

**ASSESSING SCHOOLS AS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES
SYMPOSIUM**

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INTRODUCTION

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ASSESSMENT – REVISED

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Assessing and Analyzing Schools as PLCs

If educators are indeed persuaded that transforming schools into professional learning communities offers the best strategy for school improvement, a clear vision of what a learning community looks like and how people operate in relation to this concept must be established. In order to visualize the culture in which PLCs exist, a portrait of learning communities can be sketched by examining the dimensions and critical attributes forming the professional learning community. Additionally, investigation into organizational dimensions linked to these critical attributes can provide a more comprehensive description and understanding of the impact of the learning community.

The complexity that exists in identifying schools as PLCs offers a challenge for researchers, principals, staff, parents, and other stakeholders. While many principals and faculties conceptualize their schools as organizations operating as learning communities, they rarely meet the operational criteria. Schools that are operating as PLCs must have a culture in which learning by all is valued, encouraged, and supported. Within such communities, “the staff, intentionally and collectively, engage in learning and work on issues directly related to classroom practice that positively impacts student learning” (Cowan & Hord, 1999, p. 4).

In assessing the level of progress along a continuum of PLC development, specific school and classroom practices can be measured as determining factors for school renewal. Thus, analysis can further be enhanced by assessment and subsequent analyses of organizational variables, such as collective efficacy and leadership capacity, factors seemingly related.

Our conceptualization of the PLC dimensions and related attributes, and the development of the *Professional Learning Community Organizer* (PLCO) (Huffman & Hipp, 2003) created a need for a formal diagnostic tool. This new instrument was developed to align staff perceptions and day-to-day actions and to more accurately represent phases of development in becoming a PLC: initiating (starting), implementing (doing), and institutionalizing (sustaining) (Fullan, 1995; Stoll, McMahon & Thomas, 2006).

Professional Learning Community Assessment - Revised

While many schools, with the best intentions, choose to use the PLC label, we felt it essential to accurately assess the level of effectiveness of PLC characteristics. In an effort to gauge the level at which schools function along the continuum of PLCs, a survey measure was developed to assess teachers' perceptions of critical attributes within their learning organization. Additionally, this tool was designed to assist school personnel in identifying practices that successfully contribute to becoming and sustaining a PLC. Initially, the *Professional Learning Community Assessment* (PLCA) (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003) was created to assess everyday classroom and school level practices. Over the last five years, this assessment has successfully assisted educators and researchers in determining the strength of practices within each PLC dimension.

Recognition of a need to more inclusively assess levels of practice relating to utilization and analyses of data has resulted in an extension of the original measure. The integration of specific items within each of the PLC dimensions identifies data as an essential tool. This aligns with Hord and Hirsh's (2008) assertion that "Staff learning precedes student learning, and its focus derives from the study of both student and staff

data that reveal specific needs. Thus the staff engages in intentional and collegial learning aligned with needs and goals determined by data” (p. 29).

This refined measure, *Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised* (PLCA-R), continues to serve as an effective formal diagnostic tool for identifying school level practices that enhance intentional professional learning. Purposely, the PLCA-R provides perceptions of the staff relating to specific practices observed at the school level with regard to shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, including both relationships and structures.

The measure has been administered to professional staff in numerous school districts at varying grade levels throughout the U.S. The widespread use of the instrument has provided an opportunity to review the dimensions for internal consistency. Initial and subsequent studies have provided ongoing validation of this diagnostic tool. (*Our intention is to share the ongoing validation and refinement process for this effective diagnostic measure. For development and validation procedures of the initial measure refer to Huffman and Hipp, Chapter 8, Assessing Schools as PLCs, 2003*).

Our most recent analyses of this diagnostic tool has confirmed internal consistency resulting in the following Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficients for factored subscales (n=1209): Shared and Supportive Leadership (.94); Shared Values and Vision (.92); Collective Learning and Application (.91); Shared Personal Practice (.87); Supportive Conditions-Relationships (.82); Supportive Conditions-Structures (.88); and a one-factor solution (.97). This latest analysis also provided an opportunity to review descriptive statistics for each item. Mean scores for the measure resulted in a high of 3.27

within the Collective Learning and Application dimension (*School staff is committed to programs that enhance learning*) to a low of 2.74 within the Shared Personal Practice dimension (*The staff provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices*).

The *Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised* (PLCA-R) (see Figure 8.1) utilizes a four-point, forced Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree. The refinement of this PLC measure incorporates seven new statements directly addressing the utilization of data as a school level practice. To verify the relevance of the new items developed relating to data, an Expert Opinion Questionnaire was designed to assess and analyze responses from individuals within the education field having knowledge about the original PLCA measure and/or attributes of professional learning communities. This Expert questionnaire requested that respondents read each proposed measure statement and rate each item in terms of its *relevance* to more directly speak to data practices within a professional learning community assessment.

