

LEADING THE WAY TO A SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

by Public Profit

These guides accompany the policy paper *Professional Learning Communities in the Expanded Learning Field*. The guides provide practical advice that will help organizations make informed decisions about implementing or participating in a professional learning community (PLC).

Each guide draws from research in the field; from interviews with PLC trainers, conveners and participants; and from evaluations of PLCs in Expanded Learning programs. Read on for brief descriptions of each guide and its intended audience.

Why, and When, to Use Professional Learning Communities?

This guide provides an overview of PLCs. The content draws primarily from research in education to define PLCs and to describe why a PLC may be an effective professional development experience for staff in Expanded Learning programs.

 **BEST FOR:** Professionals who are relatively new to PLCs and are curious about a PLC's particular benefits for staff in Expanded Learning programs.

Make the Most of Your Professional Learning Community: What You'll Need

Designed for readers who are further along in the process of PLC implementation, this guide walks step-by-step through the essential elements of a successful professional learning community. This guide includes practical advice from PLC participants and facilitators.

 **BEST FOR:** Program leaders or trainers who are strongly considering implementing a PLC, or those who have some experience with PLCs and are looking for guidance.

How To Know if a Professional Learning Community is Effective

It's never too early to think about measuring effectiveness! This guide presents an evaluation framework for understanding the impact of professional development experiences, and offers resources for readers wishing to dig deeper into the evaluation of PLCs.

 **BEST FOR:** PLC facilitators and organizations that want to measure PLCs' impact, as well as funders considering investing in a PLC.

WHY, AND WHEN, TO USE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Why make the switch from more traditional forms of professional development to a professional learning community (PLC)?

Participants, practitioners, and research from the field offer insights as to why a PLC might be the right tool for your Expanded Learning program. Here's what we know about why PLCs work:

- When implemented effectively, PLCs support adult learning principles.
- PLC trainers model tangible skills for participating staff.
- PLCs build content- and process-area expertise.
- Over time, PLCs can improve programs.
- PLCs can empower youth workers and improve staff retention.

When implemented effectively, PLCs support adult learning principles.

Adults learn best when their learning is self-directed, builds on their existing knowledge and experiences, is linked to their goals, is relevant to their context, and acknowledges their expertise.¹

According to experienced PLC trainers, the best PLCs are those in which ownership of the process is shared by participants and trainers; in this way, the PLC differentiates itself from a typical training and supports participants' vision and goals, relates the content to participants' context and experience, and gives them space to share their knowledge with their peers.

PLC trainers model tangible skills for participating staff.

Youth workers² must constantly be responsive to the needs of youth, and often partner with youth as equals rather than acting as their superior. Experts on youth work argue that trainings and professional development that follow a typical top-down approach won't stick³. In a PLC, trainers model skills and engage youth workers in practical, hands-on, participatory approaches to learning new techniques that will be useful in their work with youth.

¹ Knowles, M. (1988). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Cambridge Adult Education.

² Youth workers are defined as practitioners who work directly with youth in expanded learning opportunities.

³ Fusco, D. (2013). Is youth work being courted by the appropriate suitor?. *Child & Youth Services*, 34(2), 196-209.

What is a Professional Learning Community?

PLCs are collaborative groups of professionals who reflect on and improve their practice.

PLCs push professionals to collaborate.

PLCs are practice-focused.

PLCs support connections between professional practice and youth experiences.

PLCs are structured around the professional and learning needs of participants.



PLCs build content- and process-area expertise.

Not only can PLCs increase staff knowledge in a specific content area, they can also improve their process- and role-specific knowledge. Evaluations of PLCs find that as participating staff members build their skills in a specific content area, like STEM or nutrition, they also strengthen their facilitation and lesson planning skills. PLC participants then apply these skills to all of the activities that they lead.⁴ Practitioners report that PLC trainings that offer both facilitation techniques and content-specific connections build “staff capacity across curricula and settings.”⁵

Over time, PLCs can improve programs.

PLCs can strengthen organizations beyond individual staff practice. Research from school day PLCs shows that they can have a positive impact on youth outcomes, including increased confidence, improved test scores, and better attendance.⁶ PLCs can also contribute to a better organizational culture, one that is committed to collaboration and that values both staff and youth learning.⁷ Expanded Learning program leaders say that these effects can be sustained even through staff turnover, especially if a Site Coordinator participates in the PLC alongside front line staff. Evaluations of multi-year, site-wide PLCs show a strong correlation between improvement in program quality and the sites’ level of engagement in the PLC.⁸

PLCs can empower youth workers and improve staff retention.

