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# A Key to First-Year Success:

## CREATING YOUR OWN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

BY NATHAN BOND

During the first year of teaching, the learning curve is steep, and the responsibility level is high. Your duties, in addition to classroom instruction, include implementing the district's required curriculum and assessments, along with getting acquainted with students, their guardians, and your school colleagues.

To assist with these demands, schools often provide an induction program that includes an experienced mentor who can offer emotional support and answer questions. This program also may include ongoing professional development workshops expounding on the school's specific instructional approaches. Induction programs are important. Research indicates that "beginning teachers who participate in some kind of induction have higher [job] satisfaction, commitment, and retention" (Ingersoll and Strong 2011, 225).

Despite these research-backed optimums, formal support systems in some schools may be missing or ineffective. It is up to you, then, to create your own support system. One possibility is a professional learning community (PLC), a network of teachers who "meet regularly for the purpose of increasing their own learning and that of their students" (Lieberman and Miller 2008, 2). When creating your PLC, invite colleagues who want to participate and who will treat others as equals.

Though new to the field with busy daily schedules, many educators have successfully implemented PLCs during the induction years (O'Malley 2010). They

find the flexibility of PLCs suitable to their schedules and preferred communication style. Whatever PLC style you decide to set up, keep in mind the five characteristics of PLCs that Hord and Tobia (2012) found in their studies of practicing teachers: supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, intentional collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared practice.

### Supportive, Shared Leadership

Before beginning a PLC, share the idea with your principal. Most administrators are excited to have their teachers collaborating, supporting one another, and taking charge of their professional development. This initiative affirms the principal's decision to hire you and engenders confidence in your abilities as an up-and-coming teacher leader. During the formation stage, work with your colleagues to select a PLC leader. This person does not make all decisions but provides the leadership to ensure well-run meetings.

### Shared Values, Vision

When forming a PLC, it is crucial for joining colleagues to agree that their *raison d'être* is to improve student learning. Realize that reaching this goal may be difficult at first, because beginning teachers tend to focus on improving their teaching. To expand this focus, challenge yourself to examine student work by administering pre- and post-assessments to determine students' learning.

## Intentional Collective Learning and Application

During your preservice program, professors and master teachers probably asked you to reflect on your teaching and identify strengths and areas for improvement. Now that you are on your own, it is important to continue examining your practice. Effective teachers maintain an inquiry stance or an intellectual frame of mind because “we now know that learning to teach is about raising questions and working with others to generate local knowledge rather than simply receiving information from outside experts and applying it in the same way for every student in every context” (Cochran-Smith 2011, 22). To find solutions to your professional questions, your PLC should take advantage of the wealth of resources available through your district and professional organizations such as Kappa Delta Pi.

## Supportive Conditions

Successful PLCs require the appropriate physical and relational conditions. The physical conditions refer to a consistent time, day, and location of the meeting. After studying PLCs among elementary teachers, Lujan and Day (2010, 15) stated, “Time must be kept sacred.” In other words, the PLC meeting must take priority over competing responsibilities. In addition to the physical conditions, consider relational conditions by building rapport among PLC members. At the beginning of each meeting, spend time getting to know your colleagues. It is sad, but teachers often know more about their students than their colleagues next door.

## Shared Practice

After building rapport, devote the remaining PLC time to sharing activities designed and taught by group members. Include samples of student work to evaluate the activities’ effectiveness. Once colleagues have shared, ask questions to promote deeper, reflective thinking and, when appropriate, offer constructive feedback. During the first meeting, set ground rules and reach consensus for giving and receiving feedback.

## Your PLC

Many schools recognize the value of PLCs and ask their teachers to form these collaborative professional development groups. Others do not. If you find yourself in the latter situation, then seek like-minded colleagues to form your own. The value of your own PLC to your growth as a professional and success in your first year is priceless. 🍏

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