YOUR INTRODUCTION TO

PLC+

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE TEAMS
THAT DRIVE STUDENT SUCCESS

An Illustrated Playbook with 40+ Videos

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INTRODUCTION

A professional learning community (PLC) is a structured, collaborative approach to professional learning in which educators come together regularly as a team to discuss and reflect on the evidence they collect from students and about their teaching practices with the goal of improving student outcomes. Unlike traditional, top-down professional development models, PLCs are driven by the teachers, who share a commitment to ongoing learning, mutual accountability, and the belief that every student can succeed. Effective PLCs give teachers the autonomy they desire and the level of professionalism they have earned.

Professional learning communities, which have existed for several decades, were originally designed to combat the teacher isolation that was common in the 1950s and 1960s. The idea was that teachers, working together, could positively impact students' learning; the groups would help ensure that the individuals working so hard to make that impact were connected with like-minded colleagues. This turned out to be a good idea, and today the evidence strongly suggests that professional learning communities can positively impact both teacher practice and student achievement.[1]

But—and this is important—these groups work only when done right. Over the decades, researchers and practitioners have learned more about what it means to implement effective professional learning communities. As the evidence has been assembled, processes, procedures, and protocols have been updated and revised. As needed, older practices were abandoned as newer practices were identified.

Enter PLC+, the next-generation professional learning community model designed to ensure that educators are connected with their peers and are impacting student learning in positive ways. This framework stands on the shoulders of the giants who went before us, yet it also reflects new evidence about learning communities that has been collected over the past decade. This book provides an introduction to PLCs in general and then takes a deep dive into an updated structure and system for ensuring that teacher teams are successful—an approach that we call PLC+.

As a high-level overview, PLC+ is fed by Liberatory Design.[2] Liberatory Design, originally developed by the National Equity Project and the K–12 Lab at the Stanford Design School (d.school), is both a process and a practice to address persistent inequities in complex systems in order to foster transformative change. In the PLC+ process, four crosscutting values serve as a foundation for the work that the PLC+ teams do: equity and fairness, high expectations, individual and collective efficacy, and activation. These values give rise to five guiding questions:

1. Where are we going?

2. Where are we now?

3. How do we move learning forward?

4. What did we learn today?

5. Who benefited and who did not?

Each of these questions also serves as the focus of a module in this book; the final module offers guidelines for how teams can work most effectively.

The questions explored in each of the first five modules inspire actions, and teams use protocols to accomplish their work. In other words, as PLC+ teams work together to seek answers to these questions, they generate a complex web of thinking and actions that improve the experience of schooling. A visual representation of this model is included below.


PLC+ MODEL
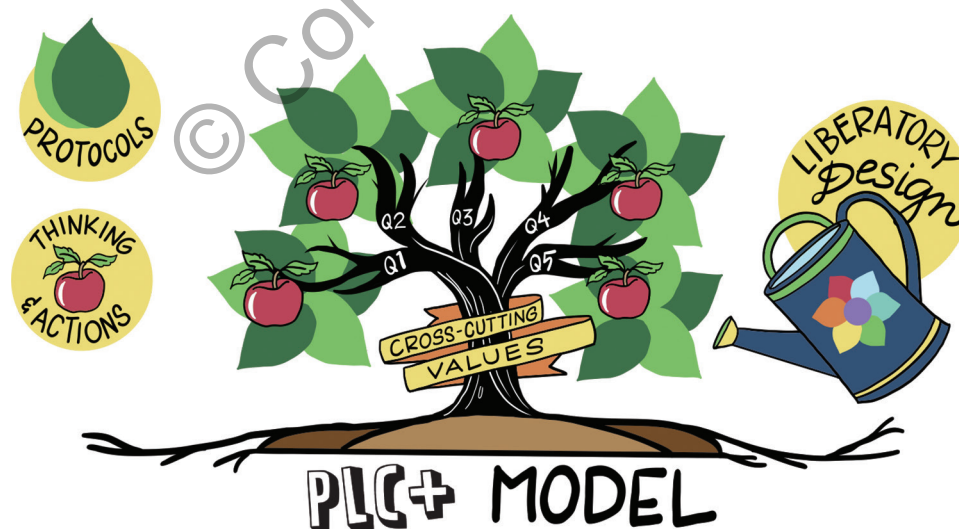
FEATURES OF THIS ILLUSTRATED PLAYBOOK

There are several design features, in addition to the illustrations, that are intended to increase your interaction with the contents. These features are consistent in each of the modules to allow you to develop habits as you interact with the information.