The 3-point rating scale included the following responses:

- H/(3) = high level of importance and relevance to PLCA instrument revision;
- M/(2) = medium level of importance and relevance to PLCA instrument revision; and
- L/(1) = low level of importance and relevance to PLCA instrument revision.

Thus, the proposed items were assessed in terms of the importance and relevance to data utilization and the appropriate fit within the PLCA dimensions.

The panel of experts consisted of school administrators and teachers, district and regional education supervisory personnel, university faculty and staff, educational

consultants, and doctoral students studying professional learning communities. Findings from the Expert Opinion Questionnaire resulted in 51 usable surveys in which the seven items were rated, on the 3-point scale, from a high of 2.94 (*Staff collaboratively analyze evidence of student learning as critical data for improving teaching and learning*) to a low of 2.69 (*Data are organized in a way to provide easy access to staff*). As noted by ratings and comments from panel members, overall strong support was indicated for the inclusion of all proposed items.

Numerous comments expressed approval. One principal stated “... *I conducted the PLCA this past fall...I am very excited to see that you are contemplating adding the data component to each of the strands of the PLCs;*” An educational consultant and regional education staff member concluded, “*I really like the new items and think they are a good addition to the existing survey. The new items support what our office [regional education office] suggests about using data to inform instruction.*”

The PLCA revision process also sought feedback from several researchers and doctoral students who had utilized the measure, as to their perceptions of the viability of the instrument. Responses were overwhelmingly positive and indicated the feasibility of utilizing the PLCA-R to assess the practices observed at the school level relating to the PLC dimensions. Table 8.1 provides comments from researchers, doctoral students, and practitioners who have administered and utilized results from the original PLCA measure.

These sample comments serve as evidence for the usability and feasibility of the PLCA as a measure designed to assess school practices relating to PLC critical attributes. One slight variation in the PLCA-R format resulting from user feedback is a Comment section, offering the opportunity for respondents to express their viewpoints at the

Table 8.1

Feedback on the Professional Learning Community Assessment

Role	Comment
High School Principal and Doctoral Student	The measure served to provide <i>“data that...is highly pertinent to the everyday lives of a building principal.”</i>
Researcher	Using the PLCA as checkpoints, the measure provided a sense of <i>“the school’s progress towards becoming a professional learning community...I believe the findings represent an accurate measure of what is really going on there.”</i>
Teacher and Doctoral Student	The measure served to provide an analysis of specific aspects of interest within the school... <i>“the leadership questions helped me to analyze how and if teachers felt that they were empowered to not only work as a collaborative community, but also to make or even suggest changes in their teaching practices.”</i>
Teacher and Doctoral Student	Regarding the quality of the PLCA ... <i>“the instrument was the centerpiece to my research study...as it allowed me to draw some very interesting conclusions. I found that the measure...helped me to tease out the nuances of how teachers collaborated and if they felt empowered by the collaborative experience.”</i>
Principal and Doctoral Student	<i>“The PLCA supported the central intent of my study quite well because of its robust alignment with my conceptual framework on PLCs...[the measure] served as a user-friendly, yet rigorous quantitative component in a mixed-method case study...its language was also the language of the PLC literature, the language that emerged in focus groups with my participants; in relation the structure of the measure – “some teachers indicated that the four-point Likert, absent the often-seen neutral option, caused them to think extensively about their responses...and that after thinking deeply about an item, they were glad they were forced to commit to a positive or negative response; “the PLCA gave me a clear, initial picture of the extent to which our organization shows characteristics and supportive conditions of a PLC...overall, the PLCA appeared to paint a profile of our school that was congruent with and confirmatory of the qualitative data I collected via focus group interviews, individual interviews, open-ended, anonymous questionnaire, and document analysis”</i>

conclusion of each of the dimension sections. This insertion provides an avenue for the professional staff to offer more comprehensive feedback on critical attributes within each dimension, thus allowing insight through qualitative means to guide further direction.

In analyzing the results of the PLCA-R, descriptive statistics are useful in determining the strength of the dimensions, as well as reviewing teacher responses for each individual item. Since the PLCA-R items illustrate actual school level practices, analysis of the measure should incorporate a review of individual items to determine the strength and weaknesses of practices deemed essential within a professional learning community.

The PLCA-R is available for dissemination and use by educators and others as an assessment tool that measures practices observed at the school level relating to the critical attributes within professional learning community dimensions. After testing and retesting this instrument, it has been concluded that users find it useful as a measuring tool to assess perceptions based on the dimensions of a PLC.

