5 QUESTIONS
PLCS SHOULD ASK TO PROMOTE EQUITY

BY DOUGLAS FISHER, NANCY FREY, AND JOHN ALMARODE

How might the work of professional learning communities (PLCs) focus on the changes necessary to ensure that *all* students are engaged, inspired, and successful?

Despite current efforts, some groups of students are not making expected progress to meet grade-level standards and achieve at the highest levels. PLCs present a rich opportunity to improve instruction, as there is evidence that teacher teams, collaborating together, impact the learning outcomes of students (e.g. Reeves, 2010).

But PLCs may not be fulfilling the promise of equity, especially for students who continue to face opportunity gaps and those who have historically been marginalized. How can we light the path to equity by refocusing PLCs so that they are more than a series of meetings and result in real change for the students who need it most?

We developed five discussion questions that we believe allow educator teams to put equity front and center in their collaborative conversations (Fisher, Frey, Almarode, Flores, & Nagel, 2020):

- Where are we going?
- Where are we now?
- How do we move learning forward?
- What did we learn today?
- Who benefited and who did not benefit?

Here we consider each of these questions and how PLCs and the students they serve can benefit from them. Although we do not think that PLCs are singularly sufficient to ensure that equity is achieved, PLCs — when done well — can drive changes to many facets of teaching and learning and seed larger change.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

This first question is deceptively simple. It asks teams to consider the learning goals and trajectory for students.

To some, it may seem that this simple question has nothing to do with equity. But in our experience, teams often plan based on their current and unexamined beliefs about students' ability and potential. Often, they have not considered that their expectations, as expressed through the lessons they design, can magnify inequitable outcomes.

When teams plan lessons well below grade level, students do not have a chance of achieving at the highest level of learning, even if they meet the specific expectations of the lesson. As an example, when a 5th-grade team plans lessons based on 3rd-grade expectations, they produce 6th graders who are ready for 4th grade. As a result, students' growth in learning over an extended period of time will be less than what is both expected and possible.

But when teams engage in conversations about what students need to learn, they surface expectations that become visible to each member of the team. The question "where are we going?" can guide PLC conversations so that expectations become aligned to grade-level expectations and team members identify barriers to learning that need to be removed as well as supports that need to be enacted to ensure appropriate levels of learning.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Equity demands that teachers build on what students already know and fill any gaps in learning opportunities. When teams discuss the current performance levels of their students, they are often confronted with the reality that some students have not had equitable opportunities to learn to grade-level standards, and they are called on to accept responsibility to close the gap. One of the main

DEFINING EQUITY

We do not limit our thinking about equity to achievement gaps. In fact, we have argued that equity is more expansive than what tests can measure (e.g. Smith, Frey, Pumpian, & Fisher, 2017). We have set our sights on ensuring that all students are engaged, inspired, and successful.

Our definition, developed in partnership with leaders from San Diego Unified School District, Chula Vista Elementary School District, Sweetwater Union High School District, and San Diego State University, specifies that equity in education:

- **RECOGNIZES** that every student comes to school with a unique identity profile that is too often impacted by racism, bias, or bigotry;

- **OCCURS** as a result of sensitive, courageous, and creative conversations and actions;

- **REQUIRES** the distribution and redistribution of resources and initiatives based on individual and group needs derived from multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data; and

- **LEADS** to engaged, inspired, and successful learners.

functions of a PLC should be to identify these gaps and strategies for closing them.

Consider one effective high school English team we worked with. The team was discussing students' writing using claims, evidence, and reasons. As part of the group's discussion, members noted that students had mastered how to write a claim, but that their evidence centered on personal experiences and not textual evidence.

This allowed them to plan how to focus their instruction on the missing link: using evidence. As one team member said, "We really don't need to start with claims. I mean, look at their work on the preassessment. They are really good at this. Way better than the group last year. But the evidence they use is all from their own lives. I get that, but we need to help them draw evidence from other sources."

HOW DO WE MOVE LEARNING FORWARD?

It might seem obvious that PLCs should focus on effective instructional practices. But this is more complex than it sounds.