 **Trainers, participants, and supervisors agree: participating in a PLC gives youth workers a sense of validation, professionalism, and empowerment.**

PLCs give participants the opportunity to share their experiences, to build networks with peers and experts, to develop skills that help their professional trajectory, and to set and make progress toward goals. PLCs can even encourage youth workers to put down roots, both in an organization and in the field.

When are Professional Learning Communities the right choice?

PLCs can be successful, long-term investments when a few key organizational conditions are in place. Here’s what we know about when PLCs work best:

PLCs may work best for organizations planning a long-term professional development strategy.

To maintain a strong PLC over time, consider making PLC participation a multi-year commitment. PLC trainers agree that participants are able to get more out of a PLC if they’ve made a long-term commitment to it.

“Learning communities are great because they provide staff with hands-on opportunities to try some of the activities, build their confidence and their knowledge. Lots of people learn better by doing. It is really helpful to provide a place for them to actually try and practice implementation so they can come back with some tangible knowledge... and build a plan for their class based on their experience in the learning community.”

– PLC Trainer

“[You] can’t underestimate the value of the relationships that come out, and that the results of those interpersonal relationships is an improvement in practice, because people now feel comfortable asking for help, sharing resources, and in many cases, visiting their colleagues and seeing it in action.”

– PLC Trainer

4 See accompanying white paper Professional Learning Communities in Expanded Learning for a summary of PLC evaluation findings.

5 Kasad, R., Agrawal, N., & Kelekis, L. (2014). Deepening professional development for STEM instruction: a look

at learning communities. *Afterschool Today*, 4(4), 12-13.

6 Cordingley, P., Bell, M., Rundell, B., & Evans, D. (2003). The impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning. *Research Evidence in Education Library*. Version 1.1. London:

EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education.

7 Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2008). A review of the research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 24

(2008), 80-91.

8 Public Profit LLC. (2013). *Oakland after school Building Intentional Communities evaluation report, 2012-13*. Oakland, CA: Author.

Participating staff should have strong facilitation skills and be looking for new ways to grow.

The better equipped a participant is to deliver a PLC's content in a program, the more likely they will be to benefit from the PLC experience as a whole.

The program's structure should be able to support staff who are practicing new skills. Some questions to ask about the program include:

- Is there designated space for program activities?
- Are target staff-to-youth ratios being met?
- Are there sufficient materials and supplies for program activities?
- How can the program schedule be modified to accommodate new content-focused activities that may last longer than one day?
- Are staff consistently using positive youth development practices in the program?
- How familiar are staff and youth with program routines that add structure to the program (e.g., transitions, program schedule, community agreements)?

Commitment from program management, Site Coordinators, and line staff is needed.

- Program directors and managers should communicate that they believe in professional development.
- Site Coordinators, who are likely to work with PLC participants daily, should demonstrate their support by:
 - » Providing sufficient planning time
 - » Holding structured coaching conversations that give staff opportunities to reflect on their practice and their experience in the PLC
 - » Attending a few PLC sessions to participate in the knowledge sharing and to ensure that staff participation occurs
- Front line staff should demonstrate their commitment through consistent participation in PLC sessions, by using planning time to incorporate new practices, by using new practices, and by assessing how well those practices worked.

“What works best about PLCs is just having a space for after school program workers to go and feel like they are a part of something greater than just what is happening in their individual classroom. [It] really [gives] them a sense that the work they are doing is meaningful and is worth the time and preparation it takes to prepare for their lessons.”

– Site Coordinator



MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: WHAT YOU'LL NEED

by Public Profit

A professional learning community (PLC) can be a valuable resource for youth workers and youth-serving organizations, and there are some factors that can turn a PLC experience from good to great. Research from across the field, interviews with participants and experts, and evaluations of PLCs in expanded learning point to lessons learned about how to maintain a strong PLC. Here's what you'll need to do:

- Assess staff and organizational capacity.
- Develop goals and structure around participants' needs.
- Build partnerships.
- Budget for extra staff time.
- Conduct on-site observations and coaching.
- Create processes for sharing and documenting PLC knowledge.

Assess staff and organizational capacity.

Logistics

Planning a PLC will require some pre-thinking about logistics. Develop answers to important questions such as:

- Where will we meet?
- When will we meet?
- Is in-person or online better for our cohort?
- What are the necessary materials and supplies?
- Who will facilitate the learning?
- How will we make decisions about changes within the PLC?

