EXPLORATION AND ADOPTION

INSTALLATION

INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

FULL IMPLEMENTATION

SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALE-UP

Birth-to-College
COLLABORATIVE TOOLKIT

How do school and program leaders prepare to implement professional learning communities within a birth-to-college approach to alignment?

Implementation Guide for School and Program Leaders: Installation*

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RATIONALE

Traditional professional development activities are often disconnected from teacher practices in the classroom. Yet within the last decade, educators have recognized that professional development can be more meaningful when yoked to a teacher’s day-to-day experience in the classroom. This is known as job-embedded professional development. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a popular form of job-embedded professional development in which “teachers collaborate to analyze their practice and discuss new strategies and tactics, testing them in the classroom and reporting the results to each other.” The popularity of PLCs lies in their ability to relate learning directly to daily practices in the classroom.¹

PLCs have the potential to positively transform the knowledge, beliefs, practices and school- and program-level policies around classroom interactions and instruction, as well as family support and engagement, resulting in improved student and family outcomes.² Since PLCs are most commonly found in individual schools and programs among teachers of the same age group or subject area, changes in mindset and practice have been localized within these environments. Yet when coupled with efforts toward alignment,³ PLCs—specifically, birth-to-college (BTC) PLCs—have the potential to catalyze changes in mindset and practice on a broader scale (e.g., across partner organizations and throughout districts and systems) in a way that allows schools and programs to provide more cohesive educational experiences to children and families. PLCs create change through an innovative and evidence-based format for professional development that promotes a line of sight from infancy through 3rd grade (and eventually college) for all staff.

Due to the complexity of planning and preparing for BTC PLCs, extra time and consideration is required from leadership prior to initial implementation. This guide for school and program leaders covers key considerations to address initial logistics and planning for PLC composition and PLC leadership, provides reflection questions to support the installation of BTC PLCs, and offers examples from the Birth-to-College Collaborative.
KEY DECISIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

At the earliest stages of exploration, adoption and installation, input from all levels of leadership is crucial to success. However, as efforts move toward full implementation, it may become important to divide the many and varied responsibilities of alignment by level of leadership. In this guide, the authors will make the distinction between organizational and site leaders wherever applicable. The authors consider organizational leaders to be those individuals at the highest level of administrative responsibility (e.g., district, regional, institutional, grantee) whose concerns and efforts are focused more broadly on the overarching vision of alignment, not necessarily on the day-to-day efforts of implementation. Conversely, site leaders are those individuals who are housed in individual schools (e.g., principals) or programs (e.g., program directors) and are responsible for organizing and implementing alignment efforts on a day-to-day basis.

GETTING STARTED

All recommendations are based on the experiences of the BTC Collaborative. We have attempted to sequence these recommendations in a way that is logical for readers unfamiliar with the BTC Collaborative and embarking on the work of alignment in their own contexts. However, it is important to emphasize that these recommendations are in no way prescriptive and should be informed entirely by your own circumstances and sequenced based on your own organizational and contextual priorities and needs.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS

- **Explore the Six Principles of PLC Success:** Using research and case studies on learning communities, T.G. Carroll, K. Fulton and H. Doerr identified six principles for success in PLCs. These six principles guided the formation of the six BTC PLCs as well as the underlying logic model of the BTC Collaborative. In a similar way, these principles should help leaders create the foundation for viable, vibrant BTC PLCs.

  - **Shared Values and Goals:** PLC members “should have a shared vision of the capabilities of students and teachers.” Essentially, PLC members should explore similarities and differences in their beliefs, mindsets and practical approaches to teaching and learning in service of improving student outcomes and their own teaching practices.

  - **Collective Responsibility:** All members are responsible for the functioning of the group, and individual roles are defined by experience and knowledge and agreed on by the team. Team members must hold one another accountable for improving student achievement and family engagement.

  - **Authentic Assessment:** A primary focus of PLCs can be to assess teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Assessments and data provide means of accountability for student and family progress and should drive continuous quality improvement and alignment efforts by the PLC.

  - **Self-Directed Reflection:** PLC members will benefit from reflection, especially those that relate “the [goals], planning, standards, and evaluation” of one’s own practice to the work of the PLC. Moreover, reflection allows PLC members to think about how their own work relates directly to the overarching mission and vision of the partnership, as well as the strategic plan for alignment across early childhood education and K–12 schools. Set aside time for reflection at the end of each meeting.
• **Stable Settings**: Effective teams need structural supports in place to be effective. For example, PLCs should meet regularly and frequently in a space conducive to collaboration. Having a set meeting time and place ensures meetings begin and end on time and provides members with a sense of stability.

• **Strong Leadership Support**: School leaders should provide positive support and clear expectations for PLC members to promote the development of relational trust within and across organizations and to encourage informed risk taking in learning and practice. Carroll and colleagues suggest a “climate of openness and trust in the school,” which empowers team members to focus energy on addressing student needs and enhancing family engagement.