- An **Essential Question** frames each module to help build an organizational framework for processing the information.

- **Two Truths and a Lie** near the beginning of each module allows you to consider several statements and then determine which ones are supported by the research and which one captures a common misconception. We invite you to return to these after reading the module to see if your thinking has been validated or extended.

- **The Story Behind the Question** provides information about why the key question is valuable to teams and the evidence that was used to develop and test it. Understanding the history of PLCs and the continued efforts to improve them, including ideas from the past that have not worked, is important for teams who want to take their work to the next level.

- **Liberatory Design**, an approach to transforming inequity in complex systems, grounds the PLC+ process and helps educators develop authentic and collaborative relationships that support redesigning negative systems, structures, and approaches that are reproducing oppression and contributing to inequitable outcomes and experiences. It builds on systems thinking and design thinking to ensure that discussions and decisions result in improved outcomes for all students.

- **Protocols** are included throughout this book to help teams engage in collaborative conversations. Protocols create structure, facilitate collaboration, and improve communication within teams. Over time, teams can adapt and revise the protocols to fit their specific needs.
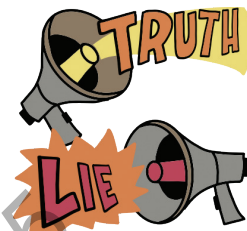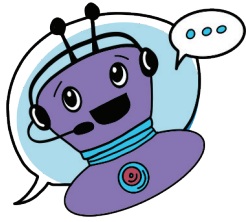
- **Ask a Bot** provides advice on using generative AI as a teaching assistant or thought partner, saving teachers and teams time to focus on the needs of their students. The output from AI should always be reviewed for accuracy and usefulness. Remember, AI systems are biased due to the fact that they scrub content that was created by humans who have implicit biases.

- **Quick Starts** provide opportunities to reflect on the content, prioritize actions, and identify resources you may need. These sections are designed to help you and your team decide which steps can be taken immediately and which ones require additional thought, planning, or time.

- The **Case in Point** in each module offers a scenario and an opportunity to see educators working together to resolve a dilemma. These cases are designed to allow you to practice and apply what you are learning by considering the challenges in the related **What's Your Advice?** feature, which allows you to make recommendations based on what you have learned and experienced. You can also share your advice with your own team members and collectively determine the next steps you believe would appropriately support the people profiled in the case.

- A **Crosscutting Values Check** reminds you of the four values that are integrated into the PLC+ framework: equity and fairness, high expectations, individual and collective efficacy, and activation. In this section, we present some questions aligned with each of the values that encourage reflection and integration into your practices.

- **Self-Assessment** tools allow you to determine the strengths of your team and where you may want to focus additional efforts. Remember, teams are always on a journey, increasing their ability to work together to impact students' learning. As teams become more efficient, the impact that they have on students' learning will increase.

- **Notice and Reflect** appears at the end of every module and invites you to reflect on your learning and take actions of your own: What will you start, stop, and continue? It allows you space to scale your level of understanding so that you can keep learning after finishing the module. It also allows you to interact with colleagues and build your collective efficacy. As we have noted many times: The plus is YOU! You are a valued contributor to your students' learning, your own learning, and your team members' learning.

STRUCTURE OF THIS ILLUSTRATED PLAYBOOK

Following this introduction, we provide an overview module that is intended to build your background knowledge about professional learning communities. We review the history of this idea and its many iterations. In addition, we provide some distinguishing features of the next-generation PLC model: PLC+. Following the introduction, we turn our attention to the PLC+ framework guiding questions:

- **Module 1** focuses on the question *Where are we going?* This module provides information about analyzing standards to identify what students need to learn and be able to do. It includes information about organizing instruction in blocks of standards and how to ensure that students understand their learning journey.

- **Module 2** focuses on the question *Where are we now?* In this module, we argue that teams should pay attention to students' strengths and assets. They should collect evidence from students to identify what they already know so that they can design the learning journey.

