics, concepts, texts, and writing assignments that they can assume the school will provide for their children, regardless of which teacher they happen to get. This common curriculum might constitute 60 to 80 percent of the material taught by teachers of the same course. (p. 33)

The district plans to have a guaranteed and viable curriculum within the next two years, allowing for the culture to build beyond determining what to teach to include also how to teach and bring unity among grade-level colleagues. Additionally, teachers observe each other in action to observe and reflect while implementing instructional practices that are discussed during PLCs.

The purpose of collaboration is made explicit and teams are most effective when they are clear about the results they are to achieve (DuFour & Eaker, 2009). Therefore, the vision for
PLC execution is that all representatives, including those who are not directly involved, can know and be able to deliver the expectations of PLCs.

**Conditions.** The following conditions are critical when considering the TO-BE of an idealistic implementation of PLCs. Conditions are components that Lollie School District and others can construct to develop a structure for teams to gather in collaboration. Time is to include consistent and multiple meetings within the week, such as collaboration two times per week for one hour each. When a large team of 8 to 10 core team members participates in collaboration, it creates the physical space, location, and room arrangement for teams to have inviting body language during the dialogue. In order to keep the agenda moving and organized and to facilitate the meetings, an articulation leader per grade level can help steer the meetings. The last necessary condition is the agenda that is established under the premise of the four PLC questions from DuFour (1998).

1. What do we expect our students to learn?
2. How do we know if they learn it?
3. How will we respond when they don’t learn it?
4. How will we respond if they already know it?

The first critical condition is for teams to have dedicated time that is uninterrupted and consistent. Therefore, Lollie School District needs to implement PLCs two times a week for an hour each of collaboration. It is critical that school districts implement this protected time within the team’s schedule or negotiate it to occur outside the school day so that it is a requirement and all participants are present. One consideration is the way in which districts can come to
consensus on operational procedures, such as how they plan to respond to tardiness or supervise recess.

Unique to Lollie School District is the larger team size, including specialists, administrators, and instructional coaches who make a PLC consist of up to 13 participants. Additionally, some groups organize themselves into committees to oversee various facets of the school’s operation, such as discipline, technology, and social climate. Although each of these activities can serve a useful purpose, none represents the kind of professional dialogue that can transform a school into a PLC. The powerful collaboration that characterizes PLCs is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning, hence, the importance of continuous, weekly collaboration with ample time to discuss. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.

As a result of the larger team sizes, an articulation leader is recommended as an asset to support the PLC process, facilitate dialogue, coordinate agendas, and analyze student achievement data. This position is a stipend-paid role for which applicants apply, and it is supported in the collective bargaining agreement. For consistency and structure, each collaborative session is to follow the four PLC questions, and teams are to contribute to the agenda based on their needs of the grade level (DuFour & DuFour, 2013).

Competencies. At the core of each learning objective or task is what participants should know and be able to do. The following competencies are critical attributes of the ways in which all stakeholders can improve the work of student learners and collaboration. PLC professional development considers the following question: how does everyone on the team contribute?
Delineated roles of the articulation and team leaders provide clarity and direction on the responsibilities of each member of the team.

Munby and Fullan (2016) provided a lens of leading from the middle as a potential solution to district structure and decision-making by making the claim that autonomy is a tricky concept in school and system improvement. When the term autonomy is used, individuals and subgroups sometimes think this means total freedom. In our view, individuals or groups are not free to be on their own. In "leadership from the middle" they are responsible for and, indeed, required to connect with others in a joint, transparent effort to examine and improve practices that increase collective efficacy in schools within the network. (p. 10)

It is critical for the school district to consider that all leadership is among the collective team and that one does not need a title to lead. Casas (2017) agreed that when one has a certain disposition that others immediately recognize and sometimes want to emulate, that one becomes a leader and that anyone can lead. "You don't need to have the title of ’principal' to be a leader. You are a leader because of your ability to inspire others, to build their confidence, to influence their thinking and, more importantly, their behavior” (p. 62). In addition to delineating the roles of leaders, we must encourage all to lead from within them.

**Conclusion**

In providing a structure through PLCs, consistency can be built within the district. As teachers move throughout grade levels, the systems and structures should be similar, allowing for continuity. From a community perspective, students and families can then know what the expectations are and how to work within the framework.

One of the major benefits from collaboration is the ability to hear multiple perspectives from various people. Through data analysis, staff members can various perspectives of the data
to determine in which areas students need additional support or extension. From a building perspective, this would create a strong alignment supporting students with the mission and belief that all means all.
CHAPTER SIX
Strategies and Actions

Introduction

One of the highest honors a school district can receive in the area of collaborative and effective teams is an award from Solution Tree, a model PLC school district. The title signifies that a school district has arrived at the “TO BE” stage of implementation, noting that a model school would influence the work of other educators in the field interested in obtaining model PLC status. According to the All Things PLC (2018) website, model PLC schools have sustained implementation for three years, increased student learning, and obtained positive and effective practices, structures, and culture around collaboration.