Two additional documents have been included as tools for analyzing and assessing professional learning communities. The *Professional Learning Community Organizer* (PLCO) illustrates practices identified through research that promote school efforts under each of the five dimensions of a PLC and phases of change. The *Professional Learning Community Developmental Rubric* (PLCDR) serves as a tool for individual or small group dialogue. The PLCDR provides reflection on the school's culture to delineate the progression of specific school level practices that reflect each dimension of a PLC through each level of change. Information on the development of these two measures can be found in Huffman and Hipp (2003), *Reculturing Schools as Professional Learning Communities* with further detail in the upcoming Hipp and Huffman (2009) *Professional learning communities: Purposeful actions, positive results*.

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Professional Learning Communities Assessment - Revised

Directions:

This questionnaire assesses your perceptions about your principal, staff, and stakeholders based on the dimensions of a professional learning community (PLC) and related attributes. This questionnaire contains a number of statements about practices which occur in some schools. Read each statement and then use the scale below to select the scale point that best reflects your personal degree of agreement with the statement. Shade the appropriate oval provided to the right of each statement. Be certain to select only one response for each statement. Comments after each dimension section are optional.

Key Terms:

- # Principal = Principal, not Associate or Assistant Principal
- # Staff/Staff Members = All adult staff directly associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment of students
- # Stakeholders = Parents and community members

- Scale:** 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD)
 2 = Disagree (D)
 3 = Agree (A)
 4 = Strongly Agree (SA)

STATEMENTS		SCALE			
	Shared and Supportive Leadership	SD	D	A	SA
1.	Staff members are consistently involved in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.	0	0	0	0
2.	The principal incorporates advice from staff members to make decisions.	0	0	0	0
3.	Staff members have accessibility to key information.	0	0	0	0
4.	The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.	0	0	0	0
5.	Opportunities are provided for staff members to initiate change.	0	0	0	0
6.	The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.	0	0	0	0
7.	The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.	0	0	0	0
8.	Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff members.	0	0	0	0
9.	Decision-making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.	0	0	0	0
10.	Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.	0	0	0	0
11.	Staff members use multiple sources of data to make decisions about teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0

COMMENTS:					
	STATEMENTS	SCALE			
	Shared Values and Vision	SD	D	A	SA
12.	A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.	0	0	0	0
13.	Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
14.	Staff members share visions for school improvement that have undeviating focus on student learning.	0	0	0	0
15.	Decisions are made in alignment with the school=s values and vision.	0	0	0	0
16.	A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.	0	0	0	0
17.	School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.	0	0	0	0
18.	Policies and programs are aligned to the school=s vision.	0	0	0	0
19.	Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.	0	0	0	0
20.	Data are used to prioritize actions to reach a shared vision.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					
	Collective Learning and Application	SD	D	A	SA
21.	Staff members work together to seek knowledge, skills and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.	0	0	0	0
22.	Collegial relationships exist among staff members that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.	0	0	0	0
23.	Staff members plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.	0	0	0	0
24.	A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.	0	0	0	0
25.	Staff members engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.	0	0	0	0
26.	Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
27.	School staff members and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.	0	0	0	0

28.	School staff members are committed to programs that enhance learning.	0	0	0	0
29.	Staff members collaboratively analyze multiple sources of data to assess the effectiveness of instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
30.	Staff members collaboratively analyze student work to improve teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					
	STATEMENTS	SCALE			
	Shared Personal Practice	SD	D	A	SA
31.	Opportunities exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement.	0	0	0	0
32.	Staff members provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
33.	Staff members informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.	0	0	0	0
34.	Staff members collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
35.	Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.	0	0	0	0
36.	Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.	0	0	0	0
37.	Staff members regularly share student work to guide overall school improvement.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					
	Supportive Conditions – Relationships	SD	D	A	SA
38.	Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.	0	0	0	0
39.	A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.	0	0	0	0
40.	Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.	0	0	0	0
41.	School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.	0	0	0	0
42.	Relationships among staff members support honest and respectful examination of data to enhance teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					

	Supportive Conditions – Structures	SD	D	A	SA
43.	Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	0	0	0	0
44.	The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	0	0	0	0
45.	Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	0	0	0	0
46.	Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	0	0	0	0
	STATEMENTS	SCALE			
		SD	D	A	SA
47.	Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.	0	0	0	0
48.	The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.	0	0	0	0
49.	The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	0	0	0	0
50.	Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff members.	0	0	0	0
51.	Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.	0	0	0	0
52.	Data are organized and made available to provide easy access to staff members.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					

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Source: Olivier, D. F., Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (In progress). Assessing and analyzing schools as PLCs. In K. K. Hipp & J. B. Huffman (Eds.). *Professional learning communities: Purposeful Actions, Positive Results*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.