

# Getting Up and Running Quickly

## Ten Things School Leaders Can Do

The following list is a concise overview of ten critical leverage points that schools leaders should address when designing an effective professional learning and planning program.

1. Get up to speed: research common planning time and professional learning communities, learn what successful collaboration looks like in practice, determine your faculty's professional development needs and priorities, and map out the assets you have and the obstacles that stand in your way. Your professional planning time strategy should be based on sound research, hard data, and objectively determined needs.
2. Create a teacher leadership team that extends beyond the typical department-head structure. Empower this team to lead an inclusive effort to develop a shared vision for professional learning and planning, and to design and implement professional learning time that is focused on increasing faculty collaboration, designing high-impact curricula, incorporating research-based instructional strategies, and developing personalized interventions.
3. Develop a communication plan that clearly and articulately outlines the rationale, vision, and expectations for collaborative learning and planning in your school. Explicitly align the plan with school and district goals, and articulate how resources will be allocated—or reallocated—to support the program.
4. Meet with the superintendent, school board, union leaders, and other influential decision-makers early in the process to discuss the school's strategic goals, build support for collaborative professional planning time, and review policy, budgetary, and contractual implications. Identify potential roadblocks early on and work to eliminate them.
5. Recruit a cadre of motivated teacher-leaders, train them in effective group-facilitation skills, and empower them to create a job-embedded professional learning and planning model that is aligned with the school's fundamental organizational structures—departments, teams, academies, content areas, grade levels, etc. The most effective planning teams foster a sense of shared purpose by mirroring the structures of the school and bringing together staff members and teachers who share students, roles, or an academic discipline.
6. Work to nurture a culture of trust, safety, and transparency among the faculty by, for example, modeling collaborative leadership, recognizing and rewarding good work, empowering teachers to lead curriculum design and instructional improvement, challenging negative attitudes, and adopting a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to negative or harmful comments about students.
7. Provide teachers with real-life exemplars of effective professional collaboration: case studies, site visits to other schools to observe high-impact professional planning time in action, visiting teachers who can speak articulately and persuasively about how professional collaboration transformed their school, etc. Learn from the best models, but customize the program to address your school's needs.
8. Make sure that collaborative professional development remains intensively focused on improving instructional practice—analyzing student data, critiquing teacher work, designing lessons, developing interventions, etc. Effective professional development affirms the value and expertise of individual teachers, while harnessing the collective wisdom of the faculty.
9. Identify the voices most likely to derail the work. Sabotage cannot be an option. Boldly and clearly express your vision for the school: equity and student needs come first. Create opportunities for teachers to lead, and find authentic roles for naysayers. While some people may not be trailblazers or innovators, everyone can play a role. It may take more time for some teachers to embrace peer leadership, facilitation, or the sharing of their work. Begin with the motivated early adopters and nurture buy-in over time.
10. Secure adequate funding and resources: identify all available funding (federal, state, and local) to support professional development, pursue grants, reallocate time or human resources, phase out dated or less successful programs, etc. Reconfigure to reprioritize. Find new and more creative ways to focus school resources where they are needed most.

# Getting Started With Protocols

## The Purpose of Protocols

In the context of teacher collaboration and professional planning time, protocols serve several important purposes:

- Structuring conversations to ensure they remain focused and productive
- Building the foundational skills essential to effective teacher collaboration
- Helping to nurture a culture of collegiality, trust, and mutual appreciation
- Ensuring everyone in the group has an opportunity to contribute and be heard
- Reducing the tendency toward subjective, digressive, or one-sided conversations
- Promoting substantive, in-depth conversations about a specific topic
- Encouraging active, respectful listening among all participants
- Providing a “safe space” for teachers to share their work with colleagues
- Allowing difficult questions or issues to be raised in constructive ways
- Eliminating unhelpful excuses, complaints, or comments about student behavior
- Keeping conversations focused on goals, solutions, and results

## A Few Important Things to Keep in Mind

- Protocol-based conversations can feel awkward at first, since people are typically not accustomed to highly structured discussions. Awkward feelings tend to dissipate quickly as people become more familiar with protocols and more experienced using them.
- Protocols are most effective when used by trained group facilitators. In the context of professional learning communities and common planning time meetings, subtle facilitation skills and strategies can mean the difference between a highly productive meeting and a counterproductive meeting.
- When starting out, it is important to practice using protocols as designed and intended. Most protocols were developed by skilled and experienced practitioners, and their underlying logic and rationale may not be immediately comprehensible at first.
- Over time, administrators and teachers should build up a repertoire of particularly useful or relevant protocols. Once facilitators and teacher-leaders become more conversant in the use of protocols, they can begin modifying them to suit the needs of a meeting or specialized topic.

