Using Inquiry Cycles in PLCs to Improve Instruction

This infographic illustrates how inquiry cycles can improve teacher collaboration and student outcomes by focusing on instructional practice. When it comes to improving student learning, there is a need for teacher collaboration, but there are many barriers to productive group work.

REL West’s Literacy Improvement Partnership has piloted inquiry cycles in two elementary schools in Washoe County School District, Nevada. Our inquiry cycles provide opportunities for targeted collaboration and peer support as teachers examine data together to improve their instruction.

COMMON CHALLENGES IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES
• A lack of focus, meeting agendas, or specific roles for group members
• Little support for learning from practice and from data
• Limited awareness of research-based practices

OUR APPROACH
• A discussion protocol with a goal statement, clear roles, and agendas
• The use of data to ground discussions within an improvement approach, focused on current practice
• A focus on research-based instructional practices

PLC Inquiry Cycle: How an improvement cycle works

PLCs launch inquiry process
• Reflect on current practice
• Choose an instructional challenge to address
• Plan data collection to learn more about the challenge

PLCs analyze and discuss new data
Teachers review data to determine:
• What did we learn?
• Did the change idea work?
• Should we adapt, adopt, or abandon the change?

Teachers collect data
• Collect data during lessons
• Record data daily
• Collect both quantifiable and qualitative data

PLCs interpret the data
• Analyze and discuss data to better understand the problem
• Identify gaps between where they are and where they want to be
• Develop change ideas - informed by research-based practices - to test out in the classroom

PLCs test change ideas
• Try out change ideas in their classrooms and collect more data

What does it take to support teacher inquiry and collaboration?

Principals
• Prioritize improvement work
• Ensure regular PLC meetings
• Set norms and expectations

Coaches
• Support PLC discussions
• Train grade-level team leads
• Provide data collection tools

Grade-Level Team Leads
• Facilitate PLC discussions
• Support their teams’ inquiry process
• Meet to share change ideas
**Discussion Protocol:**

**Analyzing change idea data**

The following example illustrates how teachers in Washoe County discuss data in grade level teams.

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**Our Goals:** Develop a community of independent writers by supporting students to...

- Feel engaged and motivated to write
- Collaborate with partners
- Write independently for 20–30 minutes per day
- Improve writing after writing conferences

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**Agenda**

**Total time:** 30 mins

1. Teachers volunteer for these roles:
   - Facilitator: Leads agenda, guides discussion, helps group to ground observations in the data
   - Timekeeper: Keeps group to the times in the protocol
   - Note-taker: Captures next steps

2. In one word, how are you feeling about [your group’s topic - engagement, collaboration, writing time, conferring]?

3. Round Robin: Understand and describe the data (≈ 1–2 mins/person)

   **DISCUSSION PROMPT:**
   - **Describe your data:**
     - What was your change idea?
     - What do you notice about the data?
   - **Interpret your data:**
     - What explanations do you have?
     - Was there improvement?

4. Open Discussion: What did we learn? (8-10 mins)

   **DISCUSSION PROMPTS:**
   - What did you learn?
   - Will you adapt, adopt or abandon your change idea?

5. Round Robin Share-Out: What will you try next? (~ 2 mins each)

   *Note-taker records next steps, shares at next huddle*
   - Each person shares:
     - What might you try next?

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**Resources**

- **IES What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guides**
  - [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuides](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuides)
- **REL West PLC Learning Huddle webinar video**
  - [https://youtu.be/0YbNYd9eYdg](https://youtu.be/0YbNYd9eYdg)
- **Ask-A-REL memo: Use of Teacher Inquiry in PLCs**
  - [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Ask/Details/73](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Ask/Details/73)
- **Ask-A-REL memo: Impact of PLCs for Students and Teachers**
  - [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Ask/Details/74](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/Ask/Details/74)

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“I haven’t seen PLC discussion as powerful as this. The structure gives all the teachers a voice.”

—Instructional Coach in Washoe County School District

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