- **Module 3** focuses on the question *How do we move learning forward?* This includes attention to instruction, which has been neglected in professional learning community conversations. Further, we note the value of teachers visiting peers' classrooms and talking about the evidence they collect to determine if their instructional moves are making a difference.

- **Module 4** focuses on the question *What did we learn today?* This is the assessment module and includes a number of tools educators can use to determine student progress toward competency. In addition, we focus on the learning of adults and how we can reflect on our efforts to ensure students' learning.

- **Module 5** focuses on the question *Who benefited and who did not?* This requires that we carefully consider the differential impact on students' learning and how we can address those differences. In addition, we note the value of removing barriers to students' learning and identifying needs for supplemental and intensive interventions.

- **Module 6** focuses on the structures and systems required for PLC+ teams to operate effectively and efficiently. Although it comes at the end of the book, as with any playbook, you can decide which move you need when. If your team wants to self-assess their efforts and identify strengths and needs, turning your attention to Module 6 would be wise.

Again, this illustrated playbook is meant to engage *you* and your team. Please mark it up and complete the various tasks. The narrative in each module provides current and tested research as well as informed recommendations for practice for your PLC+. Enjoy!

NOTES

WHAT DOES A "PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY" MEAN, ANYWAY?

Teams of educators are powerful. When educators band together, work toward a shared goal, and collect evidence to determine their impact—even when faced with challenges—the results for students are spectacular. In fact, teams of educators are unstoppable whenever they believe they can accomplish each of the following:

- Change the trajectory of students' learning

- Collect and interpret evidence aligned with their goals

- Assume collective responsibility for their own learning and for the learning of their students

In the research world, this is called *collective teacher efficacy,* and it is one of the most powerful things educators can do to accelerate students' learning.[3]

Bandura invented the term *collective efficacy* based on his observation that a group's confidence in its abilities seemed to be associated with greater success.[4] In other words, the assurances people place on their team affects the team's overall performance. In Bandura's words, "Perceived collective efficacy will influence what people choose to do as a group, how much effort they put into it, and their staying power when group efforts fail to produce results."

When a team of individuals share the belief that through their unified efforts, they can overcome challenges and produce intended results, groups *are* more effective. For example, when neighbors share the belief that they can unite to overcome crime, there is significantly less violence.[5] In business, when team members hold positive beliefs about the team's capabilities, creativity and productivity increase.[6]

There are three core attributes necessary to develop collective efficacy:[7]

1. Each person needs to have confidence about their ability and disposition to successfully contribute to a task or accomplish an activity as part of a team (individual efficacy in contributing to the group).

2. Each person needs to have skills in working for themselves and working with everyone in a team (individual efficacy in the skills to work in a team).

3. Each person needs to have confidence or a shared belief in the team's collective capabilities to organize and execute the optimal course of action (individual confidence and skills in the potency power of them working in a group).

Collective efficacy can influence a group's behavior in several ways, including these:

- What they choose to focus on

- How much effort they put in

- Their staying power in the face of extended challenges

Video 0.2

Doug explores collective efficacy
qrs.ly/mlghoa7

This is where professional learning communities came in, transforming isolated teaching practices of the 1960s and earlier years into collaborative, growth-oriented environments. PLCs are intended to empower educators to work together and share insights, strategies, and supports to address the specific assets and needs of their students. Importantly, teams of educators working in PLCs should foster a culture of continuous improvement in which teachers learn from each other, reflect on their practices, and make decisions to enhance student learning. PLCs offer a powerful, research-backed approach for building professional expertise and achieving meaningful, sustained impact in schools.

Essential Question

HOW CAN WE REFINE WHAT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ARE AND HOW THEY IMPACT ADULT AND STUDENT LEARNING?

TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

Two of these statements are true; one is false.
*Can you spot the lie?*

1. Professional learning communities have been around for such a long time that there is widespread agreement on what a PLC is.

2. Professional learning communities have the potential to raise student learning and student achievement.

3. Although professional learning communities are widely used in schools, teacher preparation programs rarely teach about them or make use of them.

