Professional learning community (PLC), as an organizational arrangement, is a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement. The literature on professional learning communities repeatedly gives attention to such organizational arrangements as supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice.

A number of education’s best thinkers have weighed in on the importance of targeted, short-term cycles of improvement. The key is for teams of professionals to achieve and celebrate a continuous succession of victories in vital areas. IN addition to trying to redesign a school or system, we should also be creating the conditions for teams of teachers to continuously achieve (and receive recognition for) wins in instructional practice. Any systemic reform should focus primarily on establishing and sustaining the structure for professional learning communities to be the key to continuous improvement that reaches students quickly and produces significant results.

**What Is an professional learning community?**

> THERE ARE simple, proven, affordable structures that exist right now and could have a dramatic, widespread impact on schools and achievement -- in virtually any school. An astonishing level of agreement has emerged on this point. Indeed, a legion of esteemed educators and researchers assert that the *most promising strategy* for sustained, substantive school improvement is building the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community. But here's the problem. Such "learning communities" -- rightly defined -- are hard to find. It is stunning that for all this evidence and consensus of expert opinion, such collaboration -- our most effective tool for improving instruction -- remains exceedingly, dismayingly rare.” (Schmoker)

The key is to replace a belief in experts who deliver knowledge of good teaching in workshops with communities of teachers who learn through ongoing collaboration and practice. (Dennis Sparks, NSDC)
“In short, the relationships among the educators in a school define all relationships within that school’s culture. Teachers and administrators demonstrate all too well a capacity to either enrich or diminish one another’s lives and thererby enrich or diminish their schools. (Roland Barth, 2006)

The Theory Behind Professional Learning Communities: What the Literature Says

The idea of a learning organization where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (Senge, 1990)

"Famous baseball manager Casey Stengel once muttered, “Getting good players is the easy part. Getting ‘em to play together is the hard part.” Schools are full of good players. Collegiality is about getting them to play together, about growing a professional community” (Barth, 2006)

"To engage all students in learning, . . . we need a different kind of high school. We have called that a personalized high school, a place where students discover their own pathways to the future, where teachers act as advisors to their students, where teachers pose real problems for their students to solve by applying subject area knowledge, where students demonstrate mastery of subjects and skills through portfolios and exhibitions–where all members of the school community work together to help each member succeed. (DiMartino and Clarke, 2008)
Successful Professional Learning Community Programs: What the Research Says

According to a summary of results included in a literature review by Shirley Hord, in schools with effective professional learning communities student results include: decreased dropout rate and fewer classes skipped, lower rates of absenteeism, increased learning that is distributed more equitably, greater academic gains in math, science, and reading, and smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds. (Hord, S.M., 1997)

Also, according to the summary of results included in a literature review by Shirley Hord In schools with effective professional learning communities results for staff include:

• Reduced isolation for teachers
• Increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school and increased vigor in working to strengthen the mission
• Shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students’ success
• Powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners
• Increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles they play in helping all students achieve expectations
• Higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students
• More satisfaction, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism
• Significant advances in adapting teaching to the students, accomplished more quickly than in traditional schools
• Commitment to making significant and lasting changes and
• Higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental systemic change. (Hord, S.M., 1997)
Professional Learning Communities Contributions to the Model Breaking Ranks School

Below, the factors that contribute to a high performing Breaking Ranks School are presented. Those factors supported and/or impacted by an effective Professional Learning Community are noted in bold and italics.

A. Leadership and Governance

1. The school principal provides leadership in the school community by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning.

2. The principal creates and works with a site-based leadership team and employs sound change leadership processes.

3. The school is governed by a site council, which is all-inclusive, diverse, and comfortable so students, parents and members of the staff and are willing to participate. (In high schools a majority of the site council is comprised of students elected by students.)

4. The high school community, which cannot be value-neutral, advocates and models a set of core values essential in a democratic and civil society including an appreciation for the diversity of the American populace.