Staff

Trainers agree that participants with stronger group facilitation skills are better able to engage with the content-focus of a PLC and are more likely to benefit from their participation.

“They’re learning something new, and learning how to do things better all the time. It’s a process that never ends [...] even the smallest successes become evident to them, and they know that that can make a difference in their own work.”

– PLC Trainer



If staff are novices to youth work and have little background in classroom management or in the youth development field, they may not be able to incorporate new facilitation strategies and content, especially if they are the sole participants from their organization.

While a content-specific PLC may be ideal for experienced staff, other types of PLCs may be more appropriate to staff new to Expanded Learning. A process- or practice-based PLC focused specifically on youth development principles would expose novice staff to the benefits of PLC-style learning while giving them the opportunity to refine their basic youth development practices.

To tackle the issues of staff capacity, consider including a staff assessment in the recruitment process. Evaluate staff on the following dimensions:

- Classroom management skills — front line staff who are still struggling to manage a group of young people will find it too challenging to implement new practices taught in a PLC.
- Length with the program — PLCs require a larger financial investment than other forms of professional development, due to the additional time staff must commit to PLC activities. Try to select someone who has strong ties to the program, to maximize the return on investment.
- Interest in the content area — As with any learner, staff who are interested in the topic are more likely to attend and be engaged in PLC sessions.
- Overall performance — Sending a staff member to a PLC communicates an investment in the staff member's professional growth. This investment should be reserved for staff members who generally do their job well and are noticeably working to improve their practice.

Develop goals and structure around participants' needs.

Goals: Experienced trainers caution against going into a PLC initiative with only their own goals in mind. Trainers should consider how to design the PLC experience to incorporate opportunities for participants to co-facilitate and take the lead in PLC sessions.

Incorporating participants' voices may involve a group goal-setting discussion. The discussion should address the following questions:

- How can the PLC make an impact on participants' perception of the experience, their behavior, and their learning?
- How can the PLC impact participants' organizations, and the youth they serve?
- How will a PLC support the larger organizational vision?

“When I am choosing who attends the learning communities, I send someone who has been around for a while, who has built a certain capacity around the area of classroom management and is ready to take their instruction up to another level. I use it as an incentive for some staff who have strong classroom management skills and great relational skills, to [...] get them more energized about some of the activities that they are doing, to give them a challenge.”

— Site Coordinator



- How can participants share the knowledge they gain?
- How can you measure what you've accomplished?

Setting specific, measurable, participant-directed goals will help guide the implementation of your PLC and will help make the impact stick.

Structure: PLC evaluations suggest that participants value supports tailored to their learning needs. Incorporating a knowledge and skill assessment at the start of the PLC, and planning based on the results of those assessments, can help you meet participants where they are.

Build partnerships.

Successful PLCs leverage relationships and expose participants to experts by incorporating consultants or partner organizations. Outside trainers and coaches can boost a PLC's reach and level of content knowledge, and can help to build participants' professional networks. PLC conveners should look for a partner organization with a shared vision, and should work with the partner to develop clear, shared outcomes. Universities and colleges, intermediary organizations, and school district training coordinators and educational consultants are all potential partners.

Budget for extra staff time.

In addition to time for attending meetings, staff need adequate time to plan and prepare lessons using their newly acquired skills. Participants, trainers, and program leadership stress that additional staff time is often needed when planning for a PLC, and this can lead to implementation and budget challenges. Consider restructuring a budget to account for the extra staff time participation will require.

The most intensive PLCs use one-on-one coaching visits with a trainer and/or content expert to improve staff practices. Staff will need additional time outside of the PLC to meet with the coach and discuss their practice-related goals and strategies for achieving those goals.

When budgeting, consider the following potential costs:

- Hours of training
- Number of participants
- Hours and types of coaching
- Hours of additional planning time
- Time for knowledge and practice sharing with colleagues
- Materials (curricula and resources)
- Administrative support and coordination

"We look for some organizational conditions first [when recruiting]. If they don't have dedicated space for their after school program, if they don't have all their staff hired at the beginning of the year...there are going to be bumps. They have to know [...] how to orient staff and quickly establish routines and rituals with a group of staff."

– PLC Trainer



Conduct on-site observations and coaching.

On-site coaching visits are a critical component of successful PLCs. Participants and trainers agree that the more coaching visits participants receive, the more they are able to improve their practice.

