

Read and Rank Each PLC Scenario:

While reading through the below scenarios, rank each learning team in order from BEGINNING to ADVANCED. Then, develop a rationale for your ranking by recording notes on the strengths and weaknesses of each learning team. Finally, check your rankings and rationales with a partner and resolve any disagreements.

Beginning	Team Name:	Your Rationale for This Ranking:
	Team Name:	Your Rationale for This Ranking:
Intermediate	Team Name:	Your Rationale for This Ranking:
	Team Name:	Your Rationale for This Ranking:
Advanced Learning Teams	Team Name:	Your Rationale for This Ranking:
	Team Name:	Your Rationale for This Ranking:

Tom's Story:

Tom—an Assistant Principal at Longview Elementary School—couldn't believe how bad he felt! He'd just walked out of a meeting with the fifth-grade teachers he'd been assigned to support, and he was convinced that he may have destroyed every bit of hope that they'd look at data together again.

The team had been discussing student work samples for months and had done some simple data analysis from a few formative assessments, but this was the first time that they had sat down together to really look at some hard numbers around a shared assessment. Needless to say, everyone had been a little nervous going into the meeting.

Tom had begun the meeting by distributing several handouts.

"Okay, everyone, as you can see on this first handout, I have created a chart showing each student's overall score on the assessment, arranged by class. At the bottom of each column, you can see the average score for each class, and the number on the far right shows the average score for the whole grade level. I also highlighted in red all the individual students' scores that were below 70. So, anyone see anything interesting?"

"I see something interesting," said Sarah. "My class had the second highest score on the grade level. I guess I did a better job teaching the material this quarter than I thought! And look at your scores, Mike; you did a great job—it looks like you only had two kids score below a 70! I guess that happens when you're the teacher of the year, right?"

As Karen looked at her own scores, though, she saw a sea of red. She counted eight students—over a quarter of her class!—who scored below 70, and her average was the lowest on the grade level by a good three points. Looking up, she thought she caught Tom and Mike trying to look away from her. There it was, right in front of her—proof positive that she was the worst teacher on the grade level, and now everyone knew it.

Karen made an attempt at levity: *"Well, Tom, with scores like this, do you want to fire me right now or wait until the end of the year, when I'm sure all of my students will be failing?"*

Sarah's Story:

Sarah was completely wiped out. Over the past ten years, she'd become a pretty accomplished and well-respected teacher. Her students regularly outperformed the students of her peers on standardized tests, and parents often requested that their children be placed in her classroom. For as long as she could remember, she'd loved her school, kids, and colleagues.

That was all changing, however. Lincoln High—the school that Sarah had worked at since the beginning of her career—had hired a new principal over the summer, and he was pushing something called “professional learning communities” on the faculty. Teachers had been assigned to grade-level teams and were expected to meet at least once a week.

Sarah's team—consisting of the algebra and geometry teachers—was giving PLCs their best shot. They'd decided to meet on Tuesdays during the new shared planning period created for every grade level and subject area. For the first few meetings, momentum and excitement were pretty high. After all, many of the teachers in Sarah's department had worked in the same building for years without knowing much about one another.

“This could be a chance to change all that!” they thought.

Unfortunately, their meetings were typically anything but rewarding. After developing and setting norms together—a task required by the leadership team—Sarah's colleagues had no idea what to do with one another! They tried developing a few lessons together but ran out of time too often to try again. They'd had a few deep conversations about pedagogy but found out that they didn't see eye-to-eye on very many key issues. They'd had meetings that ended after 15 minutes and meetings that ran long into the afternoon.

The one common thread was that nothing important was ever accomplished.

“Collaboration is a waste of time,” thought Sarah. *“I could have done much more independently in less time and with less aggravation. I'll keep attending these meetings, but my goal is to say as little as possible and get back to my classroom as soon as I can.”*

Pat's Story:

Back at the beginning of November, Pat—the principal of Seneca West Middle—conducted a formal observation of a 7th-grade Language Arts class. What he had seen had blown him away.

The class was reading the novel *The Outsiders* and learning about character development. Throughout the observation, students worked in teams on differentiated tasks, and the teacher pulled small groups of students every 5 to 10 minutes—providing feedback on progress and targeted instruction on various topics. From what Pat could tell, every student was engaged and motivated for the entire class period. He heard students having powerful conversations with each other and saw students capturing their thoughts with sophisticated writing.

After the observation, Pat learned from the teacher that the 7th-grade Language Arts professional learning team had created the entire activity. The team developed a pre-test, which was administered to all students, and then created differentiated tasks based on the pre-test. In addition, the teachers analyzed results from the pre-test as a team to identify students who might struggle with particular concepts, and they were planning to deliver a common post-test to measure the effectiveness of their teaching.

“At last,” Pat thought, “a concrete example of the powerful of professional learning teams!”

