

Professional Learning Communities

What is Collective Inquiry?

Collective inquiry: the process of building shared knowledge by clarifying the questions that a group will explore together.

Teachers in a PLC work together collaboratively in constant, deep collective inquiry into the critical questions of the teaching and learning process, questions such as:

- **What is it our students must learn?**
- **What is the best way to sequence their learning?**
- **What are the most effective strategies to use in teaching this essential content?**
- **How will we know when they have learned it?**
- **How will we respond when they don't learn?**
- **What will we do when they already know it?**
- **What can we learn from each other to enhance our effectiveness?**

The focus of collective inquiry is both a search for best practice for helping all students learn at high levels and an honest assessment of the current reality regarding teaching practices and student learning. The dialogue generated from these questions is intended to result in the academic focus, collective commitments, and productive professional relationships that enhance learning for teachers and students alike.

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Getting Crystal Clear on “Learn What?”

A *professional* teacher is constantly working with colleagues to come to a deeper understanding of the first critical question: **What do we want each student to learn?**

The insights of Doug Reeves (2002) are particularly helpful in guiding teams as they address this first critical question. He offers a three-part test for teams to consider as they assess the significance of a particular standard:

1. **Does it have endurance?** Do we really expect our students to retain the knowledge and skills over time as opposed to merely learning it for a test?
2. **Does it have leverage?** Will proficiency in this standard assist the student in other areas of the curriculum and other academic disciplines?
3. **Does it develop Student readiness for the next level of learning?** Is it essential for success in the next unit, course, or grade level?

Every credible school improvement model calls upon teachers to clarify what all students must know and be able to do. As teachers engage in this dialogue regarding what their students must know and be able to do as a result of this unit they are about to teach, they become more clear, more consistent, more confident in their ability to help all students learn.

**Are you and your teammates crystal clear on the answer to
“Learn what?”**

Make a team list of the 8-10 essential learnings per trimester for each course or subject area, and work interdependently with your colleagues to ensure all students learn what is most essential.