## Additional Background Information

Educators can find an abundance of protocols on the School Reform Initiative website ([schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol](http://schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol)), including the following useful resources:

1. *A Rationale for Protocols*
2. *Attributes of a Learning Community*
3. *Considerations for Responsive Facilitation*
4. *Feedback Principles*
5. *Glossary of Common Protocol Terms*
6. *Why Protocols?*
7. *Forming Ground Rules*
8. *Group Agenda Planning Form*

# How Do You Know It's Working

Quantifying the impact of professional planning time can be tricky, since effective teacher collaboration will influence every facet of a school. But even though perfect validity and reliability may be an elusive goal, educators can nevertheless gather evidence and data that can be traced back to or correlated with teacher collaboration and professional growth. The most important thing is to continually collect data and relevant artifacts that can confirm evidence of impact—from test scores, course-failure rates, and college-going numbers to survey responses, student work, and assessments. When discussing evaluation data, we recommend the following two protocols (from [schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol](http://schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol)): *Professional Learning Communities Survey* and *Success Analysis Protocol for Leadership Teams*. Schools should consider collecting a wide variety of evidence when trying to determine the impact of job-embedded professional learning and planning:

### Evidence of Impact: Classroom Practice Artifacts

- Common expectations (course standards) for student work, behavior, and achievement
- Common definitions or examples of excellence and mastery in student work
- Collaboratively developed strategies for engaging students
- Collaboratively developed grading and assessment practices
- Collaboratively developed intervention and support strategies for shared students
- Collaboratively developed definitions for college-preparatory coursework and college readiness
- An audit of new, modified, or improved instructional strategies and lessons resulting from collaborative work

### Evidence of Impact: Student Outcome Data

- Student-achievement trends over multiple months or years, particularly for academically struggling, low-income, minority, and special-needs students
- Graduation, college-matriculation, and college-completion rates (using the National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker for High Schools system)
- Trends in student behavior, attendance, homework completion, achievement, and course failures
- Numbers of students passing courses, meeting standards, and performing at grade level
- Evidence of improved student engagement in learning, stronger understanding of learning expectations, and higher educational aspirations (survey data)
- Student participation rates in support programs or interventions, and achievement-trend data before and after interventions have been implemented

### Evidence of Impact: Teacher Engagement and Leadership

- Increased teacher participation in collaborative professional planning time
- Numbers of facilitators trained; number of teachers assuming leadership roles in the school
- Number of meetings per month or year
- Increased receptivity to and support for professional learning groups, school-improvement strategies, and new curricular ideas among the faculty (survey data)

### Evidence of Impact: School Culture

- Increased collaboration, work sharing, professional motivation, job satisfaction, enthusiasm for teaching (survey data)
- Increased interdisciplinary work and team teaching
- Increases in peer observation of classrooms, instructional modeling, mentoring, and site visits.

# Readings and Resources

## Websites

Smaller Learning Communities Program: [slcp.ed.gov](http://slcp.ed.gov)

### Comprehensive PLC Resources and Research Bibliographies

All Things PLC: [allthingsplc.info](http://allthingsplc.info)

Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement: [centerforcsri.org/plc](http://centerforcsri.org/plc)

Learning Forward: [learningforward.org/standards/learningcommunities.cfm](http://learningforward.org/standards/learningcommunities.cfm)

### Protocols

School Reform Initiative: [schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol](http://schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol)

National School Reform Faculty: [nsrfharmony.org/protocol](http://nsrfharmony.org/protocol)

## Selected Bibliography

NOTE: This bibliography includes selected studies that guided the development of *Harnessing Teacher Knowledge*, but efforts were made to balance research with accessible, practitioner-focused books and articles.

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