From PLC Talk to PLC Transfer

Building Professional Learning Communities That Change Classroom Practice

by Tony Flach

Most schools say they "do PLCs." Usually that means teams meet regularly, review data, share ideas, and talk about students. Those things matter. But none of them guarantee professional learning, and that gap is why so many PLCs fail to move the needle on classroom practice or student achievement.

This is a hard truth for leaders to sit with. A team can meet every week, follow the agenda, and leave every session with a collegial feeling, then see very little change in what happens in classrooms. When that happens, the instinct is often to look at teachers: their resistance, their capacity, their competing priorities. But in my experience, that instinct points us in the wrong direction.

A PLC is not defined by the meeting itself. It is defined by whether the process changes adult practice in ways that improve student learning. When implementation stalls, the more productive question is not what teachers are failing to do. It is what the system has failed to make possible.

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The Question That Changes Everything

Most leaders assess PLC quality by asking: Did the team meet? A more powerful question is: What changed in teaching because the team met?

That shift, from attendance to impact, is where PLC transformation begins. John Hattie's (2009, 2023) framework for assessment-capable learners offers a useful lens here. His three core questions apply just as powerfully to adult learning as they do to student learning:

- Where am I going?
- Where am I now?
- How do I close the gap?

When PLCs are designed around those questions, loose collaboration becomes focused, evidence-rich cycles of professional growth. When those questions are absent, meetings accumulate without improving practice.

Too often, PLCs generate conversation but do not transfer that discussion into classroom action. They produce agendas and minutes but not adult learning. They create the appearance of collaboration without the discipline required for collective growth. When we judge PLCs by calendars and compliance, we miss the real issue. If we judge them instead by evidence of stronger instruction and improved student response, we begin treating PLCs as the professional learning systems they were designed to be.

Topics Generate Discussion. Success Criteria Generate Transfer.
One of the most common PLC problems is mistaking a broad topic for a professional learning target. Teams say they are working on engagement, rigor, questioning, or formative assessment. Those are worthwhile areas. But they are too vague to produce consistent implementation.

"We are working on questioning" is not yet a learning target. Without a shared, specific definition of the practice, every teacher interprets the goal differently. Implementation varies widely. The team has no common language for feedback or reflection, and no standard against which to measure growth.

A stronger PLC names the practice precisely and defines what successful implementation looks like before teachers try it in classrooms.

Consider the difference:
- **Vague:** "We are focusing on questioning."
- **Specific:** "We will increase wait time, use probing follow-up questions, invite student-to-student dialogue, and press for evidence-based responses."

That level of clarity changes everything. It gives teachers something concrete to attempt. It gives leaders something specific to look for. It creates shared language for the feedback conversations that follow.

This is Hattie's first question applied to adult learning: Where am I going? (Hattie, 2009). Defining both a clear learning intention and observable success criteria before implementation begins is not an exercise in paperwork. It is the condition that makes improvement possible. Research on teacher efficacy confirms this. People invest effort more willingly when expectations are specific and attainable (Bandura, 1997). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) similarly found that professional learning is most effective when it centers on clear goals tied directly to instructional practice and student outcomes.

The practical protocol is simple. Before the next PLC cycle, ask the team: If we walked into a classroom two weeks from now, what would we see or hear if this practice were being implemented well? Define 3–5 observable indicators. Share those indicators with teachers before they try the practice. When the team can answer that question with specificity, the PLC has a much better chance of producing real change.

Evidence Before Opinion
Strong PLCs do not begin with opinion. They begin with evidence. That sounds obvious, but it is where many teams quietly get off track.

Teams move quickly from examining data to proposing solutions without first establishing what current practice actually looks like. They discuss instruction in generalities. They assume implementation is stronger than it is. They rely on anecdotes and impressions rather than artifacts. When that happens, the PLC generates discussion but not diagnosis, and without an accurate diagnosis, adjustments are guesswork.

An implementation-focused PLC slows down before jumping to solutions. It asks: What evidence shows our current level of implementation? Which success criteria are already visible in practice? Where are the gaps? How are students responding? The evidence might come from observation notes, student work, lesson artifacts, or structured self-reflection.