• **Assess Feasibility for BTC PLCs**: Based on these principles and the direction offered in this guide, leaders must determine whether or not PLCs are an appropriate form of professional development for their schools or programs to consider in efforts toward alignment. As the authors have noted, PLCs are a dynamic form of job-embedded professional development that have been shown to dramatically improve both classroom practices and student and family outcomes. However, there are layers of logistical challenge that have the potential to derail efforts to align professional development across multiple schools and programs using PLCs. These challenges may be just too great. Therefore, PLCs may not be an appropriate alignment tool for coordinating professional development activities across schools and programs. In this case, there are other options for aligned, job-embedded professional development. Examples of such options include (1) case discussions, (2) communities of practice with either lectures from experts and/or discussions around pertinent topics relating to shared school improvement and alignment goals, (3) implementing individual growth/learning plans, (4) portfolios and (5) study groups.

• **Establish BTC PLC Meeting Time**: Create a realistic meeting schedule for individual PLCs based on each organization’s unique circumstances (e.g., context, schedule restrictions and other commitments), bearing in mind that PLCs that meet during the contractual workday, not necessarily during the instructional day, have been shown to be the most effective. Moreover, “if collaboration—focused on learning—is to become part of the routine work of educators, [then] time during the workday and workweek must be provided and protected.”

• **Define the Content Areas of PLCs**: Leaders should take an active role in defining the scope of PLCs. Content areas (e.g., language and literacy, mathematics, family support and engagement) should be informed not only by individual school priorities and data across children, families and staff but also by cross-organizational discussions among school leaders on the BTC Alignment Leadership Team identifying mutual areas for improvement. All content areas or problems of practice addressed by BTC PLCs should be applicable across the age range/grade level of staff represented.
• **Form PLCs:** There are four primary points of consideration for forming PLCs. First, consider the size of your PLCs. Groups of 8 to 12 people are recommended to strike a balance between all voices being heard and efficiency of collaborative work. Second, determine what staff roles and disciplines may be included. Interdisciplinary groups comprising teaching, family engagement, social work, special education or other adjunct educational fields ensure a variety of perspectives but may make it more difficult to apply PLC learning to everyone’s practice. Third, ensure that your PLCs are representative in terms of the ages and grade levels that make up the schools and programs within your partnership. Fourth, establish how staff members will be assigned to PLCs. For example, assignments should be influenced not only by preferences but also the knowledge, expertise and day-to-day work of staff members.

• **Select PLC Leaders:** PLCs benefit from having leaders among their group whom members can look to for ultimate accountability and guidance. Consider co-leaders, one from each of your partner schools, so that members in each school know whom to look toward and ask questions of, and to ensure that each school’s philosophies, practices and contexts will be represented and jointly shape BTC PLC learning. When identifying potential co-leaders, disposition may be more important than prior leadership experience. For example, ideal candidates should open to (1) learning new things, (2) taking moderate risks, (3) solving problems, (4) communicating effectively both verbally and in writing and (5) putting themselves “out there” as a voice and facilitator for their peers. Moreover, ideal candidates should not only be accountable, responsive and responsible but also have the interest, capacity and time to function in this role. Therefore, newer teachers may not be the best choice.

• **Define the Expectations and Responsibilities of PLC Co-Leaders and Members:** Collaborate with partnering schools around the expectations and responsibilities of PLC co-leaders. BTC leaders must also decide how PLC co-leaders should be held accountable for their work, including partnering effectively with their co-leaders. Any discussions pertaining to the expectations and responsibilities of PLC co-leaders should be shared with PLC co-leaders, themselves, and their feedback should be elicited and considered. Meanwhile, PLC members are expected to actively participate in PLC meetings by sharing knowledge and information about classroom practices with one another. PLC members are also expected to be respectful of others’ beliefs, ideas and thoughts.

• **Determine Coverage or Compensation:** If PLC time must be scheduled during the instructional day rather than during the contractual day, then leaders must provide classroom coverage for PLC members. However, if PLC time can only occur outside of the contractual day, then staff should be compensated for the additional time. Set guidelines around compensation jointly with partnering schools, which may differ in payment structures, as well as authority over budgets. Compensation should be equitable and adequate across organizations. Communicate clearly and effectively across organizations and to staff about this potential logistical and budgetary challenge.
SELF-STUDY
School and program leaders may use the following questions in their efforts to guide installation efforts around alignment of professional development through the adoption of BTC PLCs:

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS
• What time and resources are needed to carry out the key decisions and strategies for implementation?
• What strategies can be developed to protect the time devoted to this project, including time for PLC members to meet?

SITE LEADERS
• What processes and systems need to be in place to roll out BTC PLC implementation to teachers and staff?
• What processes or structures need to be in place to support continued implementation of PLCs?
• Who will be responsible for providing support to PLCs? What will this support look like? When and how will the support to PLCs occur?

WINDOW TO THE BIRTH-TO-COLLEGE COLLABORATIVE
The purpose of this section is to make a case for the importance of BTC PLCs as not only a form of job-embedded professional development but also one that furthers the cause of alignment across age and grade levels, as well as different disciplines. To this end, the authors will outline the rationale for the BTC Collaborative’s decision to focus on professional development as an area of initial alignment. This discussion will be followed by a description of not only how the BTC PLCs are structured but also how they are meant to function.