The most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning is to create the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a PLC (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). The first area of focus is ensuring that all students can learn, shifting a traditional focus on teaching to a focus on learning by educators within the organization. The conversations at the table become more student-centered, with a mindset of reaching each unique learner, regardless of a child’s additional services or identified needs. The second area of focus on practices ensures that there is a collaborative approach to decision-making and implementation within a team. Structure within a PLC allows for all members to execute the process in a similar fashion with expectations of each other that are clear and focused. High-performing teams focus on results and remove barriers that get in the way, with hard work and commitment to increasing student learning.

Gordon (2017) stated, in his book The Power of Positive Leadership, “Driving a positive, high-
performing culture requires more than words. After all, everyone has a mission statement, but only the great organizations also have people who are on a mission” (p. 21).

Lollie School District is in need of consistency in collaboration for its group to establish its implemented norms and expectations. Additionally, the longer the team has been together, the closer its members are to experiencing practices that are common and highlight each member’s skillset. Commitment to collaboration over time is one of the reasons a model PLC maintains a sustained implementation. Wagner (2012) argued that individual teachers work in isolated rooms with students without much supervision on a day-to-day basis. In the beginning phases of U.S. education, teachers were not expected to work together, define success, or discuss strong instruction practices, and they often lacked partners who taught the same grade level. In the last decade, the expectations have changed, and educational leaders are now suggesting that even those that have never been a part of a system or community dedicated to continuous improvement need to come together and collaborate.

**Strategies and Actions**

The following seven steps for strategies and action serve as the bridge between the AS-IS and TO-BE implementation and change plan. The ultimate goal is for Lollie School District to create a cycle of continuous improvement that is guided by data and influenced by educators collaborating through a PLC process. This plan can also provide intentional steps to improvement among the staff at Lollie School District and outside districts embarking on the journey of collaboration and PLCs. The seven steps for actionable change are outlined in Appendix D and include
1. Solidifying the core curriculum;

2. Maintaining a consistent, uninterrupted collaboration schedule;

3. Utilizing consistent agenda templates when teams meet;

4. Developing specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely (SMART) goals;

5. Developing a program for articulation leaders in PLCs;

6. Implementing district and school data analysis protocol; and

7. Incorporating research-based interventions and frameworks.

The strategies and actions lead to following steps for implementation at Lollie School District by incorporating the 4Cs (Wagner et al., 2012) and ways in which the district can begin to address critical components to increase awareness, participation, effectiveness, and ultimate success, with educators working collaboratively through recurring cycles and units of study, learning ways in which to build one another's competencies under one common mission of achieving better student performance and learning results.

Fullan (2011) described six steps to achieve change in his book, *The Six Secrets of Change*, which can be utilized as a framework for an organization to become a model PLC school. This framework is utilized when an organization is about to apply large-scale reform, which would occur when a district transitions into a PLC structure. The framework also offers a synergistic alignment to Wagner et al.’s (2012) 4Cs framework. The 4Cs include culture, competencies, conditions, and context. Each of these Cs allows organizations to consider ways in which to think systematically about change through a lens. When paired with Fullan’s steps to change, a reader can see the ways in which the strategies and actions are interconnected and aligned with this framework.
This chapter reviews the critical attributes for building and district leaders to consider during the implementation. Each of the 4Cs (Wagner et al., 2012) is defined, for reference within the plan: competencies are skills and knowledge that influence student learning; conditions are tangible arrangements of time, space, and resources; culture refers to mindsets, meeting, beliefs, and expectations; and context refers to the social-skills domain for students and the needs/concerns of citizens (see Figure 11).

Investing in staff is a critical component to implement PLCs so that a teacher can find meaning in his/her work through relationships that are supported within the entire organization. When teachers know they are valued by the administration, their hard work and efforts on behalf of student learning are affirmed (see Figure 11, Strategy 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Solidify core curriculum.</td>
<td>Connect peers with purpose.</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Maintain a consistent, uninterrupted</td>
<td>Connect peers with</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collaboration schedule.</td>
<td>purpose.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Teams utilize consistent agenda template</td>
<td>Learning is the work.</td>
<td>Context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for meetings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Develop a program for articulation leaders for PLCs.</td>
<td>Love your employees.</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Capacity building prevails.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 11.* Strategies and actions that incorporate the change process.

Balancing in the middle of the too-tight vs. the too-loose implementation leads the way between with focus that drives the plan. For example, having a core-guaranteed and viable
curriculum sets the focus for all students. The job of leaders is to provide direction and pursue implementation through purposeful interaction and learning in relation to results (Fullan, 2014; see Figure 11, Strategies 1 and 2). Principals and district leaders who make a commitment for honoring their time to conduct PLCs is important to get the work done.