It requires more than saying, for example, "We'll use reciprocal teaching." It involves a range of detailed instructional decisions that teachers make about *how* to implement reciprocal teaching and ensure that this approach meets the needs of all students.

When teams fail to discuss the specifics of how to move learning forward, some well-meaning teachers end up using ineffective approaches, like assigning worksheets or doing all of the work for students. Such strategies are more commonly experienced by lower-achieving students, even though they are most in need of effective instruction. According to Good (1987), lower-achieving students:

- Receive less wait time, praise, and feedback;
- Are seated farther away from

the teacher;
- Have less eye contact from the teacher; and
- Have fewer friendly interactions with the teacher.

How do PLC team members access and share the knowledge to change these patterns? Often, this professional knowledge is in the room and should be shared. If someone has a really effective way of teaching something, he or she should share it, and the team should capitalize on it. In addition, the team should investigate evidence-based practices, especially if team members encounter a new challenge or are not sure what might work in a certain situation.

In addition, teams should discuss the cultural relevancy of the materials they use to teach students the content. Teams should focus on the responsiveness of their pedagogy, asking themselves if the lessons they have designed honor the experiences that students bring to school.

WHAT DID WE LEARN TODAY?

This question centers on the learning that occurs through the PLC. This should encompass both students' and teachers' learning. The focus of what was learned today is both outward — our students — and inward — ourselves.

Teams need to discuss what they learned from students and what they plan to do about it. This involves systems for checking for understanding and then using student performance to guide next steps instruction.

For example, a middle school math team wanted to know if students had increased their knowledge of probability. As one team member said, "We can give them a problem set to do, but I am more interested in hearing their thinking. Maybe we should add a writing task and also ask students to retell their thinking. Then I think we'll really know what they learned and what we learned from the process."

Based on what they learned from their students, this team of teachers made decisions about reteaching and extension tasks. They decided what they needed to focus on with the whole class as well as small group and individual instruction that needed to occur for specific students.

WHO BENEFITED AND WHO DID NOT?

To deliver on the promise of equity, it is not enough to discuss students on a case-by-case basis. Teams also need to look at trends in learning outcomes for subgroups of students. We have found it is rare for PLC team members to do this, but it is the most critical step. It may not be comfortable, but it is crucial.

One tool teams can use to visualize the data is the Progress vs. Achievement Tool, which can be found at **www. visiblelearningplus.com/groups/ progress-vs-achievement-tool**. Inputting data into this tool creates a four-quadrant display of student outcome trends so that educators can tailor instruction to those groups' needs.

It displays student names in each quadrant and can include demographic information if the team includes it. The lower left quadrant includes students who did not make progress and did not achieve at the average of the group. The lower right quadrant includes students who made progress but still need to achieve more. The upper left quadrant includes students who achieved well but did not make a lot of progress. And the upper right quadrant includes students who both achieved well and made strong progress.

To ensure that the discussions focus on equity, teams need to consider the trends that they notice in each quadrant.

This is what happened when the middle school teachers mentioned previously entered their data into the data tool. The trends were obvious. The lower left quadrant was filled with

English learner students.

As one team member noted, "Without visualizing the data this way, I would have focused on the individual students in my class who needed more support. But it's clear that we need to do something different for our English learners if we have any hopes that they will achieve. I think we need to reconsider our instructional supports and how we remove barriers for these students because we're not doing enough to build their skills."

LOOKING THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS

These five questions can help PLCs confront the realities faced by students and become better teachers and advocates for their futures. To fulfill this potential, teams should always examine the impact their efforts

are having on student learning. This involves not only looking at student outcomes but also at changes in teaching.

For example, we encourage teachers to visit one another's classrooms and examine the impact that specific instructional strategies and changes are having on students. During these visits and all interactions with PLC members, changing the questions to focus on equity can make a difference.

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Douglas Fisher (dfisher@sdsu. edu) is professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University and a leader at Health Sciences High in San Diego, California. Nancy Frey (nfrey@ sdsu.edu) is professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University and a leader at Health Sciences High in San Diego, California. John Almarode (almarojt@jmu.edu) is associate professor at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. ■