

# Preface

*The most successful PLT in this building is run by the social studies department. They really got on board. They've structured their departmental meetings completely using the PLT structure. They have jumped in, read everything, even if they need to meet at lunch time. They've changed their practice—every single social studies teacher has changed practice around the PLT model. . . . PLTs are the vehicle we used to pull people together and create camaraderie. Were PLTs completely responsible for building cohesion? No, but they played a big part in that.*

Lonnie Barber, Former High School Principal  
Current Assistant Superintendent, Idaho

**T**here is a body of research describing professional learning communities and documenting the positive effects of teacher collaboration in professional learning communities. However, there is much less information providing guidance for schools hoping to develop and sustain such communities. This publication was written as a resource for school administrators, school leadership teams, and teacher leaders as they embark on the journey establishing professional learning teams (PLTs) as a structure to enhance teacher collaboration and student learning in their schools. The main purpose is to help leaders understand and support the work of PLTs. This guide provides practical and useful information to assist them in planning, starting, and sustaining PLTs. It also assists central office administrators to understand and support the PLT process in their district's schools. At the same time, the research informing PLTs is included as a necessary underpinning to the leaders' information base.

School leaders are more fully equipped to provide essential supports when they understand the structure and processes of PLTs along with the rationale and research. Attending PLT workshops, engaging in training activities, and strengthening their own leadership skills are all important actions for these leaders. The PLT process described in this book provides guidance and strategies for teachers as well as school leaders to begin to effectively develop these learning communities in coordination with their school improvement plans. To ensure successful implementation, school leaders need support in taking the critical and sometimes difficult first steps toward creating job-embedded, collegial, schoolwide professional growth opportunities. This book provides that support with both a theoretical foundation for PLTs and concrete advice on getting ready for PLTs. It assists in building support structures and relationships, reinforcing PLT skills, and anticipating some of the potential challenges.

## PLC VS. PLT

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) were evident in 2001 when we started developing the process referred to in this book as Professional Learning Teams (PLT). While there were descriptions of PLCs, at that time, there was no clear process for bringing teachers together to support the development of a community of learners focused on professional practice. Our belief was that a team approach would build a solid foundation, thus our goal was to provide a structure and tools to support teacher teams and connect it to the concept of professional learning. It is easier to build small *mini-communities* (teams) where individuals can share and learn from each other than to engage an entire school community all together in collaborative learning. We strongly recommend that all teams come together several times a year to share their work and maintain the connection to the larger community. However, most of the real work and transformation takes place in the smaller teams (PLTs), with the planned whole school sharing providing powerful touchstones for the entire staff, the overarching PLC.

While the term *PLC* is frequently used both in the literature as well as in practice in schools, we continue to use PLT to emphasize the importance of teachers working in smaller groups or teams in order to accomplish the work with a focus on their own specific students.

## DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

The tools and strategies presented in this book were developed during the five-year period, 2001–2005, by a team of trainers, coaches, and curriculum specialists at the Center for School and District Improvement, part of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in Portland, Oregon. In 2009, NWREL changed the name to Education Northwest. References to NWREL in this publication refer to work that was accomplished prior to the name change.

We sought to create tools for educators working in a standards- and data-driven educational system and to help support schools and teachers working to develop powerful teaching and learning through PLTs. The publication responds to the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act in assisting teachers to improve instruction in ways that increase learning and achievement for all students. These tools are continually refined and additional strategies developed in response to current needs in real schools. As a result, this is a revision of the first publication *Improving Instruction Through Professional Learning Teams* (2005) published by NWREL.

Six high-needs schools around the Northwest partnered with NWREL in honing the material presented here. During the pilot-test phase at these sites, particular attention was paid to the needs of school leaders to effectively support the PLT work. This field-based development allowed us to connect with partner-site leaders and combine their experience and knowledge with our own. Through the development process, we learned that the PLT process addresses the following school reform needs:

- Building stability and breadth in a school's instructional leadership by distributing leadership across the school through the use of teacher-led teams

- Developing staff collaboration as an important tool for improving the instructional programs in schools by using professional learning teams to improve teacher knowledge and teaching skills
- Aligning staff professional development with the school's improvement needs and objectives

The PLT process and materials align with the National Staff Development Council's standards for staff development (NSDC, 2001). (See Resource A for the complete text of the NSDC Standards for Staff Development.) In particular, this guide supports the following NSDC context standards aimed at improving the learning of all students:

- Organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district (Learning Communities)
- Requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement (Leadership)

In addition, the PLT process responds directly to a need identified by superintendents, principals, and teachers in the 2008 regional needs survey conducted by NWREL. That survey identified creating more opportunities (time) for teacher collaboration around school improvement as a high-priority concern, especially in larger districts (Leffler, 2008). The survey results indicate that they are seeking research-based information on how to create conditions that encourage teachers to collaborate around instructional practices in order to improve student learning and close achievement gaps. This includes finding flexible non-instructional time when teachers are able to engage in on-the-job professional development. A recent study in Washington State on barriers to raising student achievement also identified the need for "[t]ime for professional development and teacher-collaboration" as one of the top four barriers that, if removed, could make a positive impact on student achievement (Kruger, Woo, Miller, Davis, & Rayborn, 2008, p. i).

## **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

This is not a step-by-step, *how to create and manage a PLT* manual. Instead, it provides necessary background information and research needed to support the process. It also contains suggestions to guide the planning process along with some tools useful in early implementation. Rather than reading the guide from cover to cover, we recommend that you skim the pages, noting the contents, so that you can refer back to important information when the time and context provide the impetus to delve more deeply into the topic.

One question for school leaders to address up front is, "Are we ready to undertake PLTs as a change effort?" The information included in the guide will assist you in preparing to embark on the PLT process. It will also help you prepare the entire staff to support each other as you collectively engage in professional learning that enhances instructional practices.

This guide will help school leaders have meaningful discussions and learn together, using and modeling some of the PLT strategies and tools. Each chapter begins with a set of questions indicating main points within the chapter to focus the reader. Each chapter also ends with a brief summary of “key points” from the chapter as well as a set of questions to guide leadership team discussions and space for notes. The book concludes by describing potential challenges to the process that we encountered during field testing and evaluating the process as well as from our subsequent experience in conducting training in schools. Recommended reading and other resources are found at the end of the book.

The following graphics indicate special features to aid in these activities.

**Action:** Suggested points to use information and take action as you plan and implement PLTs in your school.



**Voices From the Field:** Direct quotes from school leaders that provide insights from actual PLTs.



**Tool:** Materials—handouts, transparencies, or posters—that can be reproduced and used to organize and introduce information on PLTs. The full-page masters can be found in the resource section at the end of the book.



The PLT Rubric (Tool H-12) can assist teams to self-assess their progress as they implement the process.

The Getting Started Roadmap (Tool H-13) contains the basic information found in the book in abbreviated form to assist busy school leaders in introducing and reviewing the process with staff. Intended as a synopsis tool for leaders, it contains abbreviated material from each chapter with the research base omitted to streamline the information.

**Leadership Team Discussion:** Suggestions at the end of each chapter to guide discussion among school leaders as you prepare to implement PLTs.



## CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 1 describes PLTs in more detail and provides the rationale for developing and supporting them. Chapter 1 contains a sample timeline for the first year of PLT development. It shows how PLTs align with the features of effective professional development described in the research. It also describes other models for collaboration. This chapter is useful for school leaders as they plan for the PLT process and prepare to explain PLTs to district leaders, parents, staff, and community members.

Chapter 2 discusses preparing for successful PLT implementation. This includes assessing current conditions and teachers’ readiness to engage in collaborative activities as well as understanding change. There is a focus on building relationships—developing trust, working with conflict, and ensuring productive avenues for communication.

Chapter 3 provides information about necessary structures—advocating for PLTs, using a leadership team, allocating time for professional development, making data available, aligning PLT efforts with school improvement goals, and ensuring accountability. Resource D contains additional suggestions for finding the necessary time for PLT members to attend workshops and meet as teams.

Chapter 4 presents research on the importance of both principal and teacher leadership and their relationship to student achievement. The role of the principal in supporting PLTs as well as the need to develop instructional leadership is discussed. This chapter also looks at facilitative and shared leadership as well as sustainable leadership. The chapter ends with a vignette describing a PLT in action—one school’s experience implementing PLTs.

Chapter 5 considers factors supporting the success of PLTs, including ways that school leaders support and reinforce the teams’ work. Emphasis is placed on ensuring that teams are led by teachers. A rubric is introduced to assist leaders and teams in understanding, reflecting, and self-evaluating the work of their PLT. Some of the possible challenges are mentioned with suggestions for addressing them. The chapter ends with the importance of celebrating success.