

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

IN THE EXPANDED
LEARNING FIELD



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Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee offered valuable suggestions for research to include in the literature review. They reviewed and commented on earlier drafts of this report.

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Though we cannot name our interviewees individually, we extend our gratitude for their willingness to speak with us about their experiences. Their insights enriched this report.

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Public Profit Team

The Public Profit Team collaboratively authored this white paper, which summarizes over 5 years of evaluation work conducted by the evaluation firm. The contributing authors are named below.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last five years, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation generously supported multiple Professional Learning Community (PLC) initiatives for expanded learning¹ staff: the Oakland Wellness PLC, Oakland Science PLC, Oakland Math PLC, the Oakland Character Development PLC, and The Power of Discovery: STEM². This white paper uses 12 evaluation reports of the PLC initiatives, as well as interviews with PLC participants and facilitators, to better understand how the PLC model is used in the Expanded Learning field, to demonstrate the benefits to participating staff and expanded learning programs, and to share best practices for youth-serving organizations interested in using PLCs.

The PLC Model

PLCs are collaborative cohorts of professionals with a shared interest in improving their practice in order to better serve youth. They meet regularly to reflect, review data, and to share and develop strategies to improve their professional practice. The PLC model started as a means of promoting high quality collaboration among school day teachers. Steadily growing in popularity, the PLC training model has since spread to other fields, including to Expanded Learning, as a way to offer more interactive professional development that incorporates practice-based supports.

Expanded Learning PLCs use models adapted from the school day PLC model.

Two different Expanded Learning PLC models are currently being used — one targets front line staff who work directly with youth, while the other engages mid-level and senior managers who direct one or more programs. As shown in Table 1, the Expanded Learning PLC models can differ from the school day model in focus, structure, and reach or participation across or within organizations.



¹ In this paper the term Expanded Learning is defined as “before and after school, summer, [and] intersession learning programs, that focus on developing the academic, social, emotional and physical needs and interests of students through hands-on, engaging learning experiences. Expanded Learning programs should be student-centered, results-driven, include community partners, and complement but not replicate learning activities in the regular school day/year.” (California Department of Education After School Division, p.4). The term “Expanded Learning programs” is used in this white paper.

Table 1: An Overview of PLC Models

	School Day PLC Model	Front Line Staff EL Model	Managers EL Model
 <p>Focus Desired PLC outcome(s)</p>	Continuous instructional improvement	Improve access to & quality of content-focused* activities	Innovative approaches to organizational & systemic change & improvement
 <p>Structure How PLC is organized</p>	Series of discussion based meetings	Training on specific curricula On-site coaching Training on how to facilitate group activities	Series of discussion based meetings Support for ongoing discussion between meetings (resource sharing, newsletters, topic briefs, etc.)
 <p>Reach Participation across or within organizations</p>	Focused – teachers from one school participate in the PLC	Broad – staff from multiple organizations participate in the PLC or Focused – multiple staff from one organization participate in the PLC	Broad – mid-level & senior managers from multiple organizations participate in the PLC

*Content-focused activities expose youth to various topics and the primary goal of these activities is for youth to learn more about the specific content area.

The PLCs highlighted in this paper primarily use the Expanded Learning PLC model for front line staff. These staff are responsible for delivering academic and enrichment activities with various content foci such as, nutrition or science, to school-aged youth for roughly three hours after the school day ends. A typical Expanded Learning PLC for front line staff will:

- Have 15-20 participants;
- Last a full academic year (approximately 9 months);
- Include five to eight structured training sessions that provide peer networking and knowledge sharing, practice of newly acquired facilitation techniques and direct instruction on content;
- Provide curricular resources;
- Offer one or two individual coaching sessions; and
- Contract with a PLC facilitator to coordinate, plan, and implement PLC sessions.

The Benefits of Using a PLC

EL programs and staff benefit from PLC participation. This white paper explores the staff, organizational, and youth-level benefits to using the Expanded Learning PLC model for front line staff. 12 evaluations of the five PLC initiatives show:

Participant satisfaction

Front line staff are highly satisfied with their PLC experiences.

Participant learning

Participating staff leave a PLC stating that they have stronger content knowledge.

Organizational change and support

Participating programs offer youth more content-focused activities. When PLC practices are shared with full EL staff teams, new practices are used throughout the program.

Participant behavior

The new facilitation strategies that staff learned help to strengthen all enrichment activities, regardless of the content focus.