The source matters less than the discipline of grounding the conversation in something concrete. Timperley (2011) found that job-embedded, evidence-based professional learning is substantially more powerful than stand-alone training precisely because it keeps teachers anchored to the real problems of their classrooms.

Evidence-based conversation also reduces defensiveness. When teams respond to something visible rather than debating vague impressions, the tone shifts from judgment to inquiry. That shift matters. It is what makes honest, productive professional dialogue possible.

Teacher Practice as Leadership Feedback

When teachers struggle to implement a new practice, weak implementation is rarely a teacher problem. More often, it is feedback about the professional learning system itself. Teacher practice is the formative assessment for leadership.

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Were expectations clear before teachers were asked to implement? Was there sufficient modeling? Did teachers have an opportunity to practice in a low-stakes setting before being expected to execute in classrooms? Was there meaningful follow-through after the professional development session ended?

When teacher practice is viewed this way, it becomes a mirror of leadership support systems, not a verdict on teacher will or competence. Before reaching for the language of resistance, it is worth asking what the system actually made possible. Leaders who ask that question seriously and treat implementation data as formative feedback about their own actions tend to build the conditions that produce sustained change.

In stronger PLCs, you are more likely to hear:

- A clear learning target and shared success criteria that everyone can articulate
- Specific evidence of current implementation, not impressions or assumptions
- Discussion of how students are responding to changes in teacher practice
- Honest reflection on what worked and what did not
- A concrete next step before the meeting closes, with a plan to collect evidence before the next session

You are less likely to hear broad themes, vague impressions, or disconnected problem talk that never connects back to classroom action.

Leaders do not need to dominate PLC conversations to improve them. They need to listen for the right indicators and ask a well-timed clarifying question when those indicators are absent.

- Can teachers name the specific instructional practice they are working to strengthen?
- Can they describe what good implementation looks like in observable terms?
- Are they connecting changes in their teaching to changes in what students are doing?

Those are the sounds of a PLC functioning as a learning system rather than a meeting obligation.

The goal is not more PLC meetings. The goal is better teaching after the meeting.

Building Efficacy That Lasts

One of the most important outcomes of implementation- capable PLCs is that they build teacher efficacy in credible, durable ways. Rooted in Bandura’s foundational work on self-efficacy, this belief grows through repeated experiences of supported effort, useful feedback, and visible impact (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Slogans and encouragement alone cannot produce it. Teachers build genuine confidence in their practice when they experience the cycle of attempt, feedback, refinement, and measurable student improvement.

Professional learning becomes real when teachers can see that a strategy they learned, implemented, and refined leads to stronger student thinking or measurably improved performance.

Over time, this builds collective teacher efficacy, the shared belief that together, teachers can make a significant difference in student outcomes. Goddard et al. (2000) found that collective teacher efficacy has a strong positive relationship with student achievement across school contexts. Hattie's synthesis places it among the highest-influence variables in education (Hattie, 2023). That outcome does not emerge from teachers simply meeting together. Efficacy happens when teams learn together in ways that change what happens in classrooms. It gains momentum when the evidence of that change is visible and shared.

A Better Way to Judge PLC Quality

Schools typically judge PLCs by structural indicators:

- Did teams meet?
- Did they follow the agenda?
- Did they look at assessment data?

Those indicators are not meaningless, but they are insufficient. Structure without impact is compliance. What really matters is whether the PLC

A better test is this: Did this PLC increase teachers' ability and willingness to implement stronger instructional practice?

If the answer is yes, the PLC is working. If the answer is uncertain, the school may have a PLC structure without a PLC learning process, and the gap between those two things is where student achievement gets left on the table.

The path forward is not more meetings or more compliance. It is clarity about what the agreed upon instructional practice looks like, honesty about where implementation actually stands, and leadership conditions that make transfer from professional development to classroom practice not just possible, but likely. Schools that build those conditions do not just improve their PLCs. They build the professional culture and collective efficacy that sustains improvement over time.

About the Author

Tony Flach is an educational consultant with more than 20 years of experience coaching school and district leaders nationwide. A former teacher, instructional coach, and administrator, and a product of his mother's classroom, Tony believes quality education is the cornerstone of social equity and that every school should be a place he'd want his own children to attend. He works with schools and districts to build the leadership capacity and data-driven practices that turn professional learning into lasting student outcomes.

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