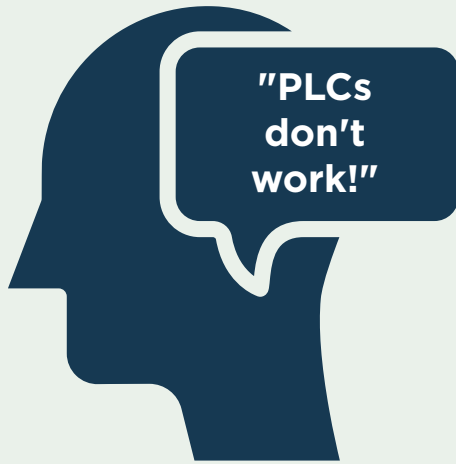




PLCs Don't Work.....Until They Do



If you have spent any time in schools, you have likely heard this phrase in one form or another. Sometimes it is shared quietly after another meeting that felt disconnected from instruction. Other times it surfaces openly during leadership discussions, staff meetings, or hallway conversations when educators express frustration with initiatives that seem to consume time without improving outcomes for students. For some educators, especially those who feel isolated as “teams of one,” the skepticism runs even deeper.

[In our previous article on singletons](#), we explored how many teachers believe meaningful collaboration is impossible because nobody else teaches the same content, grade level, or course. Whether the frustration comes from isolation, lack of alignment, or ineffective meeting structures, the underlying concern is often the same: educators are not convinced the collaboration is making a meaningful difference for students.

And honestly, many educators are not wrong to feel skeptical.

Too often, what schools call a Professional Learning Community or Collaborative Learning Team becomes another meeting to survive rather than a structure designed to improve teaching and learning. Teams meet because the calendar says they should. Agendas are filled out. Notes are uploaded. Attendance is documented.

Yet when educators return to their classrooms, very little changes instructionally. The work becomes procedural instead of purposeful. That is not collaboration. That is compliance with chairs.

The issue is not that collaboration itself is ineffective. The issue is that many schools unintentionally lost clarity around what Collaborative Learning Teams were supposed to accomplish in the first place. Somewhere along the way, collaboration became confused with simply meeting together. Schools protected time, but they did not always protect purpose. As a result, many teams drifted away from the actual work of improving student learning.

**Because collaboration is not the goal.
Improving student learning is the goal.**



When Collaboration Drifts Away From Learning

Collaborative Learning Teams begin losing effectiveness the moment they drift away from instruction and into logistics.

Conversations become dominated by field trips, pacing frustrations, behavior concerns, missing assignments, upcoming events, and operational tasks that, while important, are not the reason Collaborative Learning Teams exist. Over time, educators begin leaving meetings wondering what was actually accomplished and whether the time was valuable at all. That frustration is real, and it is understandable. Teachers do not dislike collaboration nearly as much as they dislike meetings without purpose.

The strongest Collaborative Learning Teams feel fundamentally different because they remain anchored in learning. They are not defined by how often they meet but by what they produce. High functioning teams create clarity around standards and expectations;

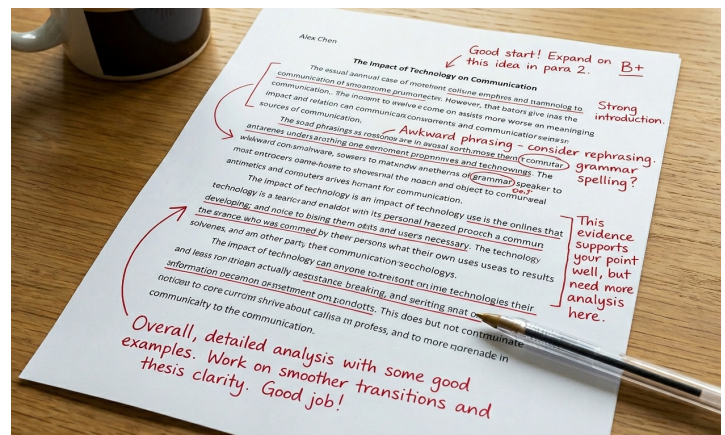
- They analyze evidence of student learning together.
- They identify instructional responses when students struggle.
- They calibrate expectations across classrooms and challenge one another's thinking in ways that strengthen instruction.
- Most importantly, they remain relentlessly focused on whether students are actually learning.

That is very different from simply “having PLC time.”

Collaboration Without Evidence Is Just Conversation

One of the biggest reasons educators feel Collaborative Learning Teams do not work is because many teams spend more time sharing opinions than analyzing evidence. Statements like, “I think they got it,” or “this class always struggles with that standard,” may feel accurate, but they rarely improve instruction. Strong Collaborative Learning Teams ask different questions. They ask what evidence exists, which students are proficient, where misconceptions are emerging, and what instructional response is needed next. The focus shifts from perception to proof.

Student work changes the conversation because it creates clarity. It grounds the discussion in evidence instead of assumptions and removes much of the defensiveness that can emerge during collaboration. The moment teams begin analyzing writing samples, formative assessments, performance tasks, or common checks for understanding, the work becomes real. The conversation moves away from what adults taught and toward what students actually learned.





This is also why “teams of one” can still engage in powerful collaboration. In our previous singleton article, we discussed how meaningful collaboration is not dependent on teaching the exact same content or grade level. Collaboration becomes powerful when educators focus less on what they teach and more on how students learn. Writing, use of evidence, academic discourse, formative assessment practices, cognitive demand, and instructional response exist across every classroom and content area. Effective collaboration happens when teams embrace shared responsibility for learning rather than limiting collaboration to identical teaching assignments.

Coverage Is Not the Same as Learning

Another reason Collaborative Learning Teams often feel ineffective is because schools unintentionally confuse teaching with learning. Teams move through pacing guides, curriculum maps, and instructional calendars regardless of whether students have actually mastered the content. Standards get covered, but students do not always develop deep understanding. Effective Collaborative Learning Teams interrupt that cycle by forcing educators to pause and ask a much more important question: Did students actually learn this?

Coverage vs Learning



vs



That question changes everything because it requires honesty, vulnerability, and a willingness to openly discuss what worked, what did not, and where students are still struggling. High functioning teams understand that the purpose of collaboration is not to prove effectiveness but to improve effectiveness. The goal is not adult comfort. The goal is student growth.

Leaders Shape the Culture of Collaboration

School leaders play a critical role in determining whether collaboration becomes transformational or transactional. Leaders shape the culture of collaboration through the questions they ask, the evidence they prioritize, and the expectations they establish. If leaders primarily ask whether teams met, then meetings become the goal. However, when leaders ask what evidence exists that students learned, what trends emerged, what instructional adjustments were made, and which students still need support, collaboration becomes focused on impact instead of compliance.

Leaders also have a responsibility to protect collaboration from fragmentation. Schools often overload teams with too many priorities, too many initiatives, and too many competing demands. The result is scattered focus and shallow implementation. If everything is the priority, nothing becomes the priority. Clarity creates coherence, and coherence creates momentum.



So How Do We Fix It?

The solution is not abandoning the work. The solution is rebuilding clarity around the purpose of collaboration. Schools must stop treating collaboration as a meeting structure and start treating it as a process for improving student learning. Teams need clarity around standards, assessment, instruction, and differentiation. They need evidence instead of assumptions. They need structures that support honest instructional conversations instead of performative compliance. Most importantly, they need a collective commitment to responding when students struggle and extending learning when students are already proficient.

Because collaboration is not the work. Improving learning is the work.

And when schools understand that difference, Collaborative Learning Teams stop feeling like another initiative and start becoming one of the most powerful drivers of instructional improvement in a system.



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