Youth outcomes

Youth receive more exposure to content-focused enrichment activities when staff participate in a PLC; however, there is limited evidence that youth gained content knowledge as a direct result of staff members' participation in the PLC.

PLC Best Practices

The Expanded Learning PLC model for front line staff used research-based best practices including:

Encouraging collaboration among participants.

The PLCs gave EL staff time for peer-to-peer sharing and collective problem solving. The PLCs also found ways to keep staff engaged outside of the structured meetings. Some of the favored ways to continue practice-based conversations were listservs and resource webpages.

Developing PLC participants into co-facilitators.

Not all PLCs were in a position to ask PLC participants to collaborate as co-facilitators; however, when it did occur, participants were more likely to feel ownership over the learning process in the PLC, allowing them to better identify and solve collective problems.

Diligently meeting the learning and professional needs of participating staff.

Year after year the studied PLCs modified their approach in response to feedback from participating staff. Facilitators made mid-course adjustments to tailor the training supports for each cohort of participating staff.

Providing staff with a specific curriculum to implement.

The Expanded Learning PLCs for front line staff seek to improve access to and quality of content-focused activities. The evaluations showed that participating staff appreciated access to curricular resources that helped them meet this goal. EL staff reported using the new activities in their programs. Even so, some

Practical Advice for Developing a PLC

Readers may also consult a companion set of practice guides, intended as easy-to-use references for Expanded Learning staff and trainers interested in creating PLCs. The three guides are:

Why, and When, to Use a Professional Learning Community:

Explains the evidence-based reasons that a district, organization, or Expanded Learning program should consider using a PLC.

Making the Most of Your Professional Learning Community:

Includes tips from research and practice on how best to organize, coordinate, and facilitate a PLC.

How to Know if your Professional Learning Community is Effective:

Provides guidance on how to evaluate a PLC's effect on organizational and staff practice and youth experiences.

staff faced implementation challenges like breaking down complex concepts and modifying activities to fit into an allotted time. The structured PLC sessions are ideal times to discuss these challenges with colleagues.

 Notably, this last best practice was absent from the literature on school day PLC models, yet appeared in each review of the 12 evaluations of the Expanded Learning PLCs for front line staff. It is likely that school day teachers do not need specific curricular resources since they receive formal training on developing and using curriculum, which may account for why it is not found in the literature.

INTRODUCTION

Expanded Learning (EL)² programs play an important role in American life. They keep children and youth safe and engaged in the out-of-school hours, reduce parents' childcare-related stress, and can help to address opportunity gaps that affect children from under-resourced communities.³

Children and youth are most likely to benefit when their Expanded Learning program is of high quality.⁴ Strong staff are a critical component of program quality.⁵

The EL field is characterized by significant staff turnover rates (26% for the 2010-11 school year⁶) and limited professional development budgets, which negatively affect staff development and program quality.⁷ Professional development in the EL field often takes the form of 60-minute lecture-based workshops, which are unlikely to improve staff members' practice with young people.⁸ To address this challenge, trainers and technical assistance providers in the EL field are using more interactive professional development models that incorporate practice-based supports: Professional Learning Communities are one such model.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), also called Communities of Practice (COPs), are collaborative cohorts of professionals with a shared interest in improving their practice in order to better serve youth.⁹ They meet regularly to reflect, to review data, and to share and develop strategies to improve their professional practice. The PLC model gained attention in the early 2000s as an effective means of promoting high quality collaboration among school day teachers. Steadily growing in popularity, the PLC training model has since spread to other fields, including to Expanded Learning.

In the last five years, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation supported multiple Professional Learning Community initiatives for EL staff: the Oakland Wellness PLC, Oakland Science PLC, Oakland Math PLC, Oakland Character Development and The Power of Discovery:

STEM². These investments mark a greater interest in the potential of PLCs to support youth workers¹⁰ to develop stronger content knowledge and improve their practice. This white paper uses 12 evaluations of the PLC initiatives to:

- Describe the PLC model used in the EL field in California;
- Demonstrate the benefits to participating youth workers, EL programs, and youth;
- Understand the organizational supports that create strong PLCs; and
- Share lessons learned for youth-serving organizations interested in using PLCs.

In addition to the evaluations, this white paper is informed by a review of the literature and by interviews with key PLC informants. The research shaped our understanding of what is known about PLCs in the field, and interviews with PLC facilitators and participating staff provided the voices of those involved in the complex work of developing successful PLCs.

