

From Compliance to Collaboration: Making PLCs Work

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ABSTRACT:

For many years, River Ridge High School has used team planning, department meetings, data teams and most recently, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to explore student work and improve instructional practice. During the past couple of years, however, two departments in particular have created environments that allow teachers to collaborate, have an authentic voice, and spend time doing what makes a difference in student learning. Most of the changes came from specific, intentional planning on the part of the PLC leader. (In our school, PLC teachers are also Program/Department leaders.) These small, strategic, sometimes discreet changes have created a new culture of work, collaboration and authentic exchange.

CASE STUDY

“PLCs, please meet in your assigned areas at 12:45,” came a voice over the loudspeaker.

These words used to signal a collective groan in my building – people would find more errands to do, more copies to be made, more grades to enter, and would arrive as late as possible. Now, I watch teachers pass through the library (my teaching space) smiling and chatting about their day, their weekends, or their work on their way to their meetings on time. This is a far cry from the way they moved towards PLCs in years past. While our PLCs aren’t perfect places where everyone always gets along, or even meetings where everyone always wants to be, I do think the PLCs in my building have made strides toward becoming *professional learning communities* where teachers seek support, share ideas and work toward common goals of improving practice and student achievement.

I have been watching and learning from two successful PLC leaders in my building. I am impressed by their ability to move their PLCs from places where basic information was disseminated to truly collaborative teams that explore instructional ideas and issues, look at student work and commit to teaching and reflecting alongside one another. I wondered how these changes came about and asked them how they were able to make it happen. Some common themes emerged:

- **Intentionality:**

Both of these leaders were very clear in describing and planning their work – effective PLCs don’t occur by chance, they develop with intentional, strategic planning. The Math program leader credits her intentional approach of developing relationships between herself and the department members, and between the department members themselves, as being the most powerful she has tried. She decided that without personal relationships, the members would not be able to do the work needed with new curriculum materials, new assessments and new classes. Her first step was to advocate for a common lunchtime for all of her department members and she now has 80% of

CRITERION 8:

Exhibiting collaborative and collegial practices focusing on improving instructional practice and student learning.

DEFINITION:

The teacher participates collaboratively in the educational community to improve instruction, advance the knowledge and practice of teaching as a profession, and ultimately impact student learning.



the members attend 80% of the time and they eat lunch together not because they are forced to but because they want to.

The English Language Arts program leader was intentional in other ways. For example, he planted seeds with individual members about future department goals to get their feedback rather than presenting to the whole department at once. This allowed him to shape the vision and message in a way that would resonate and be supported by all members of the department. Another method he used was to strategically build from interests and strengths of the group. In one case, he encouraged the competitive nature of the group and the desire to be “in the forefront” in the district as a way to create excitement and camaraderie around the rollout of the Common Core State Standards (and the intense work that would follow).

- **Accountability:**

Both leaders talked about the importance of accountability of themselves and the group members. Leaders were sure to have agendas for every meeting and a strong, detailed meeting structure – especially early on in their leadership. Participation was an expectation, and agendas and activities were designed to ensure participation in, for example, small group and grade level discussions. Also, the leaders considered how to provide “space” for those with a quieter voice, or a slower processing style, which they felt had been effective. The math leader said, “Anything I ask others to do, I also do. I allow and expect myself to be a member of the group. While I often speak first on topics, I always speak as a member and not always as a leader.” The ELA leader exhibited a similar mentality of being a part of the team rather than the lone leader. Both leaders felt this was important and key to the success of their respective groups.

One way the leaders are able to hold themselves accountable is through post-PLC debriefs with the principal. This crucial meeting helped them think about what worked, what didn’t work and what next steps need to be taken.

The principal serves as a sounding board for steps the leaders hope to take as well as allow the principal to ensure that the school and district initiatives are included in the plan for department work

- **Relationships:**

These leaders both realized that leading change in personal relationships is vital to a strong PLC group. The tradition in one group was to talk about collaboration in theory, but in action, participants did their own thing. This leader early on tried to create a sense of ownership and membership. Before meetings, individual members would be asked to bring specific ideas or share strategies that have worked for them, showcasing strengths. This forged a level of respect for the work of individuals that hadn’t always been present before. Then, when this “instructional respect” was present, they were able to move toward collaborative work. This trust, coupled with their ability to forge their own identity (see “autonomy” below) and a desire to be “in front” of district work, improved the relational tone of meetings.



Both leaders use frequent after-school check-ins as informal moments to say “How are you doing?” with little agenda. This helps build trust and provides the leader with a temperature check of the group’s needs. Social gatherings inside school (lunch) and outside of school (holiday gatherings, attending lectures together, etc.) forced members to see one another as real people, not just teaching colleagues. Said one leader, “I shifted my mindset – I treat them as I would treat a friend.” Part of this “friend” approach includes honesty and talking to people directly if they aren’t collaborating as the department needs them to, even informally checking in at lunch with members who were not supporting the group goals, asking “What can we do to get you to come with us?”

- **Autonomy:**

Both leaders felt that the autonomy that administrators provided the PLCs helped their work become better. “We were able to do meaningful work because we had a voice in the measures. Our principal allowed us to design our own work both in structure and outcome. We had fewer of the surveys and data recording sheets which felt like tests of compliance.” Rather than forms, surveys and data (perceived to be collected for the sake of data), PLCs worked to develop goals that participants truly cared about. If top down requests were made, leaders would consult with key department folks to get their read on the plan, for example, they asked “What should be our goals this year? What would you find meaningful in the work?” before launching to the broader group, and this troubleshooting helped them develop strong explanations and justifications for pursuing, or not pursuing, the plan.

- **Change is slow – hang in there!**

Schools don’t work like businesses -- the outputs and expectations can be less concrete than some people are used to. Relationships need to be developed in order for real change to occur. New teachers and teachers coming to teaching as a second career need to understand the pace of schools is unlike business, though the demands and pressure are there. Reminding members about where they have come from and where they are going provides context for new and experienced members alike. Each of these leaders used a different approach and each has been effective. The Math leader led the change directly, and used her energy and enthusiasm to convince others to join in the fun (work). The ELA leader chose a more ground-up approach, building rapport and planning for the next steps before bringing everyone on board.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Are people acting in authentic ways or are they just following the perceived rules?
- Is there respect for one another or just compliance and a desire to “just get through it?”
- What are the next steps these PLCs should take to continue growing?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sarah Applegate is a National Board Certified Teacher Librarian at River Ridge High School in Lacey. In addition to being the Teacher Librarian, Sarah also serves as a very part-time instructional coach, providing weekly trainings to teachers and supporting the collaborative work of the English Language Arts and Social Studies teachers. Sarah knows she has the very best job at the school, and tries not to brag about it too much at staff meetings!



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