Not only is it helpful for the trainer to conduct site visits, but PLC participants also say that they value opportunities to visit their peers. Site visits offer participants a chance for meaningful feedback, and can help stimulate conversations about best practices and overcoming obstacles.

Site Coordinators can be strong allies when it comes to on-site coaching. Coaching from Site Coordinators can help to ensure that the lessons learned from the PLC are being translated into programming in a real way, since they have a unique perspective on the program's context and can offer site-specific advice to PLC participants.

Create processes for sharing and documenting PLC knowledge.

Opportunities for practice sharing among staff

Participants should have a variety of opportunities to share the practices they've learned in PLCs. The participating staff could guest-lead a regular staff meeting, presenting on what they've learned in the PLC. Site Coordinators with PLC experience insist that this practice is especially helpful in the case of staff turnover.

Process for documenting knowledge gained from the PLC

PLC leaders should facilitate and encourage processes that document and store the learning gained from the PLC. Meeting notes can be recorded and shared electronically, so that participants can bring that knowledge back to their organizations. This simple tactic can help to drive organizational change and can maintain the benefits of the PLC.

"You can have your staff teach back what they learned....have them train, have them model, have them demonstrate. The [Site Coordinator] could meet with [the PLC participant] and understand what they learned and figure out how to make it applicable for other staff."

– PLC Trainer



HOW TO KNOW IF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY IS EFFECTIVE

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Evaluation can help organizations determine the impact a professional learning community (PLC) is having on participating staff, on the youth they serve, and on the organization as a whole.

A Five-Level Framework for evaluating professional development

Evaluations of professional development engagements typically follow a five-level framework developed by University of Kentucky researcher Thomas Guskey. This model was designed to address both ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions when evaluating professional development: what happened during the professional development initiative, why did it happen, and why does it matter?

The following table details the five levels of Guskey’s evaluation framework, and the data sources that can be used to gather information at each level.

Level	Questions	Data	What You Might Find
Participants’ Reactions	Did participants like it? Was it useful?	Participant self-reports Participant focus groups	Participants will report their level of satisfaction with PLC sessions.
Participants’ Learning	Did participants gain the intended knowledge?	Participant self-reports Supervisor reports	Participants will report on knowledge gained in the areas of youth development, specific content and/or facilitation skills.
Organizational Support and Change	What was the impact on the organization? How was implementation supported?	Structured observations of PLC-aligned activities Participant self-reports Staff focus groups Supervisor reports	Program staff may report on level of support received from site coordinator, structured opportunities to share what they learned with others, or additional paid time for training and prep. Observations may indicate an increase of positive staff-to-youth interactions.
Participants’ Behavior Changes	How well do participants effectively apply new knowledge?	Structured observations of PLC-aligned activities Participant self-reports Staff focus groups Supervisor reports	Reports and observations may indicate enhanced facilitation skills and increased ability to engage youth.
Youth Learning Outcomes	What was the impact on youth?	Youth self-reports Program participation data Other learning assessments	Youth will report on level of interest in activities. Program data may show increased time devoted to PLC content areas.

Understanding change

PLCs can benefit staff, organizations and youth; remember these changes take time. In the early stages the program's level of organizational development and the PLC's reach will impact the magnitude of change that PLC participation can have. But with time the change can be great: see *Why Use Professional Learning Communities and Make the Most of Your Professional Learning Community* to learn more about the kinds of impacts you can expect and how to get your program ready to use a PLC.

Resources

Ready to get started? Check out these resources to jump-start your Expanded Learning PLC evaluation.

After School Technical Assistance Providers' Evaluation Framework

<http://asapconnect.org/tape/TAEval/TAEval.html>

This guide, developed for technical assistance providers in Expanded Learning, includes step-by-step directions for clarifying the goals of your TA engagement, for developing measurement tools, and for reporting the results. Sample surveys are included in the Appendix.

Assessment Tools in Informal Science

<http://pearweb.org/atIS>

This is a comprehensive database of informal science education assessments for youth and adults.

Program Quality Assessment

<http://cypq.org/assessment>

The Program Quality Assessment (PQA) is used to collect observational indicators of program quality. It is one way to measure the extent to which PLC participants change their practice. Depending on the focus of your PLC, consider also using topic-specific supplements to the PQA for STEM, Health and Wellness, and Arts.

Dimensions of Success

<http://www.pearweb.org/tools/dos.html>

The Dimensions of Success tool is used to collect observational indicators of program quality for informal science education activities. It explores features of the learning environment, youths' engagement with the activity, STEM knowledge and practices integration, and youth development principles.