This white paper highlights the innovative ways in which PLCs can be used for professional development in the EL field. It is intended to be a conversation starter as well as a resource guide. First, we cover foundational and current research on PLCs in order to take a normative look at the PLC model, its strengths, and its challenges. Next, we give an overview of the framework through which the PLC evaluation studies are examined, followed by highlights from these evaluations. Finally we conclude with a summary of the findings about PLCs in the EL community so far, and propose additional avenues for research.

Three companion guides offer practical advice for planning, implementing and evaluating Professional Learning Communities for Expanded Learning programs.

2 See 1

3 Halpern, 2002; Lauer et al., 2006.

4 Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Smith, Devaney, Akiva, & Sugar, 2009.

5 Smith et al., 2009.

6 Employment Development Department, 2012.

7 Raley, Grossman, & Walker, 2005.

8 Fusco, 2012.

9 Lieberman & Miller, 2006; Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004.

10 In this paper youth workers are defined as practitioners who work directly with or on behalf of young people. "EL staff" and "youth worker" are used interchangeably.

THE POTENTIAL OF PLCs FOR EXPANDED LEARNING

Research on PLCs Offers Insights into Why They Work, and How

Much of what we know about PLCs comes from the substantial research on their effectiveness for school day teachers. The EL field can use this rich body of research to better understand the opportunities and challenges of adopting PLCs as a professional development strategy.

PLCs benefit participating staff, youth, and schools.¹¹ Teachers who participate in PLCs have demonstrated greater confidence and greater enthusiasm for collaborative work, and have also made specific changes in practice such as using technology in the classroom.¹² Teachers in content-specific PLCs make strides in these subject areas. For example, teachers in a STEM PLC understood math and science better after their participation, and were better equipped to use strategies to engage students' reasoning, understanding, and problem solving.¹³

PLCs have a clear structure that incorporates the collaborative and youth centered ethos of the EL field.

Schools with high-functioning PLCs improve student academic outcomes. Students of teachers in the STEM PLC mentioned above showed improved math assessment scores.¹⁴ Other student impacts can include improved test scores overall, greater reading fluency, and better attendance.¹⁵ Cordingley and colleagues note that students also improve their non-cognitive factors, including enhanced motivation, greater confidence, and increasingly active participation in class.¹⁶

There is some research to indicate that PLC participation can have a positive effect on an entire



school. One research team noted that changes in staff practice as the result of a PLC improved school culture in four ways: increased collaboration, a greater focus on student learning, teacher authority, and continuous learning.¹⁷ Gallimore and colleagues find that opportunities for teachers to learn collaboratively led teachers to “discover causal connections between

their teaching and student learning” and that teachers’ ability to make these connections puts them “on a path of continuing teaching improvement.”

Continuous and collaborative problem solving, combined with peer support, helps teachers make this shift, and this shift contributes to improved student outcomes over time.

The following section synthesizes the prevailing literature that describes the components of a PLC and presents best practices used in the Expanded Learning Field.

11 Thompson et al., 2004; Vescio et al., 2008.

12 Cordingley et al., 2003.

13 Fulton & Britton, 2011.

14 Ibid.

15 Cordingley et al., 2003.

16 Ibid.

17 Vescio et al., 2008.



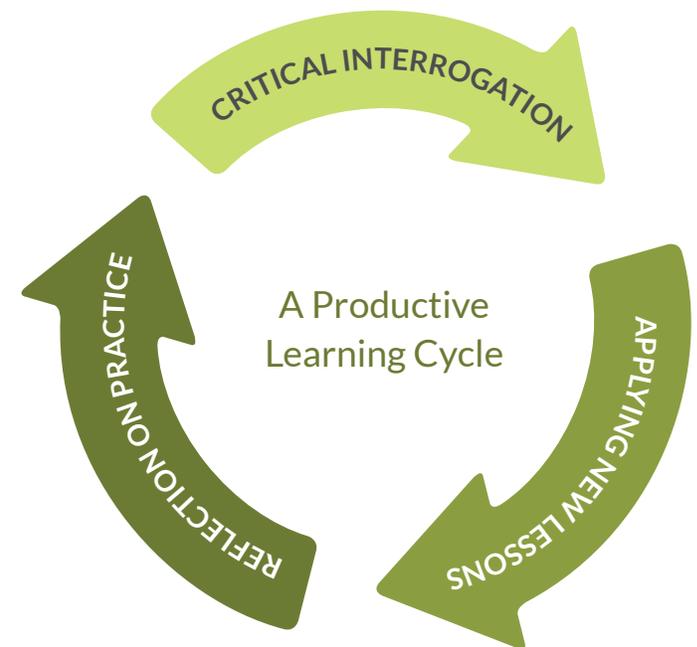
PLCs are collaborative groups of professionals who reflect on, and improve, their practice.

