Indicator Explanation

DOMAIN	EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	INDICATOR
Instruction	Diagnose and respond to student learning needs	3A.1 Instructional teams meet regularly (at least monthly) to review practice implementation data (e.g., documents from walkthroughs, practice fidelity, lesson review).

Instructional teams that consist of groups of teachers organized into grade-levels, grade-level clusters, or subject-areas provide an opportunity for teachers to work collectively to improve instruction and student achievement (Hamilton, et al., 2009). Hattie (2012) suggests that "Within a school, we need to collaborate to build a team working together to solve the dilemmas in learning, to collectively share and critique the nature and quality of evidence that shows our impact on student learning, and to cooperate in planning and critiquing lessons, learning intentions, and success criteria on a regular basis" (p. 172). Research has consistently demonstrated that a collaborative school culture, with educators working together in teams, is linked to stronger instruction and higher student achievement (DuFour, 2011; Goddard et al., 2007; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2013). The Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) reflect this research and include a Learning Communities standard that addresses the "impact of collective responsibility for student success, continuous improvement, and shared accountability" (Killion, 2015). Instructional teams often operate as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (DuFour, 2011; DuFour & Mattos, 2013), but have also been referred to as professional learning networks and communities of practice (Hirsh, 2018). Collaborative structures enhance the chances of providing the excellent teaching and learning opportunities for all students that are required for school improvement (Hirsh, 2018).

How can school leaders ensure that the school operates with high quality teams that can enhance instruction and student achievement?

Quality implementation of instructional teams is essential for instructional change and subsequent improvement of student learning (Ronfeldt, et al., 2015). Ronfeldt, et al (2015) observed in their large-scale research of over 9000 teachers and 336 schools in Miami-Dade County public schools, that schools with better quality collaboration across instructional domains also had stronger achievement gains. In some schools which have purportedly implemented PLCs, for example, "PLC-Lite" is in place, and evidence-based collaboration strategies are non-existent (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). Research demonstrates that simply providing time for teachers to meet does not impact student learning; teacher collaboration within team meetings must be structured and focused on "the right work" (DuFour & Reeves, 2016; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009). In a recent review of the literature, Ronfeldt, et al (2015) identified two types of instructional team collaboration that are likely to promote gains in student learning:

- Collaboration in which teachers analyze student data and develop instructional responses to address the data. Teachers use both formal assessment data and informal observations of student learning to determine students' learning needs and design ways that these needs can be addressed through changes to instructional practice. Effective PLCs are those in which teachers

collaborate with a clear and consistent focus on student learning data (Harris et al., 2018; Hirsh, 2018; Vescio et al., 2008). However, for significant achievement gains to occur, teachers will likely need training and support in order to engage in frequent and structured collaboration around student data (Saunders et al., 2009).

- Collaboration centered on curriculum and instructional decision-making. In order for teaming to impact student achievement, teams should maintain high levels of group instructional practices, such as co-teaching, selecting instructional methods, evaluating curriculum, preparing together for instruction, observing colleagues, and using flexible student grouping practices for instructional practice (Goddard et al., 2007; Hirsh, 2018; Supovitz, 2002).

DuFour and Reeves (2016) note that educators working in PLCs recognize they must:

1. Work together in collaborative teams rather than in isolation and take collective responsibility for student learning.
2. Establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum that specifies the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students are expected to acquire, unit by unit.
3. Use an assessment process that includes frequent, team-developed, common formative assessments based on the guaranteed and viable curriculum.
4. Use the results of common formative assessments to identify
   - Students who need additional time and support to become proficient.
   - Students who need enrichment and extension of their learning because they're already highly proficient.
   - Teachers who help students achieve at high levels so team members can examine those teachers' practices, as well as teachers who struggle so that team members can assist the teacher in addressing the issue.
   - Skills or concepts that none of the team members were able to help students achieve at the intended level, so the team can expand its learning beyond its members to become more effective in teaching those skills or concepts. The team can seek help from members of other teams in the building with relevant expertise in these areas, specialists from the central office, other teachers of the same content in the district, or networks of teachers throughout the U.S. that they can interact with online.
5. Create a system of interventions that ensures that all students who struggle receive additional time and support for learning in ways that do not remove them from new direct instruction, regardless of the teacher to whom they have been assigned.

Dufour and Reeves (2016) also recommend that PLC work within collaborative teams should be focused on addressing the following four questions:

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. What will we do if they have not learned it?
4. How will we provide extended learning opportunities for students who have mastered the content?

They note that "meetings that only address standards, that focus entirely on disciplinary issues and parent complaints, or that center on employee issues may be very interesting, but they do not represent the work of high-performing PLCs" (p. 70).

Principal leadership may be a key factor in laying a foundation for instructional teams' effectiveness (Benoliel & Berkovich, 2016; Johnson et al., 2016). One study of teams in schools in high-poverty, high-minority communities with intense accountability pressures found that effectiveness was determined by principals' involvement and their engagement in practices such as encouraging a clear and meaningful purpose for the team, attending and participating in team meetings, and encouraging teachers to focus on their own professional learning as they work with colleagues to improve performance (Charner-Laird et al., 2017). School leaders also must provide sufficient and consistent time for teacher collaboration in instructional groups in order to achieve significant student achievement gains (Saunders, et al., 2009). Unfortunately a recent national study revealed that only slightly more than one-third of teachers (38%) report sufficient time to collaborate with

their colleagues (Johnston & Tsai, 2018). Team members need a dedicated block of at least one hour for grade-level collaborative team time per week embedded within the professional workday rather than after school (Larson et al., 2012). To free up sufficient time for collaboration without additional money or loss of instructional time, elementary schools have adopted strategies such as:

> • Parallel scheduling: Grade-level teachers have a common planning time by assigning specialists (e.g., art, music, etc.) to work with students within the entire grade at the same time, with the grade-level team then designating one day each week for collaborative, rather than individual, planning;
> • Shared classes: Students across two different grade levels are combined into one class while the other team engages in collaborative work once per week; and,
> • Extended faculty meeting time: Time is scheduled for team collaboration during faculty meeting time, shifting the focus of faculty meetings from administrative communication to professional learning for teachers. (Larson et al., 2012, p. 8)

PLC leadership is also an important consideration. PLC leaders need "a strong understanding of schoolwide goals and priorities and the ability to translate them to the specific focus area of their team, [and] skills in group facilitation and in instructional leadership, leading teachers in data-driven practice improvement" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018, p. 6).

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