As he dug a bit deeper, however, Pat ended up disappointed. While the 7th-grade teachers were proud of their unit and convinced that it had worked wonders for their students, they had yet to make plans to develop additional differentiated learning experiences for their kids. *“It’s too hard,”* they explained. *“We probably spent over a hundred hours on that one project—and most of that happened after school. Then, our classrooms had so many different ability levels that we were completely overwhelmed. We’d have a handful of kids that struggled with every skill but never enough time to reach all of them.”*

Pat was crushed. He knew that PLCs were supposed to do whatever it took to help students learn, and he’d thought he’d found a team doing just that. *“How could they possibly give up what was obviously powerful work,”* he wondered, *“and what can I do to help?”*

Karen's Story:

Karen was less than excited about the next meeting of her PLC. Their principal had required that every learning team create a common assessment before the end of the first quarter to determine whether or not students were mastering the content in their curriculum. While the math and science teachers had jumped at the task and developed two or three different common assessments, her team of eighth-grade reading teachers was struggling.

It's not that Karen's colleagues refused to follow their principal's directions. They'd been poking around the edges of assessment for a long time. It's just that every time the topic came up, emotions would run high!

Their central struggle revolved around the kinds of assessments that were meaningful and important. John—a young, single teacher who spent more time at school than anyone else on the hallway—wanted to see the team use portfolios to assess the work of their students on an upcoming novel study. *"Portfolios,"* he argued, *"are so much more responsible. We'll be able to see what it is that our students know in a sophisticated way!"*

The remaining team members didn't disagree with John—they'd read about portfolios, too, and liked the sound of the idea—but they knew that developing portfolios would be hard work. They'd need to develop common rubrics and practice standardizing their grading to ensure they could compare results. They'd also need to block out time to review multiple subjective assignments, which was never easy.

To make matters worse, Karen's team couldn't even really decide what they wanted to assess. Tammy—who'd been teaching for over twenty years—felt strongly that all students needed to memorize the literary elements. *"If our kids leave eighth grade without knowing what similes, metaphors, and onomatopoeia are, we've failed them."* Ken disagreed, *"It's more important to know that our students can figure out how authors use language to influence readers than it is to know that they can list definitions."*

"We're never going to get our assessment created in the next two weeks," Karen groaned as she gathered her materials and headed to the workroom. *"And we're going to hate each other by the time this is over as well!"*

The Art Teachers of Smith Central School District

The elementary school art teachers working in the Smith Central School District were remarkable. For the past five years, they'd developed a learning community that was professionally rewarding and producing unparalleled results. Student enrollment in art electives at the local middle and high schools had never been higher, and student products had been spotlighted in area businesses. There was a real sense of pride growing in the Smith art program—and that pride was becoming an anchor in the community.

Using digital technologies, the team had even figured out how to truly create, communicate and collaborate together—becoming a model for other encore teachers in the district. They held weekly video conferences via Zoom, a free digital tool Martha had discovered and brought to the group. They'd also created a warehouse of documents, images, lessons, and ideas in a shared Google Drive, which anyone could add to from any computer with Internet access. Their monthly meetings were fun because they could pair personalities with digital contributions, but their work continued regardless of how often they gathered.

Recently, the team decided that they wanted to begin to study ways to incorporate reading and math skills into their instruction. Recognizing that the teachers of tested subjects needed all the help they could get—and understanding that many of the skills covered in core curriculums could be integrated into their work—the teachers met with department chairs from five area schools to learn more about existing student strengths and weaknesses. Immediately they embraced the intellectual challenge of contributing to the work of the “more traditional” classroom subject teachers.

But there was much to be done. While the teachers had a list of skills they wanted to integrate into their classrooms—and identified connections with upcoming topics in their curriculum—they were not reading experts. They were going to need to do some heavy lifting to learn new instructional strategies and to design ways to assess the results of their work.

Their collective energy levels, however, had never been higher. *“We can really do this,”* said Steven, a fourth-year teacher from Broad Creek Elementary. *“And I’ll bet we reach a group of kids that have never been good at reading and math before. How cool will that be?”*

John's Story:

John couldn't believe how lucky he was! As a recent graduate, he'd been hired on by a local school working towards becoming a professional learning community. While he hadn't ever heard that term in college—and knew that none of the schools that he'd attended as a kid called themselves PLCs—it was making his life a thousand times easier.

From day one, John had been assigned to a team with the other science teachers in his school. Once a week, he had the chance to sit down for 90 minutes with some of the most experienced biology, chemistry, and earth science educators he'd ever met. *"These guys have been teaching for longer than I've been alive!"* thought John. *"Their advice is nothing short of invaluable."*

And for John, their advice was invaluable! Early on, they'd decided to focus on the kinds of common practices that crossed their classrooms regardless of content—and they'd divvied up the responsibilities for developing lessons to support those practices. After teachers completed their assigned tasks, they brought materials back to the group for final review—and the work created was always rock solid.

Currently, John was responsible for designing a common set of lab procedures and a collection of lessons to introduce proper experimenting behaviors to kids. The chemistry teacher was working on lessons related to the scientific method, and the earth science teacher—who had a minor in special education—was creating a list of learning strategies teachers could use with struggling students.

What John was blown away by was how collaborating had made everyone's work easier! While his friends working in traditional schools were always overwhelmed developing daily lessons, John kept his head above water with the help of his peers. Because they were sharing the load, John had only been responsible for one or two major bits of planning since he'd started the school year. The rest of his resources were shared by peers.

"This couldn't be any better!" he thought. *"If we keep working together to create materials, we'll finally be able to make teaching manageable! No more late nights writing lessons or scrambling to figure out what to do in class each day. When everyone works together, the load certainly gets lighter."*