What Makes a PLC a PLC?

There are just as many definitions of PLCs, their essential structures, and their key components as there are research studies about PLCs and their role in school day teachers' professional development. Indeed, as PLC expert Richard DuFour notes, Professional Learning Community is a term "used to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education."¹⁸ However, there are some critical crosscutting components that these definitions share.

PLCs foster professional collaboration.

Participants should be "sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way."¹⁹ Research also underscores the collaborative nature of these groups, and goes a step further, introducing the idea of accountability: some researchers highlight that a PLC is a group that works toward a shared goal, and that can internally assess



progress, course correct, and hold itself accountable to reaching that goal.²⁰ Davis-Manigualte's research underscores this; her study of a youth development network found that collective reflection and working in committees helped participants develop critical insights that were key to their learning.²¹ As places of collaboration, PLCs offer educators risk-taking opportunities and time to practice new skills.²²

PLCs are practice-focused.

The learning happens in a PLC when educators engage in a cycle of critical interrogation of their practice, applying new lessons, and reflecting on how their practice is developing.²³ This learning cycle is what sets PLCs apart from traditional training engagements, in which a specialist delivers content to a largely passive audience of trainees in a lecture or workshop. The emphasis on collaboration in PLCs along with an explicit goal of supporting participants' learning sets the stage for a productive learning cycle.²⁴

In essence, successful PLCs are relevant to the day-to-day needs of staff, have a skilled facilitator, share their lessons learned with others, and are supported by program leadership.

18 DuFour, 2004, p. 6.

19 Stoll et al., 2006, p.223.

20 McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010.

21 Davis-Manigualte, 2012; McKenzie, 2014.

22 McKenzie, 2014.

23 Stoll et al., 2006.

24 Davis-Manigualte, 2012; Stoll et al. 2006.



PLCs support connections between professional practice and youth experiences.

Lieberman and Miller contend that PLCs provide a space to connect professional practice and student learning.²⁵ For example, The Annenberg Institute for School Reform advocates for PLC work that is informed by data, driven by standards, and “focused on instruction, equity, and results.”²⁶ For the Annenberg Institute, PLC activities include engaging in collaborative problem-solving, building knowledge by discussing current trends and practices, and providing feedback and analyzing data.

PLCs are structured around the professional and learning needs of participants.

McKenzie emphasizes that PLCs must be organized around participants’ needs and interests, arguing that PLCs are professional learning groups that

form organically around members’ needs, allow participants to self-select their roles, and offer opportunities to enrich and deepen understanding.²⁷ Further, Herman, supported by Schön’s reflection-in-action model, shows that youth workers benefit when reflective inquiry is embedded into their professional development experiences.²⁸ PLCs’ use of practice-focused reflection and group processing works to address that need.²⁹

In addition to addressing participants’ professional needs, PLCs honor the needs and characteristics of adult learners. Knowles notes that as adults mature, they become more self-directed learners, apply their learning to tasks associated with their social roles, and seek to immediately apply new knowledge — as a result, adults are oriented toward performance-centered learning.³⁰

Adult-focused training engagements must take into account this learning cycle of gathering knowledge, applying knowledge to practice, and using knowledge and experience to refine practice. The PLC model, with its iterative focus on collaboration, critical interrogation, and reflection, is a natural fit for how adults learn.

PLC Best Practices for the Expanded Learning Field

Traditional, top-down approaches to training youth workers have not been effective.³¹ Successful professional development for youth workers is flexible, context-responsive, and non-hierarchical.³² Therefore, PLCs for youth workers should embody these characteristics.

In essence, successful PLCs are relevant to the day-to-day needs of staff, have a skilled facilitator, share their lessons learned with others, and are supported by program leadership.³³

For emerging PLCs serving EL staff, Kasad et al. offer recommendations based on their prior experience designing and implementing learning communities.³⁴ They recommend that organizations designing PLCs:

- Build relationships with strong community partners, including school districts;

25 Lieberman and Miller, 2011.

26 Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004, p.2.