Professional learning communities have been around a long time. However, an overreliance on passed-down traditions has resulted in a patchwork of practices that often do not result in the intended impact. In fact, one research group who conducted a systematic review of the literature on PLCs called it "a meaningless label" because of the lack of a universally understood definition of what it means to function as a learning community.[8] Consequently, the first statement is the lie.

The second statement, which is true, raises an important point: PLCs have the potential to positively impact student learning—but it is not a given.[9] Teams can be hampered by vagueness in their purpose, their goals, and the processes they use to achieve those goals.

Unfortunately, the third statement is also true. Nearly fifty years after PLCs were first introduced to the field, much of what they are and do still seems to rely more on local customs based on the school's culture (i.e., *this is the way we have always done things*) than on actual research, which is what should actually shape a school's professional culture. Further, it is uncommon for teacher preparation programs to discuss collaboration or host PLCs of preservice teachers.[10]

With all of this in mind, it is important to recognize that there is a growing body of evidence about effective structures and protocols that increase the impact PLCs have on students. Returning to the teacher isolation days of the 1950s and 1960s is not desirable, nor is attending useless meetings. Instead, we need to identify and implement what is known about effective PLCs to ensure that they have the intended impact.
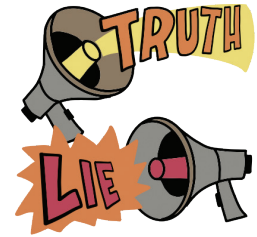
In an effective PLC, educators work together to analyze data, examine student work, and share effective teaching strategies, which creates a culture of continuous improvement within the school. The structure promotes open communication, fosters trust among colleagues, and encourages collective problem-solving, allowing teachers to grow professionally in a supportive and reflective environment. We love the following definition, which beautifully sums up the work of high-functioning, high-impact professional learning communities: "knowledge sharing, knowledge creation, the development of new practices and the joint trial and refinement of these practices."[11] Thus PLCs have two complementary purposes:

- Enhancing educators' skills and effectiveness
- Improving student learning outcomes

At the heart of every PLC is a focus on student learning. Team members work together to identify and address the specific needs of their students. PLCs often follow a cycle of inquiry, where teachers set learning goals, collect and analyze data, and implement targeted strategies based on their findings. Importantly, the adults also learn as part of this iterative process; educators continually assess and adjust their approaches based on the evidence gathered. Beyond improving student learning, PLCs aim to create a shared vision and set of values within a school, establishing norms for collaboration and accountability that strengthen the school's professional culture. In doing so, the PLC becomes a mechanism for aligning individual teachers' goals with the broader mission of the school, ensuring that everyone is working in unison toward the same high standards for students.

ASK A BOT

To help align the PLC goals to your school's goals, you might seek assistance from generative AI by using the following frame:

> Here are my school's goals for this year: [**INSERT SCHOOL GOALS**]. Do the goals for our PLC align with these school goals and reflect our core values, such as [**INSERT VALUES, SUCH AS HIGH STANDARDS FOR ALL STUDENTS**]? Provide suggestions on how we can ensure alignment and strengthen the connection between our PLC goals and the broader school vision.
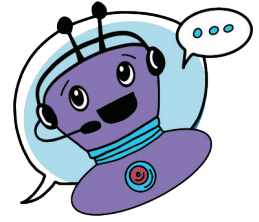
For teachers, the benefits of participating in a PLC are numerous and impactful. PLCs provide a space for educators to collaborate and learn from one another, breaking down the traditional isolation that often comes with teaching. By engaging in meaningful discussions and examining real classroom data, teachers develop a deeper understanding of effective instructional practices and gain new insights they might not have discovered alone. This collaborative approach also helps reduce isolation, as teachers feel supported by their peers and motivated by shared successes. Additionally, PLCs allow teachers to grow professionally by engaging in reflective practices that improve both their skills and their confidence. In a well-functioning PLC, teachers are empowered to take ownership of their professional growth and are better equipped to adapt to the challenges of a diverse, dynamic educational landscape, ultimately leading to a more engaged and effective teaching workforce. In fact, one of the major benefits of professional learning communities is that they can foster teacher agency.[12]

This last point is an especially important one. *Teacher agency* refers to the capacity of teachers to make intentional, autonomous decisions about their practice to best support their students' learning. It involves the ability to adapt, innovate, and take ownership of instructional choices, grounded in professional expertise and knowledge of students' needs. When teachers have agency, they feel empowered to contribute to school decisions, continuously improve their practice, and drive positive change in their classrooms and beyond.

