

## **PLCs Lead to High Achieving Students**

Missouri schools named benchmark district for its professional learning community

*by Sue McAdamis, director of professional development, Rockwood School District*

Since the days of classical philosophers, a simple question has been the source of great debates of logic and wisdom: “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” We all have used that question as an example of how many activities and processes don’t have a specific starting point that guarantees success. The same argument can be applied to starting professional learning communities (PLCs). Should a collaborative culture exist first, or can you implement the PLC process and provide a structure for collaboration to increase?

While the debate continues, nearly 10 years ago, Rockwood School District in Eureka, MO, began its PLC journey by designing, aligning and implementing a support structure to help learning communities work in each school. Over the years, the PLC process has evolved to be integrated into many facets of the district’s work and the work has resulted in high student achievement. Most recently, Rockwood School District was recognized by the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) as a best practice school district for its outstanding PLC work. Consequently, APQC has selected Rockwood as one of 13 PLC benchmark school districts throughout the United States and Canada to participate in an in-depth research project.

### **What is a PLC?**

As defined by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), a PLC goal is high levels of learning for all students, teachers and administrators. This requires a form of professional learning that is quite different from the workshop-driven approach. The most powerful forms of staff development occur in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for learning, joint lesson planning and problem solving. These teams or communities of practice are committed to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning.

There are some key characteristics that have been instrumental to Rockwood School District’s success:

**Alignment:** That term is tossed around a lot, but what does “alignment” really mean for PLC work? In Rockwood, the work done in learning communities is directly aligned to school improvement efforts, district goals, state professional learning standards and, ultimately, to the NSDC standards. This is evident in the development of interventions based on student needs, design of common assessments, creation of teacher and principal learning plans and in the

district's vision, mission and goal statements. Teachers work in collaborative teams to build shared knowledge of what students should know and be able to do. As a result, they have established the essential learning for each unit of instruction and are committed to instruct their students in this essential learning according to the team's agreed-on pacing guide.

**Support from all stakeholders:** Rockwood provides many opportunities ranging from workshops to job-embedded observation and mentoring to promote PLC practices. New teacher and principal induction programs have PLC components. Tenets of effective PLC work are used by many stakeholder groups that work with the district, providing a strong support system for collaboration and teaming to occur. The PTO, Rockwood National Education Association and school board are all heavily involved in modeling the components of collaboration and sharing that are central to effective PLCs. The school board models collaborative practice and supports the district's guidelines for site-based professional development.

**Accountability:** Collaboration within PLCs is a non-negotiable activity throughout Rockwood. This expectation is made tangible through the inclusion of specific components on the teacher and principal evaluation relating to an individual's contribution to his or her learning community. In addition, every teacher has worked with colleagues to develop a series of common, formative assessments that are aligned with the district curriculum. Teams analyze assessment results to inform and improve their practice. Most importantly, the assessment data identifies students who need additional time and support for learning. Schools have systems in place to identify and provide interventions for these students so they receive extra support at a level and intensity appropriate to their needs.

By participating in the APQC benchmarking project the Rockwood District will:

- Receive a customized benchmarking report assessing its current system and comparing its performance with that of other participating districts.
- Be able to identify specific areas of success and improvement to help focus future resources and initiatives.
- Visit, virtually or in person, and learn from districts that have been nationally recognized for their expertise in a particular area of study.
- Join a network of K–12 educators and professionals who have an interest and experience in creating and implementing systems and processes in the area of study.

Rockwood looks forward to continued improvement and further learning for educators and students as the district moves forward with its PLC work and implementation. The debate continues as to whether the chicken or the egg came first, but it doesn't matter—Rockwood

School District will continue to increase alignment, support and accountability through PLC practices.

*Sue McAdamis is the director of professional development for Rockwood School District in Eureka, MO. For more information about the school district, visit [www.rockwood.k12.mo.us](http://www.rockwood.k12.mo.us).*