27 McKenzie, 2014.

28 Schön, 1983; Herman, 2012.

29 Gallimore, 2009.

30 Knowles, 1988.

31 Fusco, 2012.

32 Ibid.

33 Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2012; Stoll et al., 2006.

34 Kasad et al., 2014

- Focus trainings on both facilitation skills and content-specific processes;
- Give participants ample opportunity to share best practices from their programs; and
- Make effective use of electronic and internet-based resources.

There's More to Learn

The literature on PLCs used with school day teachers helps build a case for using PLCs in EL programs. PLCs have improved practices for educators as well as entire schools. PLCs have a clear structure that incorporates the collaborative and youth centered ethos of the EL field. In addition, PLCs prioritize educators' learning and professional needs.

Understanding of PLCs in Expanded Learning is still emerging.

The literature on PLCs in the EL field is very limited and much of what we know about the potential of PLCs comes from research on school day teachers. One prominent example of a site-based PLC in the

EL field is the data-driven program quality teams developed by programs engaged in the Program Quality Intervention Cycle. These site-based teams assess program quality with research-based tools, and then use the data to develop and execute a program improvement plan. EL staff teams (Site Coordinators and front line staff)³⁵ that engage in this process see improvements in staff members' instructional practices, slightly longer tenure for youth workers, and higher quality programming.³⁶ These findings are encouraging examples of the potential of PLCs in the EL field.

This white paper capitalizes on 12 recent evaluations of PLCs for EL staff and interviews with PLC facilitators and participants to address the knowledge gap that exists about PLCs in the EL context. Though more research is needed to fully explore the role of PLCs in EL, these evaluations offer a description of a PLC structure that can work for EL providers and illustrate the benefits and challenges of using a PLC.



³⁵ In this paper Site Coordinators are professionals who manage the day-to-day operations of an EL program. Front line staff work directly with youth. Both Site Coordinators and front line staff are considered youth workers.

³⁶ Smith et al., 2012.

USING THE PLC MODEL IN THE EXPANDED LEARNING FIELD



Since 2010, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation has supported PLCs for EL programs as an intensive approach to professional development for front line staff. These include several PLCs in Oakland, California – Wellness, Science, Math and Character Development Learning Communities – along with a statewide Community of Practice associated with the Power of Discovery: STEM² initiative. Each of the PLCs is described in more detail below.

Wellness Learning Community

Operating in Oakland since the 2010-11 program year and supported by the Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) After School Programs Office, the Wellness PLC provides participating front line staff with wellness-related curricula, five or six in-person workshops, and on-site coaching. In 2010-11 and 2011-12, Communities, Adolescents, Nutrition, and Fitness (CANFIT) provided training and coaching services. The Learning Community began with broad

foci on nutrition, gardening, and physical activity, with special gardening and physical activity breakout sessions. The 2011-12 year narrowed its focus to physical activity. Beginning in 2012-13, specialists from the OUSD Office of School Wellness started supporting three learning “strands” focusing on cooking/nutrition, gardening, and physical activity.

STEM-Themed Learning Communities

In this paper, evaluations of all STEM-themed PLCs are discussed together. Below, the three PLCs that focus on STEM topics are described.

Oakland Science Learning Community

The Science Learning Community is a partnership between OUSD's After School Programs Office and Techbridge, a specialist in informal science. Since the 2010-11 school year, the Science Learning Community offers hands-on science and engineering curricula, six to eight in-person workshops, and on-site coaching to front line staff in Oakland. Workshops emphasize inquiry-based practices and offer staff an opportunity for lesson previews from the STEM LC curriculum.

Oakland Math Learning Community

Be the Change Consulting and OUSD partner to offer the Math Learning Community. The goals of the Math PLC are to build the capacity of afterschool direct-service providers to provide high-quality informal math education opportunities to youth. Members receive in-depth professional development, including monthly training meetings, coaching, and curriculum resources, with the goal that they use what they learn to implement math activities in their programs. Trainers facilitate six monthly training meetings during the school year.

The Power of Discovery STEM² Communities of Practice

Launched in 2012, the Power of Discovery initiative seeks to improve the quality of informal science education in school-based after school programs across California by providing resources, curricular implementation support, and ongoing training and on-site coaching. EL programs are served by one of five Regional Innovation Support Providers (RISPs), who lead Communities of Practice for participating program staff. The Communities of Practice are the primary vehicle for providing targeted technical assistance to participants based on their particular needs, and offer opportunities for knowledge sharing and situated learning. In 2013, over 540 EL programs spread across five RISP networks participated in Power of Discovery: STEM² Communities of Practice.



