

Using Inquiry Cycles in PLCs to Improve Instruction



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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 test change ideas

- Try out change ideas in their classrooms and collect more data

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

Cycle repeats until goal is met

Improvement Inquiry Cycle

Our PLCs...

Foster an improvement mindset

Engage teachers in a cycle of inquiry

Are guided by our discussion protocol ensuring equitable and collaborative participation*

Encourage reflection on group processes and norms

Focus on research-based instructional practices

Use data to ground discussions

Promote teacher choice, agency, and voice

** See our discussion protocol on page two for an example.*

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.



The focus of each PLC meeting is research-based student learning opportunities



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

Teachers choose roles that support the facilitation of the group process

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

"In one word..." ensures that every group member has a voice in the discussion from the start

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?

The round robin format encourages teachers to summarize their thinking and supports equity. Making observations about and interpreting data are key to understanding the problem

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?

The group discussion is the heart of the protocol and is designed to help the group have a deeper conversation about what was observed, what was learned, and implications for next steps

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?

In the final step every PLC member shares out what he or she will try next and this is recorded on a note-taking form

Resources

IES What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guides

- <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuides>

REL West PLC Learning Huddle webinar video

- <https://youtu.be/OYbNYd9eYdg>

Ask-A-REL memo: Use of Teacher Inquiry in PLCs

- <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>



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



This product was prepared in February 2019 under Contract ED-IES-17-C-0012 by Regional Educational Laboratory West, administered by WestEd. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.