Investigation cycles are essential because they serve as the drivers of professional learning communities. They provide a structured, continuous process for examining and improving teaching practices to enhance student learning. Through these cycles of inquiry, teachers collaboratively set focused goals, collect and analyze data, implement instructional strategies, and reflect on the outcomes. This iterative process allows educators to make data-driven decisions and adapt their approaches based on what is working or what needs adjustment.

By engaging in regular investigation cycles, PLCs create a culture of continuous improvement where learning is constantly evolving based on evidence rather than assumptions. This approach not only builds collective expertise within the PLC but also fosters a deep sense of accountability and shared commitment to achieving the best possible outcomes for students.

NOTES

QUICK START

|	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Ask others about the history of professional learning communities in your school or district.				
Reflect on any previous experiences you have had in professional learning communities. When were they effective and when were they not useful?				
Identify the ways that data and evidence of student learning are used in professional learning communities.				
Make a list of the "passed-down traditions" in your PLC and evaluate whether they align with the purpose and goals of a professional learning community.				

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(Continued)

(Continued)

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
As a team, read the section "What Defines an Effective Professional Learning Community?" and collaborate to establish a shared understanding of what a PLC should and should not be.				
Review the core attributes necessary to develop collective efficacy. Identify specific ways you can contribute to fostering it with your team. For example, you might modify your language to emphasize team success (e.g., "We can solve this together") or encourage collaborative problem-solving when challenges arise.				
Take time to reflect on the collective success of your PLC team. Collectively acknowledge wins, such as implementing an instructional practice or using data to inform practice.				
Discuss examples of successful collaboration and analyze what made those moments effective.				

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WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?
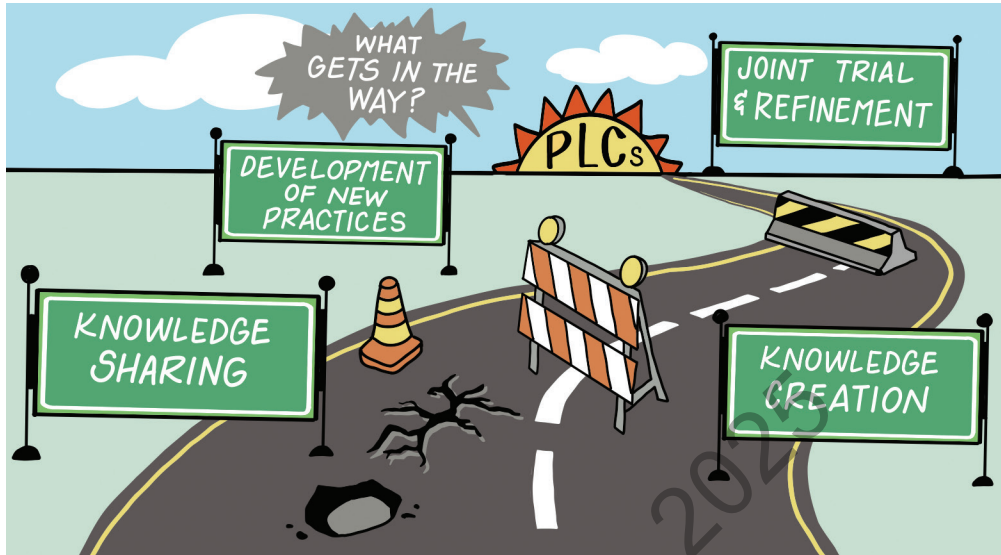
Conventional practices regarding professional learning communities often stray far from what they were intentioned to do:

- Knowledge sharing

- Knowledge creation

- Development of new practices

- Joint trial and refinement of these practices

Instead, PLCs often operate as isolated teams, rarely (if ever) interacting or learning from other teams in their school. Even more rare are teams that operate among schools. Unfortunately, this silo approach prevents the formation of productive networks, which effective professional learning communities can actually foster. Before we continue, let's briefly examine some of the barriers that can prevent PLCs from working together as high-performing teams.

