Making
PLCs
a Plus

3 strategies to spawn better teacher collaboration and greater impact

By Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and John Almarode

Professional learning communities (PLCs) were introduced in the 1970s, at about the same time as bell-bottoms and disco. Fashion and music have evolved, but when you see teachers trying to work collaboratively, have their practices kept pace with the times? It's time to advance teacher collaboration—upgrading the wardrobe and playlist, in a sense—to ensure that we can continue to maximize student learning better than ever before.

Here are three things you and your teams can do immediately to increase the impact PLCs have on students'—and teachers'—learning:

1. Conduct a Gap Analysis
There are six evidence-based characteristics of PLCs, according to Shirley M. Hord's "Learn in Community With Others," and each needs to be considered for professional learning communities to thrive. While the presence of these characteristics won't necessarily mean a PLC is

effective, they are important considerations that teams should discuss and revisit periodically as they embark on the journey of improving student learning and teacher expertise. If there are gaps, teams should strive to fill them through collaborative conversations and professional learning.

Take a moment to make an assessment of your progress in each of the six characteristics in the "Mind the Gaps" sidebar on page 18. Invite team members to use the same tool to assess their strengths and needs. When the third-grade team at the pseudonymous Mountain View Elementary used this tool to assess their learning community, they found gaps that hindered their potential for maximizing the impact on students'—and their own—learning.

Team members agreed that peers were supportive of one another and had the structural conditions in place for collective learning, but they did not engage in it. "We never share
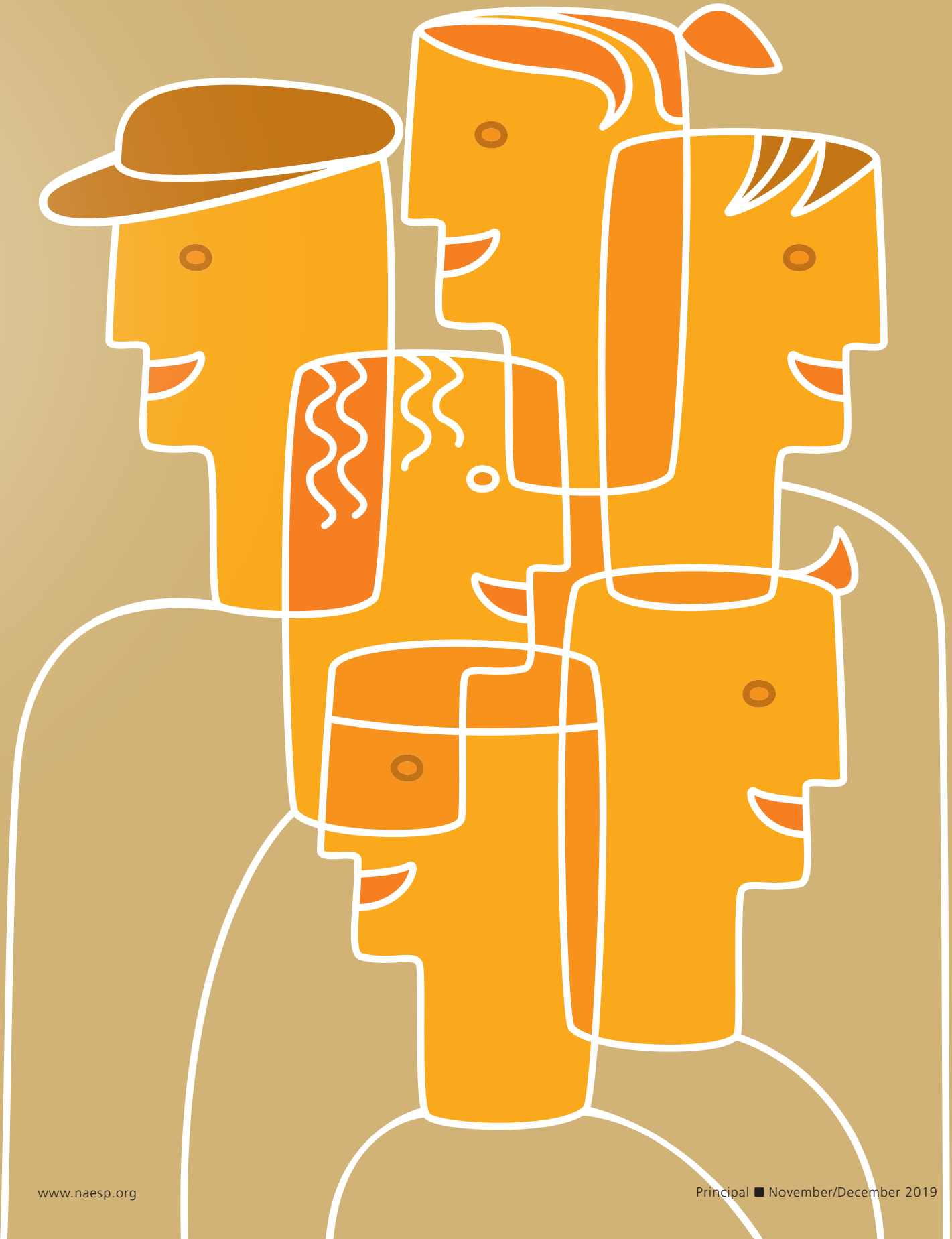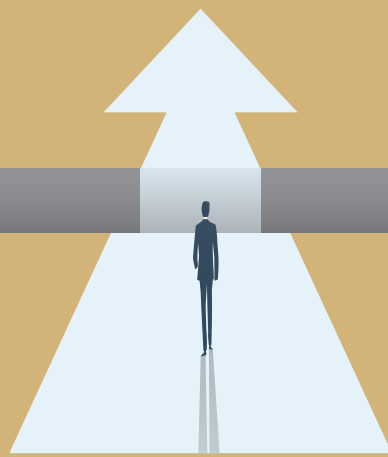
Mind the Gaps

Rate your success in building a PLC on a 1–4 scale:

1. This is not yet established in our PLC.
2. This happens randomly and is not commonplace.
3. This exists but can't yet be considered systematized.
4. This is systematically embedded within our PLC.