Leaders need to consider the new resources and motivations for the implementation. Striving on a way to build the skillset of staff without using fear or punitive accountability builds the abilities of staff to lead collaborative meetings.

Leaders need to consider the new resources and motivations for the implementation. Striving on a way to build the skillset of staff without using fear or punitive accountability builds the abilities of staff to lead collaborative meetings (see Figure 11, Strategy 5).

A strategic approach to embed learning opportunities within natural meeting times and the day-to-day experiences of a teacher is critical so that the professional learning is not superficial or out of context (see Figure 11, Strategy 3).

In an organization that focuses on clear results, with administrators who are persistent in doing the things to create consistent results, transparency is fueled by accurate data to inform the schools (see Figure 11, Strategy 6).

The knowledge and commitment from a leader is to determine consistently what students know and are able to do, what educators do with those who have met the goals, and what educators do with those who need more support. Meaning is created by monitoring student performance in a humble way, modeling continuous improvement (see Figure 11, Strategy 7).
Leadership Lessons

One of the greatest leadership lessons I have learned in the process is to consider all aspects of a school organization when considering implementing PLCs. At the core of continuous improvement is the need for a collaborative approach to achieve at the highest levels. PLCs require common vision, resources for implementation, data to determine success, structures and time for implementation, and materials and frameworks for how to respond to student performance outcomes. Muhammad and Hollie (2011) presented a new angle when leadership is the means of driving the PLC force and is the will and skill to lead. They outlined four stages based on the ability to lead by aligning the philosophy, managing frustration, creating a culture of collaboration, and institutionalizing cultural health. Lessons for school and district leaders must consider ways in which leaders view leaders or followers that are negative during the change process. I have learned that we must view misinterpretations or misinformed staff members in a positive way; perhaps they have not yet seen the benefit. Leaders must find ways to support, have a critical conversation, or show a different angle of the implementation.

Conclusions

The PLC model encompasses several facets of a school organization through a powerful model that supports staff in the process of working toward focusing on student learning and working collaboratively to address objectives that matter most to learning and monitoring the effectiveness of the plan through accountability toward improvement. Educators who come together collectively, laser-focused on these goal areas, can improve student learning, understanding that the process takes time, discipline, and persistence to come to life. Success is most likely to come to those who work through challenges that come their way as a collective
group, but the process cannot work for teams who cannot find a way to work through a challenge along the way.
CHAPTER 7

Implications and Policy Recommendations

Introduction

At Lollie School District, students, staff, and community members value professional, passionate, knowledgeable, and skillful staff that work in collaboration to provide a dynamic and rewarding learning experience for students. This philosophy supports a critical commitment to stakeholders working together so that the outcome and opportunities are better than when they work in isolation. Among the eight sections of school board policy in the district are two that are intertwined to include educator collaboration in an effort to deliver high-quality instruction for students. Section 5, Personnel, and Section 6, Instruction, of the school board policy manual highlight both of these critical components of effective collaboration.

The second strategy in the change action plan is to maintain a consistent, uninterrupted collaboration schedule. This would allow teams to meet weekly for two hours and remain committed to each other and accountable for meeting. A critical consideration of this collaboration is for participants to include all members of the team, not just grade-level classroom or content teachers. Specialists are not always available to meet for professional development or team/department meetings and it is critical that specialists, special educators, and student services providers are also engaged in the regular meeting. The second major strategy in the change action plan is to provide a structure for the meetings, by requiring teams to use a consistent agenda template. The template would include four major areas: clarifying standards and targets, determining proficiency indicators, intervening, and providing enrichment and extension opportunities.
Time is one of the most valuable resources, yet the cost associated with it is priceless. Teachers plan their academic day minute by minute, and actions throughout the day are filled with instructional commitments, materials preparation, assessment analysis, and communication among stakeholders, leaving limited time for collaboration. Battersby and Verdi (2015) also suggested that protected PLC time addresses teacher isolation, attrition, and student achievement. This claim revolves around the need to enact fundamental changes in districts as found in their study among music and fine arts educators. Across the state, few schools structure teacher time during the school day.

Snyder and Bae (2017) argued that professional learning is something that happens outside of teacher contract hours or during the summer, divorced from the classroom and the problems of practice with which teachers are struggling. Their study highlighted the success of four schools that redefined traditional structures and policies to encourage teacher collaborative work, which improved student and staff learning experience. This is a critical problem among the 800 Illinois school districts that make decisions about planning for teachers. Because planning opportunities are not consistent, educational leaders, on behalf of learners across the state, must stand for time being allocated to create the most successful conditions of learning.

