PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCs)
“If there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: the right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting. Our experience with schools across the nations bears this out unequivocally.”
(Schmoker, 2004, p. 48)

“Achieving school improvement involves continual learning groups focused on explicit goals for student learning.”
(Linda Darling-Hammond)

“In successful schools, teachers form professional learning communities that focus on student work through assessment.”
(Michael Fullan)

“Improved student learning and teaching result when teachers collaboratively focus on achievement and assessment, questioning practice, and supporting professional growth.”
(Judith Little)

“Professional learning communities are indeed the best form of staff development.”
(Dennis Sparks)

(cited in Schmoker, 2006, pp. 109, 177–178)
CONTENT

WHY PLC'S? .................................................. 1
WHAT IS A PLC'S? ......................................... 2
HOW DO PLC'S FUNCTION .............................. 4
YEAR AT A GLANCE ........................................ 6
COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY .............................. 8
SUPPORT DOCUMENTS .................................... 12
WHY PLCS?

The ultimate goal of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is to improve student achievement. Over 40 years of effective schools’ research demonstrates that one of the most effective ways to improve student learning is through the systematic and innovative work of PLC. Our district’s PLC model is a collaborative process that is important for Response to Intervention (RTI) and needed to establish our collective vision related to responding to the needs of our learners.

Our efforts within this structure foster a commitment to the goals of our strategic plan:

- Meeting each student’s UNIQUE NEEDS
- The continuous improvement of INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT
- RECONCILIATION
- Organizational EFFECTIVENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

More specifically, our district’s PLC model will facilitate an open system of communication and foster a collaborative learning culture focused on four areas of our Learning Framework:
- Curriculum & Instruction
- Assessment & Reporting
- Collaborative Culture
- Safe, Caring & Inclusive Schools

What we learn through collaborative inquiry will help us identify our needs and next steps, and lead to innovations and areas of celebration. Educational experts recognize that the collaborative, focused work of PLCs contributes to higher levels of student learning.
A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a group of people who are motivated by a vision of learning and who support one another toward that end. PLCs are a catalyst for improving instruction. They involve all educators reflecting and learning together to improve the academic performance of all students. Within the PLC structure, educators use the collaborative inquiry process - a powerful design for professional learning that is a self-directed and student focused approach to professional growth.

A PLC:

Represents a collective effort to enhance student learning

Promotes and sustains the learning of all professionals in the school

Builds knowledge through inquiry

Analyses and uses data for reflection and improvement

(BOlam et al., 2005)
Key Components of PLC:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Understandings</th>
<th>Focus on Student Learning</th>
<th>Group Decision Making</th>
<th>Collaborative Inquiry Process</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Document, Share &amp; Celebrate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared Mission, Vision &amp; Values</td>
<td>Use of Common Formative Assessments</td>
<td>School-Wide Goals</td>
<td>Plan: Scanning &amp; Focusing</td>
<td>Trust &amp; Safety</td>
<td>Document the journey during collaborative inquiries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment of Strategic Plan, Learning Framework &amp; School-Wide Goals</td>
<td>Analyze Data for Emergent Patterns</td>
<td>Student Support Structures</td>
<td>Act: New Action &amp; New Learning</td>
<td>Ability to take risks &amp; share openly</td>
<td>Share across collaborative groups, schools and system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration &amp; Collective Ownership</td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative Inquiries</td>
<td>Observe: Checking &amp; Evidence</td>
<td></td>
<td>Celebrate learning and successes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Intervention (RTI)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative Curriculum Mapping</td>
<td>Reflect: Lessons Learned &amp; Next Steps</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PLC Structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative Inquiry Process</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)
HOW DO PLC’s FUNCTION?

CONSISTENT PRACTICES ACROSS NLPS
- Common Mission, Vision, Values and Understandings
- Alignment to District Goals and Learning Framework
- All Educators Participate
- The Collaborative Inquiry Process is Embedded within the PLC Structure
- Common Formative Assessments inform Instruction and Student Supports
- Norms and Protocols are established
- Learning is Documented, Shared, & Celebrated

SPECIFIC TO INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS
- School goals
- Focus of Inquiries – Student Needs, Team Goals and Innovations
- Norms, protocols & documentation
- Size & number of collaborative inquiry teams
- Team configurations (grade level, content areas, multi-grade, cross curricular)

“To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results.”
Richard Dufour, 2004
The Collaborative Inquiry process is embedded within the PLC structure. Although there is no one way to do collaborative inquiry, the framework that follows can serve as a guide for collaborative inquiry in Nanaimo-Ladysmith Public Schools (Adapted from Ministry of Education, Ontario and Halbert & Kaser (2013)).
Roadmap for PLCs

Common Understandings
- Mission, Vision, and Values
- Alignment
- Collaboration and Collective Ownership

Group Decision Making
- School-Wide Goals
- Student Support Structures
- Collaborative Inquiry

Collaborative Inquiry Process
- Plan
- Act
- Observe
- Reflect
- Plan
- Act
- Observe
- Reflect

Focus on Student Learning
- Use of Common Formative Assessments
  - Reading, numeracy, writing, etc.
- Analyze Data
  - Emergent patterns
  - Classes, grades, school

Document, Share & Celebrate
- Year end

Mission, Vision, and Values
Alignment
Collaborative Inquiry
School-Wide Goals
Student Support Structures
Collaborative Inquiry

Use of Common Formative Assessments
- Reading, numeracy, writing, etc.