5. In conjunction with agencies in the community, the school helps to coordinate the delivery of physical and mental health and social services for youth.

6. Recognizing that education is a continuum, high schools reach out to elementary and middle level schools as well as institutions of higher education to better serve the articulation of student learning and to ensure each stage of the continuum understands what will be required of students at the succeeding stage.

B. Professional Community
1. **Members of the staff collaborate in both interdisciplinary and discipline specific teams including staff and (in high schools) students to develop and implement the school's learning goals.**

2. **Common planning time is regularly scheduled and amounts to 30 minutes for every hour of instruction.**

3. **The school is a professional learning community that focuses on the skills and knowledge required to ensure that the principal, teachers, and other staff members continuously improve in their ability to address students’ intellectual and affective needs as they relate to improved student outcomes.**

C. **Personalized Learning**

1. Students display a sense of belonging and the feeling that someone cares whether they are doing well academic, civic, and social realms.

2. Each student has a Personal Plan for Progress reflective of the individual learning styles, histories, interests, and aspirations that documents an engaging process of student introspection, goal setting, community-based explorations, progress review and reflection all demonstrated through biannual student led conferences.

3. Every high school student will have a Personal Adult Advocate that meets with him or her either individually or in a small group daily to help him or her personalize the educational experience. Advisory content includes preparing students for the college admissions process including the completion of the FAFSA.

4. The students’ families are engaged as partners in the students’ education especially as participants in student led conferences and as reviews of exhibitions.

D. **Personalized Teaching**

1. To promote a culture of high expectations for all, students are heterogeneously grouped in all subject areas.

2. Teachers teaching AP and honors classes are responsible for contact time with no more than 100 students per school year, and teachers teaching more challenging students are responsible for contact time with no more than 60 students per school year.
3. Role model teachers teach the most challenging students, e.g., freshmen.

4. The school employs a flexible schedule that allows better use of time in order to meet the individual needs of students to ensure academic success.

5. Teachers design high quality work and teach in ways that engage students, cause them to persist and, when the work is successfully completed, result in their satisfaction and their acquisition of knowledge, critical thinking and problem solving skills, and other abilities valued by society.

6. Teachers are adept at acting as coaches and facilitators to promote more active involvement of students in their own learning.

7. Teachers know and use a variety of strategies and settings that identify and accommodate individual learning styles and engage students.

E. Personalized Curriculum

1. The school eliminates the Carnegie unit in favor of exhibitions of mastery as the basis for earning credit.

2. The school identifies a set of essential learnings in which students must demonstrate achievement in order to graduate, to include student outcome expectations in academic, civic, and social realms.

3. The high school has only three departments, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Humanities, and Community Connected Learning in order to integrate the school’s curriculum and emphasize depth over breadth of coverage.

4. The content of the curriculum connects to real-life applications of knowledge and skills including internships, service learning and project-based learning opportunities.

5. The school has partnerships with institutions of higher education that includes dual-enrollment opportunities for all students.
6. The core curriculum is college preparatory for all and is aligned with the admissions requirements with the flagship state university in the state.

7. Each course offers an honors challenge that is inquiry-based and available to any student that chooses to complete the work.

8. Students construct knowledge through projects designed to require students to access knowledge, analyze it, synthesize it, and present it as a body of material which he or she has designed to maximize communication with students, teachers and community members.

9. The school has plan to make technology integral to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, accommodating different learning styles and helping teachers to individualize and improve the learning process.

F. Personalized Assessment

1. At the heart of the school is performance assessment that permits teachers to have deep knowledge of their students and the practices that would best help them to learn.

2. Comprehensive personal learning plans; graduation challenge, capstone, senior projects, portfolio assessments all including exhibitions are the norm and required of every student.

3. Assessment is incorporated into instruction so that assessment is accomplished using a variety of methods and does not merely measure students, but becomes part of the learning process.

4. Assessment practices capture the dynamic and varied ways in which a student’s academic growth occurs—in other words, more closely resembles a videotape than a single snapshot.