**Policy Statement**

I recommend the following policy be used as a framework for districts to adopt and implement into their schools. However, it is important to note that in the state of Illinois, local school districts develop policies based on statute and often use the Policy Reference Education Subscription Service (PRESS) from the Illinois Association of School Boards (Policy Services, 2019). This advocacy is a call for lawmakers to offer two hours per week of protected time for
PLC for all certified educators across the state. It is not fair to students across the state for teachers to have no learning experience that is consistent and coherent due to a lack of collaboration opportunities. The only way this call for change can come to fruition is if the ISBE works closely with lawmakers to develop a commitment to this collaboration.

Should the following policy be approved, it would help meet the problem of finding a time and following a structured agenda for collaboration in all schools. Although there would be structure within the agenda for consistency, teams would also have an opportunity to update, edit, and revise the agenda. On behalf of ensuring a consistent learning experience for students among all classrooms across the district, this policy should be prioritized. Having a structured time will also ensure that all teachers of the team are sitting around the table during discussion, decisions, and action planning. Because core teachers at each grade level make up a team of nine, this policy meets the need to find a time when all members can participate without interruption.

**Policy 5:340.** The Lollie School District Board of Education believes that a PLC is a dynamic organization of educators (professional, administrative, or certified employees) committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of structured collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students that they serve. PLCs are characterized by

- a shared mission, vision, values, and goals;
- collaborative teams focused on learning;
- data-driven collective inquiry;
• commitment to continuous improvement, and
• results-oriented decisions.

The Lollie School District Board of Education expects every educator to participate effectively and actively in district- and/or school-assigned PLC activities. Participation is an essential responsibility of every educator in the Lollie School District. The Lollie School District Board of Education believes that, as a PLC, the district's fundamental purpose of its work in the schools is to ensure high levels of learning for all students, and this belief about learning translates into four critical questions that drive the daily decisions in the schools (DuFour & DuFour, 2013):

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. What will we do if they do not learn it?
4. What will we do if they already know it?

The Lollie School District Board of Education believes that, as a PLC, it is essential for educators to build and maintain a collaborative culture throughout the entire school system. Policymakers should consider adopting standards for professional development to guide the design, evaluation, and funding of professional learning. This would require administrators and school boards to evaluate and redesign the use of time and school schedules to increase opportunities for professional learning and collaboration, including participation in PLCs, peer coaching and observations across classrooms, and collaborative planning (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017).
Analysis of Need

It is critical to view the implementation of PLCs in a multifaceted approach. Stakeholders involved in the structure, implementation, participation, and analysis of a structured time for collaboration may face a variety of challenges. The following section outlines and analyzes the perceptions and implications of the proposed policy from six different perspectives.

Educational Analysis

Hattie (2003) studied teachers in New Zealand and what they discussed over the course of their interactions. They discussed kids, curriculum, and sports but never addressed teaching and learning practices. Hattie claimed that one of the biggest problems in the educational system is that educators do not talk about practices but remain in isolation. Districts need dedicated time for teachers to collaborate, which can be organized in professional communities and a structure for the consistent purpose of convening to support the dialogue and action among educators during a PLC. Additionally, the four questions (DuFour & DuFour, 2013) require a complete understanding of what each student should know and be able to do as a result of each unit, grade level, and/or course. The additional questions focus on creating a systematic learning approach for students who are experiencing difficulty and enrichment.

Economic Analysis

The proposed consistent structure for educators to meet regularly requires time outside of the school day, and time equals money. The cost to implement at the district level can be bargained during contract negotiations and accrued through a salary increase. If the hourly rate for teacher curriculum development in a school district ranges anywhere from $25 to $35, one can consider the two-hour per week collaboration scheduled to cost the district approximately
$50 to $70 per teacher per week. This rate would be bargained through an increase in the salary schedule for staff for buy-in with the implementation. Questions that districts and unions would need to consider are whether or not there should be an increase in pay if the collaboration begins outside of the current contractual school day. Districts that would be required to implement this policy based on the state legislature would need to consider ways in which to make the transition if the contract is not under negotiation. Many policies from the state have received negative labels and phrasing, such as unfunded mandate.

Social Analysis

Collaboration opportunities for educators requires a unique approach to scheduling, which is a challenge compared to other sectors of work because teachers provide constant supervision and oversight of students. Teachers are responsible for their own classroom but are required to work together to deliver a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Establishing a PLC can be difficult because changing existing teacher culture is difficult (Tam, 2015), especially because PLCs require both principals and teachers to agree on the expectations for shared responsibilities within the PLC in their school. The social implications are dependent on whether or not teachers believe that they service students as a collective whole or teach in isolation.