A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING ABOUT WHAT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ARE

In short, the professional learning community is the school: teams of teachers and leaders working synergistically. Teams operate within the school and contribute to the collective knowledge and practices of the entire community. Yet far too often the team acts as an isolated unit of analysis, not as a cohesive unit across the school. And, unfortunately, when teams are isolated from one another, innovation is thwarted, and the system is structured to maintain silos of excellence.

When teachers work together, they can reduce or eliminate the within-school differences in students' learning. An international study of science performance in sixty-eight countries reported that the variance (the spread between the highest- and lowest-achieving students) is far larger within a school than between schools. Of all the countries studied, the variance in US schools was among the highest, accounting for 80 percent of the differences (the international average was 69 percent).[13] Imagine the impact that this has on students' learning, especially those unlucky enough to be assigned teachers who have no peer support and who are trying their best to implement effective practices. This variation is simply not fair, and it results in differential impacts on student learning.

Marc Tucker, former president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, attributed this wide variation within schools partially to how schools are structured, with little opportunity for teachers to spend time in each other's classrooms working together in teams to solve problems, and with limited chances for new teachers to learn from experts in their own schools.[14] Without regularly scheduled events such as learning walks, without investigation cycles focused on joint trial and refinement of practices, and without school networks to share findings across the school community, change is left to chance.

A LACK OF CLARITY AND SHARED PURPOSE

When team members aren't aligned on goals or lack a clear vision for what they want to accomplish, their efforts often become fragmented. Without a common understanding of the purpose, each member may interpret the work differently, leading to varied priorities and a diluted focus. This lack of alignment can make it challenging to achieve a collective impact on student progress, as members pull in different directions or struggle to prioritize effectively. Schools that mandate a particular focus for the professional learning community, but fail to build a strong rationale for that focus, risk leaving teams in the unenviable position of going through the motions without true intention. Even worse, when the focus is vague and repetitive (e.g., "Our focus this year is on raising test scores in reading and math"), a hodgepodge of strategies is likely to emerge. And don't even get us started about the utter waste of waiting until the fall of the following school year to determine whether your actions resulted in a positive impact.

A LACK OF SUFFICIENT COLLABORATION TIME AND STRUCTURE

Teachers are already stretched thin with daily responsibilities, and without dedicated time for collaborative planning, analyzing data, and discussing instructional strategies, time use can devolve into a series of hurried check-ins rather than productive, reflective meetings. Additionally, without clear agendas or norms for collaboration, meetings may lack focus, leading to frustration among members who feel their time is not used effectively. A high-performing team requires dedicated time with purposeful structures in place to keep the work meaningful and aligned to shared goals.

CONFUSION ABOUT COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION

Shirley Hord's research highlights a critical distinction between teams that work cooperatively and those that work collaboratively. She uses this metaphor: "Dating is a cooperative venture, while marriage is a collaborative one."[15] Cooperative teams can be less successful than collaborative teams because their members may divide tasks and work independently, each responsible for a specific piece of the whole. Although they might come together periodically to share progress, cooperative teams often lack a deep, collective commitment to shared goals about student learning (versus simply getting some required tasks done). Members may focus on their individual successes and struggles, which are eventually combined, but their work remains largely isolated.

In contrast, truly collaborative teams engage in ongoing, interdependent work toward a common challenge. They build shared knowledge, examine data together, and engage in reflective dialogue, continuously adjusting their strategies based on insights from the group. Collaborative teams are committed to shared accountability for results, which means every member is invested not only in their own success but also in the success of the entire group. This level of collaboration fosters a stronger, more unified approach to improving student outcomes, as each member's expertise and insights contribute to collective progress.

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QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Talk with colleagues to learn their perspectives about what gets in the way of a productive professional learning community. Does their feedback align with barriers discussed in this section?				
Identify the existing schedule for PLC team meetings. Name the current focus of your PLC team.				
Identify ways to optimize the use of collaboration time, such as using clear agendas and establishing norms for meetings.				
Reflect on your team's interactions with other teams in your school. Are there any opportunities to collaborate with other teams? Brainstorm ways to engage in cross-team sharing sessions.				
Review your current PLC goals and discuss how they directly align with student success. Are your goals clear enough to drive collective action? Consider revising them if necessary to focus on tangible student outcomes.				

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