

A Key to High Performing PLCs: Connecting the “Talk to the Walk”

Premise

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been posited as essential to promoting increased student achievement. However, a significant challenge in PLC work involves supporting teams in moving beyond simply discussing student data in global terms, or “admiring the problem” (e.g. discussing reasons why performance is not improving). Research indicates a key factor in changing human behavior, including educators, is “actionable performance feedback”. Regrettably such feedback is not routinely a component of the PLC process, or anywhere else in the typical teachers’ daily experience. In other words, to significantly improve teacher instruction the PLC process must move beyond simply talking about various forms of student data, brainstorming possible teaching strategies and the like to concretely demonstrating/observing/modeling the actual teaching that is producing the data being discussed. A common observational tool across ALL formats to foster coherence and shared focus which can change over time as the instructional improvement priorities mature and evolve. This “actionable feedback” provides the context for developing the reflective practice essential to instructional improvement. Connecting the dots, one could say, between our teaching and student learning... or connecting the “talk to the walk”.

The work lies in face-to-face interactions among people responsible for student learning around the work, in the presence of the work...If you can't see it – it isn't there.

- Richard Elmore

Practices Essential to Providing Actionable Feedback:

- 1) Peer Coaching – EVERY teacher a coach** – every 2-4 weeks each PLC member visits a designated PLC member’s classroom (beginning w/leadership team volunteers). Feedback is shared and discussed/explored at the following PLC. A new member then volunteers for the next observational cycle (random or “drop in” works best, usually on prep time).
- 2) Team Coaching or Learning Walks/Instructional Tours** – 4-8 colleagues (often across PLC/content areas observe for 20 min. – immediate debrief in the hall for 5-7 min. Later detailed discussions/inquiry/exploration of questions during PLC time.
- 3) Classroom Video Clips** – 2-7 min. clips demonstrating some aspect of instruction that is of mutual concern (e.g. structuring the use of academic language in discussion) to analyze student response data - using same LW observation tool to guide the giving/receiving of actionable feedback tied directly to what is visible in the video.
- 4) Mini-lesson demonstration** – 3-10 min. modeling some portion of a recent lesson demonstrating the strategy or tactic of interest, not simply describing but actually modeling the instruction provided – debrief using same LW tool.
- 5) Brief Principal Walk Throughs** – focused on key global indicators (e.g. simple indicators of the same key instructional domains(e.g. engagement, academic language, critical thinking, scaffolding support), usually 5-10 min. – provide some form of brief feedback (e.g. 3 x 5 NCR card left on the teacher’s desk).
- 6) Common Formative Assessment/Problem Solving** – examine samples of student work, quizzes, writing, tests, etc. – analyze/discuss what kind of instruction produced these results (e.g. what is working and why so as to scale it up, what is not working and figure out potential alternatives to employ/evaluate in the problem solving or inquiry cycle).