Stoll and Louis (2007) shared the following quote from a lead teacher: “You can’t be growing all the time” (p. 1). The teachers went on to further discuss the idea that people have moments when they are "on the spot" as opposed to moments when things fall apart. This ebb and flow is supported when a collaborative effort is included, ensuring that someone is always there to keep the workload flowing well.
**Political Analysis**

Running parallel to the economic analysis, the political analysis of this policy advocacy weaves together similar, yet different, points. It is imperative that locally elected school board members engage in the legislative process by contacting their state legislators and weighing in on the critical issue of teacher collaboration. Legislators value input from school board members and want to know exactly how these issues would affect local school districts; therefore, the impact of ensuring that all points are heard regarding the policy is critical. As elected officials, school board members must also make decisions that support their respective community, which may or may not be in favor of teacher collaboration time, should it impact the instructional minutes in a school day. For example, if the board decides to implement this collaboration during an early release or a late start, political ramifications may occur, depending on the public opinion. Therefore, it is critical for school board members to garner buy-in and be provided a brief on the impact of PLCs, considering the valuable resource of time and collaborative efforts to improve the learning experience.

**Legal Analysis**

The root issue of ensuring that there is a dedicated time for PLCs to occur is tied to the collective bargaining agreement. Questions that districts and unions need to consider are whether or not there should be an increase in pay if the collaboration begins outside of the current contractual school day. Additionally, districts with already established contracts that outline individual plan time would need to consider how to make adjustments and move from a personal planning experience to a balanced group approach.
Another area in which districts may find themselves considering legal guidance is if there are any complaints that a colleague is not participating or attending all of the collaborations consistently. Districts need to consider what actions to take in the event that the staff are late to the required meeting and to what point it is a reflection on professional practice and whether the lack of attendance would be a valid reason for employment termination.

**Moral and Ethical Analysis**

This call to action for lawmakers, boards, and districts is to provide protected time for educators to collaborate and is a necessity for all districts to ensure that each educator has a time carved out for a collective approach to planning and analyzing an educational experience for all students. Morally, building leaders need to communicate the message about their advocacy for all of their students to learn at high levels and the need for coming together as a team. Additionally, one can consider it to be immoral to expect teachers to meet all state and district mandates if in fact they are not provided the time and treated as professionals who need to collaborate and work together.

Ethically, it is important to consider that all staff members participate in the process and that specialists, such as special educators, are not excluded. Mateo (2015) offered a final thought: will we embrace and challenge them or relegate them to lowered expectations by default? ALL means ALL demands that district and school leaders and teachers rally behind the common belief that ALL students can achieve and excel—in school, careers, and life.

**Implications for Staff and Community Relationships**

Multiple stakeholders are involved with collaborating in a PLC. Building relationships among adult learners requires the space, time, and conditions to communicate and interact
effectively, regardless of biases and educational philosophy. Relationships can be jeopardized if interactions are neither respectful nor honor the beliefs of the collective vision. According to Darling-Hammond and Brandsford (2007),

> Teachers must be able to function as members of a community of practitioners who share knowledge and commitments, who work together to create coherent curriculum and systems and that support students, and who collaborate in ways that advance their combined understanding and skill. (p. 13)

Culture consists of the mindsets and the quality of the relationships that exist within PLCs (Wagner et al., 2012). Therefore, educators can consider the emotional drain of the work environment when thinking about another implication of implementing PLCs. Interpersonal relationships are demanding in a service profession such as teaching, and relationships among various personalities can be somewhat forced through required collaboration. The difference for teachers compared to other professions is that they receive little if any down time; they finish various meetings with adults and go straight to the classroom, where they immediately facilitate social-learning activities through collaborative education, creating burn out (Godsey 2016).

From a community standpoint, some districts are required to start the school day late or end the school day early on a regular basis for collaboration time. If this is a scheduling request on behalf of the district, then connecting with community partnerships for childcare opportunities and family participation is critical to the buy-in process. An unintended consequence may be that the schedule impacts the ability for guardians to care for their students when school starts later or ends earlier on a regular basis. Additionally, some schools release at a half-day with some irregular schedules, which can also be a challenge for guardians to coordinate, pay for, and find care for their students. In addition, the disruption of the routine
schedule can impact students' reactions to the day-day experiences in which they engage at the school setting. A school's implementation of the policy of PLC before or after students arrive can impact the relationship and connection administrators or educators have with guardians because they would not be available during that time.

**Conclusions**

Without this policy, educators among various districts and even within schools may not be afforded the opportunity to improve their craft through collaborative efforts with their colleagues. Morel (2014) argued for the importance of collaboration in a variety of settings and also argued that collaboration is necessary in a complex, global society, as it increases teachers’ job satisfaction and is an effective learning practice and an important example to students. At the center of this policy is the assurance that all students receive a thoughtful educational experience that has been discussed with other educators to improve delivery methods and monitoring for intentional strategies to be delivered along the course of a student’s learning experiences.

The Lollie School District Board of Education believes that effective educators have a profound impact on student achievement and, to be highly effective, educators must work to achieve the collective purpose. Educators and parents have historically used the phrase "it takes a village to raise a child," indicating that supporting children in a community cannot be done alone. Therefore, instituting district policy to ensure all time for teachers to collaborate toward a common mission is a critical contributing factor to improving student-learning objectives. “Professional learning communities within schools has been a minor theme in many educational reform efforts since the 1960s. Perhaps it is time it became a major cry among reformers rather than a quiet whisper” (Louis & Kruse, 1995, p. 163).
CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

Introduction

The theme for this program evaluation centered on the review of PLCs and the art of collaboration among educators on behalf of supporting student learning, ultimately increasing student achievement. There are three big ideas of PLCs; focus on learning, collaboration, and results. The first theme, focus on learning, supports the decisions that are made about curriculum, assessment, instruction, interventions, grading, and instructional practices to filter through a common lens within a grade-level team. The second theme, collaboration, highlights the importance of schools meeting their fundamental purpose of student learning without isolation. A collaborative culture that is engulfed with the idea that each participant works interdependently while assuming collective responsibility for the learning of all students is the critical idea of Theme 2. The last theme is results-driven, ensuring that teams use evidence to respond to students who need additional support or have demonstrated learning on the previously determined objectives or skills.

To better understand collaboration efforts, K-5 staff had an opportunity to offer their perceptions of PLCs, ultimately answering my research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of collaboration in PLCs?
   a. What does it mean to collaborate?
   b. What structures best support teacher collaboration in schools?
   c. Who is responsible for supporting the development of PLCs?

2. How do articulation leaders support the development of PLCs?
The analysis of the program review focused on the three big ideas related to student outcomes and staff support. The study allowed for an analysis of teacher input, teacher leader perceptions, school and district data, and research related to PLCs. When a school and district community believes that all children can learn and achieve at high levels because teachers make the difference, the conditions for success need to be created. The fundamental purpose of a school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels. To define all, educators must be clear and intentional on the purpose, practices, beliefs, procedures, and policies that support this fundamental process of growing learners among the school community.

**Discussion**

The main purpose of this study was to review the implementation of PLCs at Lollie School District. At the two elementary schools, teachers have approximately nine core grade-level teachers and three specialists who meet regularly through the PLC model. At the beginning of the program review, collaboration had been reintroduced to the staff as it was newly agreed upon that teachers would meet at the start of the school day, before students arrive, for uninterrupted collaboration. My research questions focused on the conditions needed to ensure that the time was spent as effectively as possible and that the resources, structure, and support were provided for the staff to engage in collective inquiry.

I was able to synthesize the findings of the PLC data by looking closely at the perceptions of collaboration among a PLC as it related to participants’ knowledge and beliefs about the process. Graham and Ferriter (2009) argued that miscommunication and misunderstanding can cause frustration regarding the PLC process; therefore, the professional development, common language, and frameworks/structures are important for school districts to consider and address.
during implementation. The authors claimed that by talking about the difficulties of implementing a PLC, teachers receive a framework and language by which to understand and discuss their own frustrations.

In addition to my review of current and credible literature on PLCs, the current state of Lollie School District was analyzed and recommendations were made in the “TO-BE” analysis based on Wagner’s (2012) 4Cs—context, conditions, competencies, and culture. The conditions within the change plan included at least a two-hour consistent collaboration each week for grade-level teams and highlighted the need for specialists to be a part of the PLC. Because the collective staff believed that all students could learn, all staff needed to be present for the collaborative efforts during collaboration, including special educators, English language learner teachers, reading specialists, instructional coaches, and any other student services representatives. Schmoker (2006) argued that collegiality does not improve student learning, but rather that the ability for teachers to meet regularly to refine their own learning together can make the difference.

Using this study as the basis of the argument, I recommended to the ISBE a policy that would need administrative code to be written to ensure that all school districts afforded collaboration through PLCs at the state level. As there are approximately 850 school districts in the state of Illinois, it is imperative that all state students are subject to high-quality learning objectives in their daily school engagements, regardless of which school across the state one student attends. I am a strong believer of anthropologist Margaret Mead’s quote on collaboration and teamwork: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has" (Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc., 2009, p. 97).
Therefore, I whole-heartedly believe that educators can collectively change the world for the students in our schools when they come together for continuous improvement that monitors student-learning experiences.

