

Here's How

Leadership guidance for new principals



#1: Forming Professional Learning Communities

"Ice cream" versus "ice cream sundae." "Principal" versus "effective principal." There is a difference. Effective, student-centric educational leaders foster professional communities of teachers and other staff, according to Standard 7 of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders—foundational principles developed with guidance from The National Policy Board for Educational Administration and the Council of Chief State School Officers. In an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, teachers and staff take "collective responsibility for the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of each student"—and that's the cherry on top.

Getting Started: What and How

Curriculum. Subject area. Equity goals. A particular group of students. Glaring needs in the school improvement plan or student achievement. Choose the areas where shared accountability can change the status quo. Then, apply a process to creating PLCs:

1. Choose PLC members steeped in the topic. A school improvement PLC should include the leadership team, plus teachers and support staff.
2. Include parents, community members, and school partners, where appropriate, and create avenues for student input.
3. Align PLC goals and practices with district and school vision, mission, campus improvement plan, and instructional practices.
4. Schedule meetings every two weeks. Extend to three or four weeks as roles become clear.
5. Create schoolwide consistency by creating an agenda template with vision, mission, agreed-upon norms, follow-through, discussion items, and action summary. Limit agenda items to one or two.
6. Keep leadership shared and fluid. Instead of appointing a static group leader, cultivate an atmosphere in which leaders step forward according to the talents and capabilities they bring to distinct issues.
7. Delegate PLC leadership as a tool for building shared accountability, but signal the importance of participation by attending some meetings. If discussion strays or the meeting isn't held, ask why.
8. Measure success through explicit links to student learning. Verify progress through test data, final reports, and surveys.
9. Watch for evidence of progress during walkthroughs and evaluations.
10. Assign a "silent observer," armed with a list of effective team characteristics, to provide feedback to each PLC every semester or so.

Research says ...

- Trust, collective efficacy, and a culture of data use are the signs of an effective learning culture.
- Effective principals provide time and support for PLCs. They help teachers develop shared accountability for student learning.
- Using PLCs as a key school reform strategy to increase teacher collaboration can close racial achievement gaps.
- High-impact teaching practices—such as examining the effects of teaching and encouraging students to take control of their own learning—are best learned explicitly and with peers.

Resources

- *The Principal: Three Keys to Managing Impact* — Michael Fullan
- *Leading Learning Communities: Pillars, Practices, and Priorities for Effective Principals* — The National Association of Elementary School Principals
- *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* — The National Policy Board for Educational Administration
- *How Principals Affect Students and Schools* — The Wallace Foundation



Words of wisdom

We thank these principals who shared their valuable expertise and insights for this guide:

- “Everyone’s a school improvement team member. It’s about the three Cs: contribute, connect to other people, and feel capable that you can do what’s being asked of you.”
—*Shauna Kauffman, principal, Arnold Elementary School, Anne Arundel County Public Schools, Annapolis, Maryland*
- “You will be amazed at the hours, days, years the adults will beat themselves upside the head on something, when they could have just asked the students.”
—*Howard Fields, assistant superintendent of human resources, Kirkwood School District, Missouri*
- “Sometimes I lead, and sometimes you lead, depending on who the expert is.”
—*Michael Chirochello, consultant, Leadership Matters LLC*
- “Advocate for the need and share the vision and mission as to why it’s essential that we do this work. We’re motivating folks to get on the bus.”
—*Denise Michelle Gamble, education consultant, NAESP Race and Equity Task Force member*
- “If you don’t have alignment, you’re not speaking the same vocabulary through all of the big-picture, aspirational elements of the work.”
—*Christopher Bailey, principal, Clack Middle School, Abilene, Texas*

Keys to success

Empowering people is a strong pillar of leading learning communities.

1. Align with school mission and vision.
2. Use explicit protocols.
3. Promote shared leadership.

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Read the culture: 5 steps

Effective principals start by building a foundation:

1. Give yourself the grace to ask questions and model vulnerability.
2. Assess the leadership team’s capabilities and understanding of PLCs.
3. Get to know teachers and their strengths.
4. Understand the initiatives and processes you’re implementing.
5. Create time in the school day for collaboration and brainstorming ideas on effectively teaching content and planning lessons with similar scope, sequence, and rigor.