Analyze Data
- Emergent patterns
- Classes, grades, school

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## YEAR AT A GLANCE

### PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WITHIN PLC</th>
<th>OUTSIDE OF PLC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>September - October</strong></td>
<td><strong>Use Common Formative Assessments (School-Wide)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Develop Common Understandings</strong></td>
<td><strong>Determine an implementation plan across the school and support team (classroom teacher, SST, TL, I&amp;I, Admin, other)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Shared Mission, Vision, &amp; Values</td>
<td>▶ Determine common assessments could include but are not limited to: NLPS Assessment for Learning (Reading) &amp; Alpin (French Immersion), School Wide Writes, DMA, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Alignment with school goals and district learning framework</td>
<td><strong>Common assessments could include but are not limited to: NLPS Assessment for Learning (Reading) &amp; Alpin (French Immersion), School Wide Writes, DMA, etc.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Understanding of collaboration &amp; collective ownership, common formative assessments, responsive student supports (RTI Model)</td>
<td><strong>Conduct class review process informed by data</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **October - November** | **Prioritize needs across the school and organize student supports** |
| **Focus on Student Learning** | **Determine areas of focus for collaborative inquiries** |
| ▶ Develop collaborative norms for wider | ▶ Where will you make the most difference for your learners? |
| ▶ Engage in collaborative conversations about common assessment data (i.e., school wide scanning, use supporting documents to analyze data, see emergent patterns) | ▶ What colleagues can you align with for a common learning focus? |

| **Group Decision Making** | **Prioritize needs across the school and organize student supports** |
| ▶ Determine focus for school-wide goals | ▶ Where will you make the most difference for your learners? |
| ▶ Determine priorities / structures for student supports | ▶ What colleagues can you align with for a common learning focus? |
| ▶ Determine collaborative inquiry foci & groups | ▶ For a common learning focus? |
WITHIN PLC

November – April

**Collaborative Inquiry Process**
- Determine a collective plan, on the calendar, to come together as a whole (every 3 PLC’s approx.) to share across collaborative inquiry groups: progress to date, learning and next steps.
- Develop collaborative inquiry group norms
- Collaborative Inquiries progress where teacher teams (3-6 people approx.) are guided by the NLPS inquiry model and are:
  - Reviewing data to determine impact on student achievement
  - Collaborating about what’s working, what’s not, and what’s next
  - Sharing progress with each other, asking questions, problem solving & planning for learning embedded in practice

OUTSIDE OF PLC

- Responsive student supports (Tier, 1,2,3)
- Use of formative assessment to monitor student progress
- Teacher professional learning embedded in practice, supporting collaborative inquiries and supported by I&I Lead Teacher, Teacher Librarian, and Student Support Teacher
- Continuous reflection on inquiry – look at data, impact on student achievement, teacher learning
- Colleague observations
- Co-teaching
- Co-planning

April – June

**Focus on Student Learning**
- School-wide, look at assessment results to determine impact & progress towards school goals

**Group Decision Making**
- Determine student support schedule for intervention groups (last push towards results)

**Document, Share & Celebrate**
- Share learning across collaborative inquiry groups and progress towards school goals (school-wide)
- Share learning across the district - PLC Share-out, Showcase of Learning, School Growth Report

**Use Common Formative Assessments (school-wide), with a focus on vulnerable learners**
- Determine an implementation plan across the school and support team (classroom teacher, SST, TL, I&I, Admin, other)
- Common assessments could include but are not limited to: NLPS Assessment for Learning (Reading) & Alpin (French Immersion), School-Wide Writes, DMA, etc
- Determine recommendations for classroom placement for following school year (balanced classes) using various points of data
- Determine next steps for progress towards school goals
COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

WHY COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY?
Leading educational researchers recognize the power of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) to transform schools and help educators meet the adaptive challenges confronting them. When integrated in PLCs, collaborative inquiry will help in establishing a learning culture. Collaborative Inquiry is a powerful professional learning design that provides the framework within the PLC structure for strengthening teaching and ultimately improving student learning.

WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY?
Collaborative inquiry is a strategy for professional learning; it is a professional way of being where educators explore areas of their practise to continually learn and meet student needs. It places educators in the role of actively constructing shared knowledge through treating their classrooms and schools as sites for investigations. Inquiry involves exploring to learn. With colleagues, teachers investigate new, engaging and relevant questions about how to meet their students’ needs. They collectively formulate a plan for implementing new strategies and monitor the effect these strategies are having on student learning. This cycle of inquiry leads to innovation, as educators create new approaches that are fundamentally different from the way in which things were done before.