**Leadership Lessons**

Throughout my study, I reflected on various components of the review and evaluation, including ideas from thought leaders in my literature review and conversation with key stakeholders engaging in the PLC process at Lollie School District. Considering the opportunities for growth and the areas of success, I can consider the following leadership lessons.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) stated, "The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems" (p. 19). Implementing PLCs is a continuous task that improves with time and is influenced by outside factors such as new personalities joining a team, student or staff dynamics, enhanced learning standards, and structures for collaboration. Implementing PLCs is an adaptive challenge, and effective administrators and teacher leaders have the concepts and practices to motivate and inspire others by touching the emotions of students and adults. Educators often find success in crossing off technical tasks in a to-do list, but the PLC concept is a process that is ever-evolving through consistent collaboration and cycles of collective inquiry.

The initial leadership lesson learned centered on recognizing the value of structuring and scheduling opportunities for educators to come together to engage in a PLC. The change can have impacts both on a small scale and a larger school-wide or district-wide scale. Although I value working collaboratively, I recognize that some people in the school system prefer to work
in isolation. I have learned that it is my responsibility to help others understand why we are truly better together and the ways in which a PLC is more than just meeting together on a regular basis. I must find ways to instill the purpose, tied to improving student learning experiences, and convince the staff of the benefits to collective collaboration by valuing each other’s strengths and continuing to reflect on practices for improvement. Therefore, from the district level, I must advocate for and support a schedule and structure that allows for staff to come together for collaboration. Additionally, I recognize that people within the organization look to me for communicating the plan and future vision. Dennis Sparks (2005) identified several fundamental barriers to PLCs, including "a lack of clarity regarding vision, values, intentions, and beliefs" (p. 162). Therefore, I must be able to articulate, simply and clearly, the vision for PLCs within the district.

Last, this experience also allowed me to reflect on my personal leadership skills and acknowledge potential impacts of my own leadership influence. Specifically, I asked myself, what do I need to contribute to this conversation to help acknowledge solutions to challenges, and how can I elicit insight from those around me? When I reflect on what others are contributing to the conversation when meeting with a group, I evaluate where we are with the PLC process and what detailed steps we need to continue to address to move our teams forward.

Conclusion

At the keynote of the Solution Tree PLC conference, Robert Eaker closed with a powerful session, titled "Would It Be Good Enough for Your Own Child?" As a mother of two school-aged daughters, I am drawn into this concept that guardians want the best for their children, and if given the choice of a basic learning experience or an exceptional learning
experience, caretakers would likely choose the latter. As an educational leader, I believe strongly that we must promise a standard of care for all children in our schools or grade levels to have the best possible learning experience. In schools with multiple teachers at each grade level, it is imperative that all students within the grade level have the benefit of learning from a group of teachers who have worked interdependently to align common goals for the improvement of student learning. There is a considerable difference between a child who has a teacher with mediocre instructional practice and his/her neighbor down the hall in another classroom with a teacher who implements high-impact strategies and intentionally monitors and supports student learning. Every reader would want his/her own child to attend a school where a teacher-team focused on student learning with intensity and purpose so that regardless of the teacher assigned to his/her child, the reader would know that the learning experience had been developed among a culture of collaboration and structure on behalf of all students learning that grade-level content.

Kanold (2017) claimed that, “Transmitting inequity from one classroom to the next is generally not something we are mindful of or think about” (p. 109). The program evaluation provides insight into the need for PLCs or educational teams to come together on a regular basis to set goals, plan, analyze learning, reflect on effectiveness, and provide additional time support or extension for learning. This is possible through discussion and action on the four guiding questions:

• What do we expect students to learn?

• How do we know if they learn it?

• How do we respond when students experience difficulty in learning?

• How do we respond when students do learn?
As a classroom teacher, there have been times in my career when I did not care about the other students in my school’s grade-level team because I was selfishly giving my all to the students in my direct supervision and oversight. The program evaluation provides insight into the reasons for collaboration among educators in the school setting and the ways in which to structure effectively the conditions for collaboration on behalf of student learning. A policy recommendation is made at the state level to provide systemic change in school schedules, ensuring that grade-level/content teams have the opportunity to meet consistently each week and work through the PLC process.

Although this advocacy may sound as if it is teacher- or staff-driven, the ultimate purpose is to ensure high-performing collaborative teams that monitor the learning of each student, skill by skill, on a frequent and timely basis through collaboratively developed common assessments and instructional experiences. The reason is to support the notion that all students are the students of all educators in a school-wide setting, ensuring that student learning and growth is possible for every child in the school. Until educators take a stand to be relentless about ensuring high-quality student learning experiences for all students, it is not guaranteed that teams will collaborate, and teachers may work in isolation, where the bar is set lower in some classrooms than in others. An educational system commitment that all students can learn must occur to change the trajectory of every student’s future. My hope is that, through the PLC process, the day in education can come when every leader can say to every parent, “It does not matter which teacher your child has at our school. His or her learning experience will be as rigorous and engaging as what you perceive from the best teacher in our school. If your child needs extra time
and support to learn at high levels, we will guarantee that he or she will receive it under our oversight.”
REFERENCES


Muhammad, A., & Hollie, S. (2011). *The will to lead, the skill to teach: Transforming schools at every level*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.


