GREAT SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP

Significant research supports the value of creating professional learning groups (PLGs / PLCs) in schools. Effective PLGs can build a culture of collective efficacy that increases equitable outcomes for students. Structurally, they:

- Meet regularly

- Have skilled facilitation

- Use agendas and protocols to discuss teacher work, student work, research, and data

- Are configured in a way that has value for each participant

When central to the work of the school, PLGs become the expression of a professional school culture where trust is authentic, risk-taking is possible, and feedback is direct and respectful. When schools walk the cultural talk of PLGs, classroom interactions are more likely to mirror those same dynamics, and teachers connect with each other in ways that impact student learning.

While many PLGs thrive, others struggle. PLGs represent a significant allocation of district resources: time, personnel, materials. Sustaining them requires initial planning combined with ongoing thoughtful support. Whether a school is just launching PLGs or working to increase their impact, this document is designed to help educators maximize their success.

> **Purpose:** Agree on the purpose of PLGs, and lead with this. Establish and communicate the guardrails within which PLGs operate framed around their focus and intended outcomes.

Challenges: PLGs without a clear and present purpose often devolve into working groups without a unifying vision which ties directly to student improvement.

Systems with Effective PLGs:

- Collaboratively develop and articulate the purpose and work of PLGs, ensuring a clear connection to teacher learning and student growth.

- Clarify the freedoms and restrictions that each PLG has to determine its work, including:

  o Shared school-wide agreement about what constitutes relevant agenda topics;

  o Types of work that PLGs are expected to engage in (e.g., tuning common assessments and calibrating expectations for students, sharing feedback on instructional dilemmas, examining student data to adjust instruction and supports);

  o The degree of flexibility each group has regarding agenda design and flow to attain district or school goals for PLGs.

> **Structure:** Ensure that regular PLG time is provided and held sacred. Determine the configuration and stability of PLG rosters and schedules.

Challenges: Determining the best schedule and configuration for PLGs requires agreement about the school's priorities. Without this agreement, PLG time is sometimes used by school and district leaders for priorities other than the stated purpose, which can lead to faculty disillusionment with PLGs. The thoughtful and strategic composition of PLG rosters plays a role in the PLGs' impact. Consistent groupings tend to deepen trust and professional growth among colleagues.

Systems with Effective PLGs:

- Organize staff into PLGs to align with the school/district purpose for the meetings; ensure every staff member can clearly answer:
  - Who is in my PLG?
  - Who is facilitating my PLG?
  - When and where does my PLG meet?
- Schedule PLGs of sufficient length (at least 50 minutes) and frequency (at least twice monthly) to build momentum and accomplish the stated purpose;
- Schedule time for non-PLG work to be addressed and accomplished, separate from the PLG schedule. This ensures that other work can be accomplished without infringing on PLG time;
- Maintain records of PLG work, including agenda outcomes, notes and attendance, on a shared platform, supporting a culture of transparency and mutual accountability;
- Consider the impact of various grouping configurations:
  - Departments / Content area configurations can maximize the benefits of shared content knowledge, overlapping course responsibilities, common assessments, explore content-specific pedagogy, and tune shared curricular materials.
  - Vertical team configurations can follow student achievement across years, develop spiralled curriculum and assessments, and reinforce members' content area knowledge.
  - Grade level team configurations can review students' learning across disciplines, develop flex grouping and other responsive intervention strategies, and improve instructional strategies appropriate to an age group.
  - Multi-grade, interdisciplinary configurations are well-suited for connecting colleagues across subject areas to explore broad topics in pedagogy, examine school-wide data, and focus on attaining other whole-school purposes and goals.
  - To ensure the work is relevant to them, single and small-cohort professionals (e.g. art, special education, world language, health), non-instructional professionals (guidance, social work) and paraprofessionals deserve thoughtful consideration and outreach as PLGs are configured.

Sustainability: Ensure that groups are led by trained facilitators; ensure that facilitators and participants are continuously supported through the challenges that naturally arise during collaborative work.

Challenges: A single initial training is not sufficient for the long-term sustainability of a school's PLG system. Facilitators need regular and ongoing support; the initial clarity of purpose behind PLGs needs reinforcement; norms must be nurtured. Ultimately, ongoing work is needed to ensure agendas, group make-up, and other working elements of PLGs remain in line with goals for student learning and teacher practice.

Systems with Effective PLGs:

- Train facilitators and provide them ongoing support;

- Organize facilitators into their own PLG which meets monthly to reflect on their experiences, share expertise, and strategize about challenges and opportunities moving forward;

- Monitor progress toward agreed-upon outcomes related to instructional practice and student learning. For example, use surveys to collect and act on feedback from staff, and analyze other data tied to the stated PLG outcomes;

- Model the use of protocols and pay thoughtful attention to process in faculty meetings, leadership meetings, and other school-wide events;

- Create a system for monitoring attendance, participation, and engagement in PLGs, with appropriate administrative follow up when expectations are not met or team dynamics become an obstacle.

Culture: Cultivate belief systems based on a commitment to collective efficacy—together we can reach all students—and model norms of productive dialogue among educators.

Challenges: When PLGs are seen as a stand-alone initiative, meetings can be perceived as isolated events and they fail to impact the culture of the school.

Systems with Effective PLGs:

- Develop, model, and nurture explicit norms, both within PLGs and in the larger school community;

- Use protocols to structure and deepen discussion, and to ensure safety for risk-taking;

- Foster belief systems that include commitments to career-long growth and improvement of adults' practice, growth mindsets about children, and the value of deep collegiality;

- Support the expectation that all members of the faculty share work for feedback;

- Ensure school leaders participate in their own PLGs with fellow administrators, allowing them to speak from personal experience about the value and impact of this structure.