HOW DO WE ENGAGE IN COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY?
Collaborative inquiry has been described as a “way of thinking” not separate from “your normal everyday way of doing what you do.” Educators often describe collaborative inquiry as a journey, an invitation to explore professional wonderings and questions. Choosing to embark on this journey means preparing to examine existing practices and assumptions.

Although there is no one way to do collaborative inquiry, the attached framework can serve as a guide for collaborative inquiry in Nanaimo-Ladysmith Public Schools. Educators can work through this cycle of professional inquiry (Plan – Act – Observe - Reflect) and use the phases and questions from the Spiral of Inquiry (Kaser & Halbert, 2013) to deepen and guide this process.
Student Learning

FOCUSING
Where will concentrating our efforts make the most difference? How are we contributing to the situation?

SCANNING
What's going on for our learners? How do we know? Why does this matter?

NEXT STEPS
What are our next steps for students? What do we need to learn more about?

REFLECT
How and where will we share our progress and insights?

LESSONS LEARNED
How and where will we learn more about what to do?

CHECKING
Have we made 'enough' of a difference?

EVIDENCE
How do we know? What evidence do we have to show our impact?

NEW ACTION
What can we do differently to make 'enough' of a difference?

NEW LEARNING
How and where will we learn more about what to do?

PLAN

ADAPTED FROM MINISTRY OF EDUCATION (ONTARIO) & SPIRALS OF INQUIRY (HALBERT & KASER, 2013)
## COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLAN</th>
<th>Utilize evidence to identify a learning need and develop a plan with the end in mind.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scanning</td>
<td>What’s going on for our learners? How do we know? Why does this matter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing</td>
<td>Where will concentrating our efforts make the most difference? How are we contributing to the situation?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>Implement plan to use evidence based strategies, engage in new learning &amp; access resources.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Action</td>
<td>What can we do differently to make ‘enough’ of a difference?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Learning</td>
<td>How and where will we learn more about what to do?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBSERVE</th>
<th>Monitor student &amp; educator learning by examining evidence collected to determine impact.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Checking</td>
<td>Have we made ‘enough’ of a difference?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>How do we know? What evidence do we have to show our impact?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REFLECT</th>
<th>Share and celebrate new understandings and consider next steps.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learned</td>
<td>How and when will we share our progress and insights?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next Steps</td>
<td>What are our next steps for students? What do we need to learn more about?</td>
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</table>
SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHER INQUIRY

1. RELEVANT

Student learning guides inquiry.
Student learning is the anchor for the teacher inquiry process – students’ learning processes and the products of their learning form the essential material of the inquiry.

2. COLLABORATIVE

Teacher inquiry is a shared process.
Although the mandate to reach every student seems simple, achieving this goal is complex. When educators work together to inquire about their students’ learning and engagement, they embrace this complexity as an opportunity for further understanding rather than something to simplify.

3. REFLECTIVE

Actions are informed by reflection.
When teachers make pedagogical decisions, they necessarily reflect on students’ engagement and learning resulting from their past decisions – setting aside moments for reflection provides opportunities for teachers to share their reflections and make their thinking both more intentional and explicit.

4. ITERATIVE

Progressive understanding grows from cycles of inquiry.
The reflective process is most powerful when it cycles back, reviews and builds on each successive inquiry. Such iterative reflective work is facilitated by regular and consistent analysis of what is being learned and how.

5. REASONED

Analysis drives deep learning.

Inductive Reasoning
We engage in inductive reasoning when discussing whether or not the evidence of the specific student thinking and learning is enough to draw conclusions about a general theme of what has been learned.

Deductive Reasoning
We engage in deductive reasoning when we consider how a widely accepted practice can be applied in a specific instance of particular students in a classroom.

Abductive Reasoning
We engage in abductive reasoning when we form and test a hypothesis. For example, we begin with the supposition that if student interests are incorporated into the program, then student ability to generate robust question skills will improve. We test out this hypothesis through classroom actions that incorporate student interests and examine student conversation and actions generated as a result.

6. ADAPTIVE

Inquiry shapes practice and practice shapes inquiry.
Collaborative inquiry requires thinking to be dynamic and creative as professionals seek ways to meet the needs of students. Teachers participating in collaborative inquiry continually adapt and apply knowledge and pedagogical approaches in response to their work in the classroom.

7. RECIPIROCAL

Theory and practice connect dynamically.
With such wide and varied bodies of knowledge to explore, and limited time to act on the specific needs of students, it is important that the use of expert knowledge is strategic and purposeful. Purposeful use of book studies, literature reviews and consultation with other professionals are all means to ground the inquiry within the existing bases of knowledge.
please visit NLPSlearns

SUPPORT DOCUMENTS

- PLC
- ASSESSMENT
- COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY
- ABORIGINAL UNDERSTANDINGS
REFERENCES


OECD, The Nature of Learning, Using Research to Inspire Practice, Practitioner Guide


System Leaders and Collaborative Inquiry (September 2015)

Collaborative Inquiry in Ontario What We Have Learned and Where We Are Now (September 2014)

Dynamic Learning: Connecting Student Learning and Educator Learning (August 2013)

Professional Learning Communities: A Model for Ontario Schools (October 2007)