APPENDIX A: FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Focus on Learning

• How does the district’s structure for PLCs impact your grade-level team?
• Are all members of your team on the same page and consistent in instructional implementation?
• How does your team come to agreement about determining evidence of student learning?

Collaboration

• What is the role of the articulation leader during collaboration time?
• How do colleagues perceive the role of articulation leaders?
• What does your team do when there is disagreement?
• What makes PLC collaboration effective?
• What are some actions that principals can take to increase teacher leadership and increase capacity for professional learning?

Results

• What additional resources (e.g., time, materials, staff) are needed to improve PLCs in the district?
• What student data should be collected to evaluate the effectiveness of PLCs?

Additional

• Are there any other issues related to PLCs in our district that we haven’t touched upon that you would like to discuss?
• Is there anything else that I should consider in my study of professional learning in our district?
APPENDIX B: AS-IS ANALYSIS

“As Is” 4 C’s Analysis for Professional Learning Communities

Context
- High expectations for student performance from community
- Overcoming reduction in force, reduced programming, and limited professional development from five years ago

Culture
- Inconsistent expectations of holding each other accountable on behalf of student learning
- Distrust within the team; including smaller groups of relationships
- All in it together or compartmentalized and broken into smaller teams

Conditions
- Collaboration two times per week for one hour
- Eight to ten core team members
- 1 articulation leader per grade level
- Developing ELA units of study from scratch

Professional learning communities are built on relationships and a common set of commitments to improving student learning. When implemented well, it can lead to reliable growth in student learning. How can all stakeholders improve this work?

Competencies
- Articulation leaders attended Solution Tree professional learning conference
- Limited professional development
- Collaboration used for curriculum development, rather than reflective of the four PLC questions
APPENDIX C: TO-BE ANALYSIS

"To Be" 4 C's Analysis for Professional Learning Communities

Context
- Increasing performance scores in core content areas to be one of the top schools within the county
- Strong curriculum and instructional experiences for students
- Well developed and sustainable system of supports for professional development

Culture
- Consistent implementation of core curriculum for all content areas and grade levels
- Positive support when one member has seen success based on a strategy and courage to try the strategies
- Clear expectations and functions of the PLCs, where all members honor each other in the process

Conditions
- Collaboration two times per week for one hour
- Eight to ten core team members
- 1 articulation leader per grade level
- Agenda engage in the 4 PLC Questions from DuFour
  - What do we want students to be able to learn?
  - How will we know they have learned?
  - How will we respond when some students didn’t learn?
  - How will we enrich learning when students demonstrated mastery?

Professional learning communities are built on relationships and a common set of commitments to improving student learning. When implemented well, it can lead to reliable growth in student learning. How can all stakeholders improve this work?

Competencies
- Professional learning communities professional development: how does everyone on the team contribute?
- Delimited roles of the articulation and team leaders
### Strategies and Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Solidify core curriculum | ● Determine core curriculum commitment for all students in each content and grade level  
● Select effective resources for all students  
● Finalize scope and sequence  
● Communicate implementation plan and instructional expectations  
● Develop common summative assessments  
● Develop common formative assessments |
| 2. Maintain a consistent, uninterrupted collaboration schedule | ● Commit to 2hr collaboration per week  
○ All educators and specialists at each grade level/content should be present |
| 3. Teams Utilize Consistent Agenda Template for Meetings | Agenda includes 4 major topics:  
● (Clarify standards and targets of focus)  
○ *What do we want all students to know or be able to do?*  
● (Determine proficiency indicators)  
○ *How will we know if students have mastered the standards of focus?*  
● (Discuss interventions)  
○ *How will we respond for students who have not yet learned?*  
● (Discuss extension and enrichment)  
○ *How will we respond for students who have already demonstrated mastery or are ready to do more?* |
| 4. SMART Goals | ● Set goals to unify and create a sense of urgency for a team to strive for meeting, ultimately improving student learning |
| 5. Develop a program for articulation leaders for professional learning communities | ● Delineated roles  
● Consistent district-wide articulation meetings  
● Support and strategies for facilitators of professional learning communities |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Develop District and School Data Analysis</td>
<td>3 Times a Year Data Review Meetings Conducted by a Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protocol</td>
<td>● Based on the data, how does data differ classroom to classroom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ What are the implications of this information? Which instructional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>strategies helped students learn? What skills did the proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students demonstrate in their work that set their work apart?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Use the data to support a goal area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Develop a plan to implement and monitor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Interventions</td>
<td>● Create a system of supports:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Why, When, How to provide intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Determine resources for how we will respond when students have not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yet learned?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ Agree upon the goal and how to monitor progress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>