# HIGH SCHOOL
# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES, 2008–2009



## Austin Independent School District
### Department of Program Evaluation

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The

x  Many teachers did not have a clear conceptual understanding about the nature, participant roles, and objectives of their PLCs. Thus, the activities within their PLCs were variable and often were reported as being administrative in nature.

x  Overall, the majority of teachers highly valued the time spent and the work conducted in their PLCs, especially when the work was content focused. Approximately 65% of teachers rated their PLC experiences positively, and 35% indicated a need for improvement, as evidenced by their fair or poor ratings.

# LIST OF TABLES

Third, all teachers should participate in the ongoing process of examining individual, classroom, school, and district levels of student learning and should work toward achieving individual and collective goals in highly effective PLCs. Furthermore, the PLCs should include a careful evaluation of teacher effectiveness, based on student learning results. This requires PLCs to embrace data as a useful indicator of progress, and to move beyond using averages to analyze student performance and instead to focus on the success of individual students.

### DISTRICT CONTEXT

The 2008–2009 school year marked the second year in the district's official implementation of PLCs. The fundamental objective of PLCs for the 2008–2009 school year was to provide a environment for teachers, administrators, and instructional coaches to work collaboratively on an ongoing basis to improve the quality of teacher instruction and student learning in classrooms. As a long-term result of the initiative, PLCs are expected to

- increase teachers' skills, confidence levels, and excitement about teaching;
- increase collaboration among teachers;
- increase teacher retention;
- increase levels of student engagement and performance; and
- decrease achievement gaps between student groups.

PLCs were established in all district high schools in 2007–2008 and were expected to develop into high-functioning, collaborative groups in the 2008–2009 school year. Across campuses, the models used to facilitate these collegial learning groups varied and were supported by different external providers. Some high schools (e.g., Eastside, International, Lanier, and Bowie) created their own professional learning goals and structures, based on campus-identified needs. LBJ, Reagan, and Travis used the First Things First (FTF) model, which featured a multidisciplinary, small learning community (SLC) approach to promote student engagement and learning. Akins, Anderson, Austin, Bowie (Social Studies/Science), Crockett, and McCallum used the Disciplinary Literacy (DL) model, supported by University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning (IFL). The DL-PLC model focused on assisting teachers to design and implement rigorous instruction within core content areas.

The PLCs met at various times during the school day and the school year. The meetings may have occurred during common planning periods within the school day, after school, and/or on designated professional development activity days set aside by the district. High school teachers were generally provided with two periods per day to engage in administrative tasks, instructional planning, and professional learning activities. Thus, teachers were expected to use one of these periods to meet with their PLCs. Additionally, high school campuses delayed class start times for an hour on selected dates during the course of the academic year.

These late-start days created time for the PLCs to focus on the improvement of teaching and learning, without taking teachers out of the classroom (Looby, 2008).

With these structures in place, PLCs were operated in the district with little direct cost. Training sessions and support services for PLCs often were provided by contracted providers or district personnel. Funding for these activities were supplied through various program budgets or funding sources as determined by program, school, or district decision makers. An estimation of actual cost to the district could not be determined.

## METHODS

### PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation was designed to provide information to the district regarding the extent to which the requisite resources for successful implementation of PLCs were present within each campus, and the extent to which participants held a shared understanding about PLCs. As PLC work progresses in subsequent years, more advanced forms of evaluation will be necessary to inform progress and district planning.

### EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The following questions guided the evaluation of the district's PLC program:

- x To what extent were the requisite conditions (e.g., time, leadership, trained facilitation, resources, and protocols) in place to implement successful PLC(s) on each campus?
- x To what extent did PLC participants express a clear conceptual understanding about the nature, participant roles, and objectives of PLCs?
- x To what extent did PLC participants express a clear understanding about the activities (i.e., in a manner that indicated their PLC involvement)?
- x What were the specific PLC-related activities on each campus?

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSES

To address the evaluation questions, the existing PLC Survey was modified for use in the 2008–2009 school year. With input from Office of High Schools staff, Office of Curriculum and Instruction staff, and researchers from Stanford University's Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, DPE staff used items from,

and develop. They did not think many of the resources (e.g., experience, ideas, and interests) they could contribute were considered or used by their school leadership.

**CRITICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PLCS**

The PLC Survey also asked teachers to indicate the degree to which critical characteristics of highly effective PLCs were evident in their group (Table 3). Specifically, these characteristics included openness to improvement, respect for one another, collaboration, shared norm and values, and reflective dialogue. High percentages (more than 70%) of the teachers *strongly agreed* or *agreed* their PLC members were open to improvement, respected each other, worked collaboratively, shared norms and values, and engaged in reflective dialogue. The responses pertaining to whether PLC members shared norms and values were mixed, with 18% of the teachers indicting they were *not sure* and 20.8% *strongly disagreeing*.

Table 3. Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities, Spring 2009

| The members of my PLC… | Strongly agree (5) | Agree (4) | Not sure (3) | Disagree (2) | Strongly disagree (1) | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Are open to improvement. | 24.2 | 52.1 | 15.9 | 5.7 | 2.3 | 4.0 |
| Respect each other. | 32.4 | 46.4 | 12.8 | 6.4 | 1.9 | 4.1 |
| Work collaboratively. | 27.3 | 52.6 | 13.6 | 4.6 | 1.9 | 4.0 |
| Share norms and values. | 20.8 | 51.3 | 18.1 | 7.5 | 20.8 | 3.8 |
| Engage in reflective dialogue. | 22.4 | 55.5 | 12.9 | 6.8 | 2.3 | 3.8 |

*Source*. District Professional Learning Community Survey, administered within the district's Employee Coordinated Survey.
*Note.* For positive responses (*always* and *often*) exceeding 70%, the results are in green font. For less desirable responses *(occasionally* and *never)* exceeding 20%, the results are in red font**.**

Teachers also were asked to describe the frequency with which they engaged in various activities typically found in high-functioning PLCs (Table 4). Overall, the teachers' responses were mixed. More than half (56%) of the teachers reported their groups *always* or *often* shared and discussed new teaching approaches to increase student engagement, alignment, and rigor. However, the majority teachers indicated they engaged in the other desirable PLC activities (e.g., sharing and discussing student work, analyzing student data, and developing common

> **Most teachers indicated their PLC possessed the critical characteristics necessary to function at a high level (e.g., openness to improvement, respect, collaboration, and reflection).**

Teachers of special education students and/or English language learners were especially supportive of PLCs because they had opportunities to plan with core course area teachers. They believed this practice increased the alignment, relevance, and rigor for students with special needs.

However, in many

Table 5. Teachers' Satisfaction

attendance existed within and among schools. *Considering the district's expectation that all teachers actively participate in a PLC, it is recommended campus and district administrators (a) reiterate the expectation that PLCs are to meet regularly and for a sufficient amount of time, (b) monitor the frequency of PLC meetings to ensure they are occurring regularly and for an adequate amount of time, (c) identify the challenges associated with regular and timely meetings, and (d) develop structures and/or support systems to address the identified challenges to ensure all teachers are participating often.*

Principal support for PLCs was perceived positively by most teachers. They believed principals were supportive of PLCs, provided time and resources, and encouraged teacher empowerment and autonomy. Still, a considerable percentage of teachers (20% to 25%) were *not sure* about or *disagreed* their principal was supportive of or provided the resources for their PLCs. *It is recommended principals clearly articulate their expectations of and support for PLCs and with some frequency to ensure all teachers are aware of their encouragement.*

Teacher empowerment and autonomy are difficult to develop and require that the principal communicate his or her vision of instructional improvement through the development of teacher expertise (Keedy & Finch, 1994). Consistent practice and skilled leadership are required to achieve a balance between teacher/school empowerment and the development of common goals for the classroom, the school, and the district to ensure coherence in teaching and learning for all students (Blase & Blase, 2001). *Thus, further inquiry is recommended to explore the practices of campus administrators as they facilitate the development of PLCs on their respective campuses. This inquiry may help the district identify best practices for creating highly effective PLCs. Also, additional and ongoing support should be provided to principals so they can effectively facilitate the development of PLCs in their schools.*

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Teachers indicated they were participating to differing degrees in activities associated with well-functioning PLCs. Most often, teachers reported their groups shared and discussed new teaching approaches to increase student engagement, alignment, and rigor. However, they also indicated they engaged in the other desirable PLC activities (e.g., sharing and discussing student work, analyzing student data, and/or developing common assessments) with little frequency. The variation in teachers' conceptual understandings about the nature, participant roles, and objectives of their PLCs appeared to influence the activities in which they engaged within their PLC groups. *It is recommended that principals and PLC leaders received ongoing training and sup930( )-20. Tc 0.004 Tw o1uTs-2(ng and s3-10( ac-r(C)7( l)-2(e)4e)4(conTw o1)h(pal)-2(s )]T.*

## REFERENCES

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