THE BIRTH-TO-COLLEGE COLLABORATIVE’S UNIQUE APPROACH TO PLCS
PLCs have become the cornerstone of initial alignment efforts within the Birth-to-College (BTC) Collaborative. The collaborative has pioneered the idea that achieving vertical alignment (i.e., alignment of systems and practices up and down the educational continuum) is best achieved by each PLC comprising staff that represent the continuum’s age and grade levels. The Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute sought to capitalize on the strong professional learning cultures already in place at each of their school campuses. Each has flourished in its own right, emphasizing collaboration and continuous improvement of instruction and family support. The next logical step, therefore, was to try to extend these individual successes by inspiring, incentivizing and supporting teachers and family support staff in their efforts to take the next step: integrating a BTC system within the culture of the partnering schools.
BTC PLCs are made up of teaching, family-engagement, special-education, research/evaluation and administrative staff working with infants, toddlers, preschoolers and students through 3rd grade (and eventually 5th grade). BTC leaders made sure there were members on each PLC who work with children and their families spanning all of these ages so that staff can learn from each other’s expertise and experience; infant-toddler-preschool teachers can develop a line of sight for where their students need to be as they enter kindergarten and advance through school; and teachers of elementary school-aged students can understand the learning and developmental precursors that form the essential foundation for continued learning as students enter the primary grades.

BTC PLCs are different from a traditional PLC format in many ways. For example, membership is interdisciplinary and crosses three school campuses. Moreover, across age/grade levels, members work with children from birth to age eight. Lastly, BTC PLCs are topic based toward the goal of alignment.

The six BTC PLCs focused on these teaching and learning practices: assessments, transitions, family and social support, social-emotional learning, math, and language and literacy. Of the many aspects of teaching and learning the collaborative could have chosen, leaders felt these presented critical opportunities for professional learning and alignment. Over the first two years of the partnership, each PLC developed its own norms, goals, rationale and objectives for its work.

The BTC PLCs were each headed by two co-leaders, one from Educare and one from either elementary campus—North Kenwood/Oakland or Donoghue—of the UChicago Charter School. Together these co-leaders shaped agendas for meetings and guided the work of the group. Each PLC was supported by a facilitator—a member of the partnership who sat on the BTC Alignment Leadership Team and brought the leadership’s vision to the PLC and shared any issues or opportunities for systems or practice change with the appropriate teams. In addition to the co-leaders and facilitators, there were between six and nine members of each PLC who typically represent the three schools in the collaborative. The BTC Collaborative sought, through the structure and function of BTC PLCs, to align professional development for teachers and staff that have expertise serving children from birth through 3rd grade. Leaders and staff alike found BTC PLCs an enriching experience that informed their professional practice and reinforced a moral imperative to deliver quality educational experiences for the children they serve.

For a more detailed account of the Installation stage of the BTC Collaborative PLCs, please refer to the second BTC Collaborative teaching case study—with teaching notes and companion video—*Building a Birth-to-College Model: Professional Learning Communities*. This can be found in the “For More On This Subject” section of this document.

**SUMMARY**

The purpose of this guide is to walk leaders through many of the initial logistics, planning and considerations for alignment using PLCs. The hope is that these considerations will inform leaders across partnering organizations and help them consider whether or not using PLCs to drive alignment work is feasible given their unique circumstances. The authors believe that PLCs, especially
cross-age/grade/discipline PLCs, are a powerful tool for alignment because they have the potential to change mindset and practices toward a birth-to-college continuum. In the next guide, the authors continue the discussion of alignment within the domain of professional development by focusing on initial implementation efforts—specifically how leadership can support the work of PLCs. Future alignment guides from the BTC Collaborative will address later stages of implementation and other areas of our alignment efforts.

FOR MORE ON THIS SUBJECT


NOTES

* These guides were organized and informed by the framework on program implementation created by the National Implementation Research Network. “Installation” is the process of preparing to “begin implementing an evidence-based practice or program.” That is, “structural supports necessary to initiate the program are put in place (e.g., ensuring the availability of funding streams, creating reporting frameworks, outlining outcome expectations).”


4 For additional information on how the BTC Collaborative developed its mission, vision and initial goals, please refer to the teaching case study and its accompanying video Working Together to Build a Birth-to-College Approach to Public Education: Forming a Partnership Between the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute and the Ounce of Prevention Fund
For an in-depth discussion of job-embedded professional development, including the examples the authors have listed, please refer to Croft, A., Coggshall, J.G., Dolan, M., Powers, E., & Killion, J. (2010). Becky DuFour, e-mail communication to authors, September 2, 2014.

An internal alignment team in your own school/program should be established in the exploration and adoption stage of implementation. This alignment team should include high-level administrators, mid-level management, instructional leaders (e.g., coaches, curriculum specialists, educational coordinators) family-support/engagement leaders and, ideally, some direct service staff and parents as representatives. This team will be charged with exploring and discussing the advantages, drawbacks and, eventually, successes and challenges of pursuing a BTC-aligned approach.