



# Communicate the Benefits of PLCs

**A new study reveals that parents often like PLCs for the wrong reasons**

*By Elizabeth Berg Leer, Heather Campbell, Jackie Molina, and Olivia Haines*

Over the past decade, professional learning communities (PLCs) have become a common model for professional development in American schools. In *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Richard DuFour and his colleagues promote the PLC as a vehicle for enhancing student learning: When teachers are provided with collaborative meeting time to review student data, reflect on instructional practices, develop and implement

new practices, and analyze the impacts the new strategies have on student learning, they can better facilitate the achievement of all students.

Studies suggest that PLC collaboration is likely to improve student performance, but little data exists to link PLCs to increased achievement. Our own study found no statistical evidence of increased standardized test scores following the implementation of a PLC. However, designing a study and assessment tool that can

measure achievement attributable to PLCs is a complicated task.

Does the lack of empirical achievement data—and the problematic nature of trying to produce it—suggest that PLCs are a waste of a school's time and resources? After all, PLC meetings can consume significant instructional and administrative time if schools are serious about revising practices to better meet students' needs. We think not: Research indicates other positive

results from the implementation of the PLC model.

### Parent Perspectives

While teachers' perceptions of PLC effectiveness have been studied extensively, parents' perceptions haven't. What do parents think of a model that often takes instructional time from the school day and disrupts the normal school schedule? In the Midwestern school district we studied, school begins an hour later on Wednesday mornings to allow teachers to meet with PLC teams; buses also run an hour later, and class periods are shortened.

Parents reported several negative impacts of the late start, including disturbance to work schedules, disturbance to student routines, difficulty arranging transportation and child care, and economic losses. Also, parents who leave older children home unsupervised for that hour worry about them getting off to school by themselves.

However, parents reported several positive impacts of the altered morning schedule, as well. They appreciate that their children get an extra hour of sleep once a week, have more time for breakfast, have more free and family time before school, and have more time for homework. Some parents indicated that Wednesday is their favorite day of the school week because of the more relaxed morning pace ("We love Wednesdays—[they are] a chance to catch our breath in the middle of the week!"). Others expressed the opposite opinion.

Of parents who reported having an opinion about the district PLC, 60 percent felt "somewhat positive" or "very positive," and 40 percent felt "somewhat negative" or "very negative." Parents who experienced the most disruption tended to question PLCs the most, asking questions such as, "How can taking time away from learning improve results?" and "Why can't PLCs be done after school if they're so important?"

### A Communication Gap

While parents reported some positive impacts of PLCs, the perceived benefits look different from those noted by teachers. Teachers focus on improvements in collegiality and teaching effectiveness, while parents largely appreciate the weekly PLC time for quality-of-life reasons and seem to have little knowledge of the potential academic benefits.

Some 79 percent of parents indicated they don't feel informed about what teachers used PLC time for, and 75 percent responded that they wanted more information. But while 30 percent of teachers said they share information about PLCs at parent-teacher conferences, only 15 percent of parents reported receiving such information.

We also learned that while the school district made significant outreach efforts to the community when first implementing the PLC model,

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little or no communication about it now comes from the district, exacerbating the lack of parent information. Therefore, families with young children and families moving into the district are often uninformed.

The lack of information likely has affected how parents perceive the impacts of the PLC on student learning. When we asked parents whether or not PLCs increased their children's learning, 60 percent indicated they were unsure, and only 20 percent noted a positive relationship.

### Factors in Funding

Although parents are generally positive about PLCs, their perceptions are based on their own quality-of-life considerations, not academic ones. This is not the kind of support that will sway school boards or convince community members that PLCs are

relevant to school success—and, thus, important to fund.

To ensure the sustainability of PLCs as a model of professional development, principals, teachers, and school administrators must do a better job of communicating the educational benefits of PLC time to parents and other school stakeholders. If the public is not receiving a clear message about the educational benefits of PLCs, schools put the future of this model at risk.

Principals and teachers can use the following methods to communicate PLCs' benefits:

- Share information about PLC activities at every parent-teacher conference.
- Send periodic PLC reports to parents via class newsletters or email messages.
- Include PLC information regularly in printed and electronic school or district communications.

- Write occasional guest columns about PLC activities for the local press.
- Make presentations to the school board about specific PLC successes.
- Create videos showing PLCs at work, and post them on the school or district website.

If parents know how teachers use their collaborative time to meet students' needs, understand that collaborative teams enhance teachers' professionalism and their practice, and recognize that teachers perceive increased student learning, they are more likely to appreciate and support PLCs. 

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