Structural Conditions: Does our PLC have established times when we are able to meet? Are there schedules in place that support collaboration and diminish isolation? Are needed resources available?

Supportive Relational Conditions: Is there trust and respect in place within our PLC that provides the basis for giving and accepting feedback in order to work toward improvement?

Shared Values and Vision: Do members of the team have the same goal? Do they have shared beliefs about student learning and the ability of team members to impact student learning?

Intentional Collective Learning: Does our PLC engage in discourse and reflection around sharing practices, knowledge, and skills to impact the growth and achievement of our students? Do we find ways to learn from each other or learn together?

Peers Supporting Peers: Does our PLC support lifting each other up? Do we celebrate individual and group successes? Do we observe one another while engaged in practice to help others strengthen their practice?

Shared and Supportive Leadership: Are power, authority, and decision-making shared and encouraged between teachers and building leaders? Is there a positive relationship among administrators and teachers in the school, in which all staff members grow professionally as they work toward the same goal?

instructional ideas with each other," one teacher said. "We talk about what students need to learn and then how to assess that learning, which is great. But we never talk about how we think students learn and what we can do to accelerate that learning."

2. Update the Discussion Drivers

We agree with past practice that suggests guiding questions are important, as they help team members focus in their discussions. But as the third-grade teacher said, many PLC teams avoid talking about instruction, and we're not sure why. We are not suggesting that the discussions focus exclusively on instruction, but rather that teaching is part of the conversation.

If we want to change learning outcomes, we must make changes to instruction. Therefore, we want people to share evidence-based practices with their peers. We encourage team members to know the research behind the instructional strategies they try and how those strategies moved learning forward. We expect that they will determine the impact that their instruction has on student learning. The discussion drivers we have found to be especially effective are:

- Where are we going?
- Where are we now?
- How do we move learning forward?
- What did we learn today?
- Who benefited, and who did not benefit?

These questions don't have to be asked in any particular order, but let's look at them in turn:

"Where are we going?" focuses on what students need to learn. Since the 1970s, teams have been encouraged to discuss learning expectations. Standards were not common, so the curriculum in one first-grade class could be very different from the one in the classroom next door. Today, standards drive decisions about what to teach, but teams need time to analyze the standard concepts and skills so they can select appropriate instructional materials and plan the right level of rigor in lessons.

"Where are we now?" focuses on what students already know, because far too many lessons cover content students have already mastered. What a waste of time! Few teachers have extra time, so it's important that they

Engaging in more productive discussions with peers results in better learning for everyone.

don't teach things students already know, understand, and are able to do.

Unfortunately, most PLC models fail to focus on students' current level of understanding. But it turns out that it's pretty easy to figure out what students know through initial or pre-assessments, conferences, observation, and work samples. We just need to make sure that lessons are based on the data collected so that instructional minutes can be maximized.

"How do we move learning forward?" encourages teachers to discuss their best evidence-based ideas for improvement, including instructional strategies and learning tasks. Instruction to accomplish those tasks is also important. Imagine a teacher leaving a team meeting focusing on the need for students to improve their speaking and listening skills and deciding that round-robin reading—having students read aloud from new texts—is the best approach, although it has been considered poor practice for at least a decade. The mismatch between learning task and desired learning outcome is a barrier to moving learning forward.

"What did we learn today?" involves team discussion about learning impact, as well as adult learning. Teachers need to see student learning as feedback and use evidence of learning to change instruction. Sometimes, based on their impact, teams need to focus on their own development. For example, the kindergarten team at North Roads Elementary (another pseudonym) noticed that the majority of students couldn't identify the difference between one, two, and three objects.

"We all taught this, but they really didn't get it," one team member said. "My students have worked on this idea during center time all week long. Centers are clearly not working. We need to look at other ways to engage them in this content. We need to find some research on this and learn some more. I have reached out to our math specialist, as well."

"Who benefited, and who did not benefit?" takes the previous question to the next level. Teams need to talk about student learning and

make adjustments in their course of action for individuals, but they also need to examine trends. Teams of teachers must consider their impact on groups of students, such as those living in poverty, specific ethnic or racial groups, or students with disabilities. A focus on equity has been missing from most PLC conversations, and teacher teams need to consider the ways in which they can remove the barriers to students' learning.

3. Facilitate and Activate the PLC
The conversations that teacher teams have relative to the discussion drivers noted above can be difficult. Yet they have the power to impact student learning in powerful ways. Our experience suggests that this does not happen simply when a group of adults gets together. Sometimes, they get off-task and off-topic. Other times, they avoid the difficult conversations that would move learning forward. In some places, the solution has been a facilitator, but the role of a true facilitator is to avoid direct participation in decision-making, which can be a problem if the person facilitating is a member of the team, has good ideas, and is teaching students.

Thus, we focus on *activators* rather than facilitators. Teachers need to be activated to engage in appropriate discussions that move learning forward, and the activators need training to organize team dynamics and mobilize supportive, collaborative learning. When they are effective, student learning soars.

The PLC movement has had successes and challenges. It's time to build upon the successes of the past to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of teams. Students and teachers deserve it. Engaging in more productive discussions with peers results in better learning for everyone. **P**

Douglas Fisher is a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High & Middle College.

Nancy Frey is a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High & Middle College.

John Almarode is an associate professor of early, elementary, and reading education at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia.