

# Professional Learning Communities

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## *Site Visit Protocol and Discussion Guide*



NATIONAL  
HIGH SCHOOL  
ALLIANCE

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WASHINGTON, DC

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## *Site Visit Protocol and Discussion Guide*

Prepared for the 2003 National High School Alliance Partners Meeting in Washington, DC



### **The Vision and Mission of the National High School Alliance**

The National High School Alliance is a partnership of nearly over fifty leading organizations that share a **vision** for a nationwide commitment to fostering high academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, and promoting civic and personal growth among all youth in our high schools and communities.

To advance this vision, the HS Alliance's **mission** is to engage its partners to work individually and collectively to inform policy, practice, and research, and to promote public awareness and engagement. The HS Alliance accomplishes this by providing a forum for professional discourse and collaborative effort to leverage its partners' resources, knowledge, and capacity.

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Please visit our website at [www.hsalliance.org](http://www.hsalliance.org) to learn more about the National High School Alliance.

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## **Focus of the Protocol**

The Role of Professional Learning Communities in the Development of Practitioners for Improved Student Outcomes

## **Structure of the Protocol**

This protocol is designed to structure observations and reflections specific to professional learning communities during the site visit and debriefing sessions. The term “practitioner” is used generically to refer to all school or program-based professionals, such as teachers, specialists, principals, and youth workers.

The protocol is organized into six characteristics that define a high quality professional learning community. Section six outlines the elements that need to be in place in order to support the five characteristics. For each section, key indicators are phrased as questions.

- I. Shared Norms and Values
- II. Collective Responsibility for Shared Norms and Values
- III. Focus on Student Learning
- IV. De-Privatization of Practice
- V. Collaboration
- VI. Conditions and Structures

## **How to Use the Protocol**

The indicators for each section are phrased as questions, both to prompt critical observations and to facilitate conversations with members of the school community. Use the questions directly to the extent that it seems natural and appropriate to do so.

Space is provided on the protocol for note taking during the site visit and during the debriefing sessions. The notes area is divided into two sections so that visitors note both *what* they observed as evidence of the indicators in the school, and *how* they saw this to have impact for the school.

## Overview of Literature on Professional Learning Communities

Leading researchers and practitioner organizations have identified professional learning communities as a key component for the improvement of teaching and learning, particularly at the secondary level. The outcomes of professional learning communities for high school-aged youth, as suggested by current literature, are consistent with the mission of the National Alliance on the American High School (HS Alliance): to foster high academic achievement, close the achievement gap, and promote civic and personal growth of all high school-aged youth. The HS Alliance explores professional learning communities as a promising strategy within the context of one of its seven focus areas: the preparation and development of teachers, principals, and youth workers.

A professional learning community is characterized by the collaborative work of educators to continuously seek, share, and act on their learning in order to improve their practice for the purpose of improved student outcomes (Astuto, 1993). Professional learning communities have been identified as a core component of successful schoolwide improvement for several reasons: they function as an effective strategy for building school capacity around core issues of teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, 1995); they foster the democratic practices required to undertake and sustain fundamental, systemic change (Bryk, 1994); and, they can serve as a mechanism for transforming school culture. By modeling collegiality, intellectual inquiry, critical discourse, and continuous improvement, professional learning communities also function—in implicit and explicit ways—to raise the expectation and standard for students’ level of engagement, development, and achievement. Studies have indicated that students tend to be engaged in learning at high intellectual levels when the adults are engaged with one another and with their students at high intellectual levels around a shared vision for student success. Through the learning community, teachers learn “how to translate enhance curricula and higher standards into teaching and learning for all of their students” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Quality professional learning communities are also characterized by many of the same attributes associated with high quality professional development: they shift the notion of professional competence from individual teacher expertise to professional community expertise; they foster a collective sense of responsibility for students’ progress (Anderson, Rolheiser, & Gordon, 1998); they are inherently job-embedded and team-based (Darling-Hammond, 1996,1998b); they require a community of learners to translate into higher levels of learning for all (Jones, 1998; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997); and, they are embedded in schoolwide goals for student learning specific to the school community (Renyi, 1998; CCSSO, 1997; Sparks, 1998).

Although comparative or longitudinal studies have not yet been undertaken to measure the impact of an organizational school feature such as a professional learning community, available research asserts that the defining features of teachers’ work lives do have a significant influence on teacher learning and development. Further, the literature asserts that there are specific characteristics of professional learning communities that impact teacher’s ability to significantly improve student learning and development. Two characteristics have been identified as having most significant influence on student outcomes: cultural norms around learning; and, the collective responsibility of teachers for learning of all students. The literature also asserts that professional learning communities with these features are most likely to emerge in smaller schools. Because smaller schools tend to be designed with a communal, rather than bureaucratic, decision-making structure, they also foster two other characteristics of professional learning communities associated with improved outcomes for both teacher and students: sharing, collaboration and cooperation

among teachers; and, authority to define their needs and to control decisions about curriculum, teaching methods, classroom environment, and other school issues not specific to instruction.

A recent strand of research suggests that professional learning communities must also balance attention to the collective, shared identity of professional learning communities (i.e., a strong focus on team and schoolwide needs and priorities), with attention to the needs and contributions of teachers as individuals. Structures that support professional learning communities must therefore provide opportunities for both shared and individual learning (Scribner, 2002). Shared learning requires more systemic supports, such as time, additional personnel, resources, and training in the skills required to facilitate collaborative work. Individual learning often can be provided in a less systemic way, through the provision of opportunities for professional development through stand-alone workshops or seminars to help teachers build skills in specific areas. Individual learning is important in that it serves to foster teachers' sense of self-efficacy and agency that are crucial for their full participation in a professional learning community. Professional learning communities that recognize the voice and contributions of individuals also serve an important role in providing a context in which there is room for critical inquiry and dissent.

## **I. Shared Norms and Values**

Practitioner roles, responsibilities, and objectives are jointly defined and clearly articulated around shared norms and values that reflect a commitment to equity and high expectations for all students' learning.

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Observations/Evidence</b>
<b>A. Is there an ongoing discourse to develop and reaffirm common norms and values about students, learning, teaching, and their roles in the context of the school and community? Are the shared norms and values in writing?</b>	
<b>B. Do the shared norms and values include the belief and expectation that all students can learn and achieve?</b>	
<b>C. Do shared norms and values include both academic and youth development outcomes?</b>	
<b>D. Are students included in the discourse around shared values and norms? Do they articulate and embrace these values?</b>	

## II. Collective Responsibility for Implementing Shared Norms and Values

When norms and values are shared and clearly articulated as schoolwide expectations, practitioners assume collective responsibility for meeting and holding one another accountable to them. This sense of collective responsibility creates energy throughout the school so that effective practices and processes can be sustained over time and are not dependent upon a particular school leader or condition.

### Indicators

### Observations/ Evidence

<p><b>A. Is there a mutual understanding and expectation that all members of the faculty are responsible for student outcomes?</b></p>	
<p><b>B. Do practitioners hold one another responsible for developing curriculum, instruction, and assessments consistent with shared values and norms?</b></p>	
<p><b>C. Do practitioners analyze disaggregated student performance data to ensure equitable access to resources?</b></p>	
<p><b>D. Do students feel connected to a sense of collective responsibility for successful schoolwide outcomes?</b></p>	

### III. Focus on Student Learning

The primary efforts and activities of a professional learning community are focused on the tough questions of student learning. To answer these questions, practitioners engage in reflective dialogue and critical inquiry to seek a better understanding and practice that will ultimately benefit students.

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Observations/ Evidence</b>
<b>A. Do practitioners focus on students' intellectual development (rather only on specific techniques or how to cover curriculum)?</b>	
<b>B. Is teaching practice based on a coherent curricular vision around core ideas and modes of inquiry in the disciplines?</b>	
<b>C. Is teaching practice guided by diagnostic assessments and other data that show how students learn as well as what they know?</b>	
<b>D. Do practitioners employ multiple strategies to meet all students' needs, including English learners and students with disabilities?</b>	
<b>E. Do practitioners recognize and engage students around their prior knowledge and cultural contexts?</b>	
<b>F. Are students aware of teacher expectations and purposes for learning content and methods?</b>	

#### **IV. De-Privatization of Practice**

Professional learning communities transform the privatized, isolated practice of teaching by establishing the structures and expectations for public, reflective, ongoing discourse on the challenges of teaching and learning. By making their work “public,” practitioners define—and continually redefine—the meaning of good teaching and classroom practice for themselves both as individuals and as members of a professional community.

##### **Indicators**

##### **Observations/ Evidence**

<b>A. Do practitioners share what they know with one another?</b>	
<b>B. Do practitioners consult with one another in a spirit of professional inquiry about their problems and successes with teaching and learning?</b>	
<b>C. Do practitioners observe and provide critical feedback on one another’s practice through reflective dialogue?</b>	
<b>D. Do practitioners work together to review, and to make decisions about practices based on, quality research?</b>	
<b>E. Do practitioners make their work public to students, parents and community, and engage them as valuable partners in the process?</b>	
<b>F. Do practitioners have external networks to access ideas, materials, and colleagues (e.g. via institutes, content associations; school-university partnerships, reform collaborations)?</b>	

## V. Collaboration

A key attribute of professional learning communities is the extent to which practitioners engage in ongoing collaboration. Because the focus is on improving practice for improved student outcomes, collaboration can occur both within and across traditional departmental structures, depending upon the need and expertise required to solve a particular problem.

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Observations/ Evidence</b>
<b>A. Do practitioners draw on one another’s expertise— both within and across groupings and content areas— to address obstacles and to improve their ability to serve diverse student academic and social needs?</b>	
<b>B. Do practitioners encourage and support risk-taking and innovative practices based on research?</b>	
<b>C. Are practitioners generating “craft knowledge,” i.e. knowledge from individual classroom practice is refined through collaboration?</b>	
<b>D. Do students have opportunities to work in collaborative ways with one another and with practitioners to inform the teaching and learning process?</b>	

## VI. Structures and Conditions

Five key school structures and conditions impact the development and sustainability of a professional learning community: school leadership; school autonomy and shared decision-making; time for teacher planning and analysis; and, professional development.

### Indicators

### Observations/ Evidence

#### *A. Leadership*

Does the school leader act as the facilitator, rather than as the main architect, of professional learning community?	
Does the school leader actively support shared decision-making through distributive leadership?	
Does the school leader ensure organizational structures and resources to support professional community (time, personnel, schedule, etc.)?	
Does the school leader negotiate the politics of reform within the local context (e.g. with the district, union, parents, other agencies)?	

#### *B. School autonomy and shared decision making*

Do practitioners have authority to make decisions about resources, hiring, and management of classroom and schoolwide issues?	
Do practitioners define and structure staff development based on their needs (rather than as administrators define them)?	
Do teachers play an integral role in decisions about students with special needs?	

**Indicators****Observations/ Evidence*****C. Time for teacher planning and analysis***

<b>Are teaching schedules designed to allow for regular team meetings?</b>	
<b>Are additional personnel (e.g. aides, interns, volunteers) and partnerships (e.g. business apprenticeships, service learning) used to create more planning time for teachers?</b>	
<b>Are PD funds allocated to provide release time (e.g. for meetings, retreats, summer projects)?</b>	

***D. Professional development***

<b>Are PD opportunities structured both for the whole faculty as well as for individual teachers?</b>	
<b>Do PD activities draw upon both internal and external expertise?</b>	
<b>Is PD embedded, ongoing, and connected to the school's mission and priorities?</b>	
<b>Are new teachers provided with supports and induction into the professional learning community?</b>	

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# Partners of the National High School Alliance

## National Research and Policy Organizations

Achieve, Inc.  
Alliance for Excellent Education  
American Youth Policy Forum  
Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
Association for Career and Technical Education  
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development  
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation  
Carnegie Corporation of New York  
Center on Education Policy  
CORD  
Education Development Center  
Education Trust  
Institute for Educational Leadership  
Jobs for the Future  
KnowledgeWorks Foundation  
MDRC  
  
National Council of La Raza  
National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform  
Pathways to College Network

## State Leaders

Council of Chief State School Officers  
National Association of State Boards of Education  
National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education  
National Conference of State Legislatures

## District & School Leaders

American Federation of Teachers  
Buck Institute for Education  
College Board  
Consortium on Chicago School Research

Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform  
Middle College National Consortium  
National Association of Secondary School Principals  
National Career Academy Coalition  
National Education Association  
National Staff Development Council  
New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Public Secondary Schools

## Community & Youth Leaders

Chicago Community Trust  
Forum for Youth Investment  
National League of Cities  
National Youth Employment Coalition  
Public Education Network  
Rural School and Community Trust  
What Kids Can Do

## Technical Assistance Providers

Academy for Educational Development, Schools for a New Society  
Career Academy Support Network, UC Berkeley  
Center for the Social Organization of Schools, Talent Development High School  
Coalition of Essential Schools  
Commonwealth Corporation  
Cristo Rey Network  
Education Alliance at Brown University  
Institute for Research and Reform in Education, First Things First  
National Academy Foundation  
National Center on Education and the Economy, America's Choice High Schools  
Southern Regional Education Board, High Schools That Work



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