Character Development Learning Communities

Be the Change Consulting and OUSD also partner to offer the Character Development Learning Community. Started in Oakland in 2011-12, the Character Development PLC supports community cohesion and shared social and moral values among staff and youth in EL programs using the Building Intentional Communities (BIC) curriculum. This curriculum includes activities for staff members, whole-program strategies to improve program culture, and leadership enrichment classes for youth. Programs are placed into one of two tracks in the PLC, depending on their organizational readiness.

The PLC initiatives are situated in California's EL context, which is committed to providing high quality programs for children and youth. At the state level, the California Department of Education's After School Division provides both guidance and practical tools that assist with quality improvement. The California Department of Education adopted quality standards for Expanded Learning in 2014 and programs are encouraged to use publically available self-assessments to monitor program quality.³⁷

At the city level, Oakland uses multiple approaches to better understand and improve the quality of its EL programs including using the Program Quality Assessment tools, developed by the Weikart Center

for Youth Program Quality. Oakland now requires that all publicly funded EL programs participate in a year-round quality improvement cycle. To support EL programs, Oakland Unified School District creates an annual professional development plan that includes citywide supports such as monthly Site Coordinator meetings and on-site coaching. PLCs are the most intensive professional development offered by the school district for EL program staff.

Features of the Expanded Learning PLC Models

A PLC Model that Focuses on Front Line Staff

The PLC initiatives described above and interviews with PLC trainers reveal two distinct PLC models used in the EL field, both of which share some similarities with the PLC model used to develop school teachers.³⁸

The PLCs highlighted in this paper are largely those designed for front line staff that are responsible for delivering academic and enrichment activities with various content foci such as, nutrition or science, to school-age youth for roughly three hours after the school day ends.³⁹ The Expanded Learning PLC model that targets front line staff is designed to improve the access and quality of content-focused⁴⁰ activities. A typical Expanded Learning PLC for front line staff will:

³⁷ To see a copy of the California Self Assessment Tool, please visit: <http://tinyurl.com/ko48t8h>

A version for EL programs serving high school-aged youth can be viewed here: <http://tinyurl.com/lrgz8f5>

³⁸ Specific components of the PLC models

are included in Table 3 (See Appendix) and in the Wellness, STEM and Character Development PLC Evaluation Highlights.

³⁹ Many of the Learning Communities featured in this paper were coordinated by Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) After School Programs Office.

District staff and other stakeholders refer to the PLCs for front line staff as a "learning community," as opposed to a professional learning community. For the sake of consistency throughout this paper, we will use the term "PLC" when referring to Oakland's after school learning communities.

⁴⁰ Content-focused activities expose youth to various topics and the primary goal of these activities is for youth to learn more about the specific content area.



- Have 15-20 participants;
- Last a full academic year (approximately 9 months);
- Include five to eight structured training sessions;
- Provide curricular resources;
- Offer one or two individual coaching sessions; and
- Contract with a PLC facilitator to coordinate, plan, and implement PLC sessions

The five to eight structured trainings seek to improve EL activities and include direct instruction based on the content-area focus of the PLC. The PLC facilitator leading the trainings may also be an expert in the content focus of the PLC. Participating staff have time to practice newly acquired facilitation techniques, engage in peer networking and share knowledge and resources with one another. While one-on-one coaching sessions are common, the specific number of sessions depends on the budget for the PLC.

The Expanded Learning PLC model for front line staff described in the PLC evaluations is similar to the school day model in that it brings professionals together to engage in ongoing reflection on their performance and to implement new features into their practice. In addition, the Expanded Learning PLC model for front line staff uses PLC best practices including:

Encouraging collaboration among participants.

The PLCs gave EL staff time for peer-to-peer sharing and collective problem solving. The PLCs also found ways to keep staff engaged outside of the structured meetings. Some of the favored ways to continue practice-based conversations were listservs and resource webpages.

Developing PLC participants into co-facilitators.

Not all PLCs were in a position to ask PLC participants to collaborate as co-facilitators; however, when it did occur, participants were more likely to feel ownership over the learning process in the PLC, allowing them to better identify and solve collective problems.

Diligently meeting the learning and professional needs of participating staff.

Year after year the studied PLCs modified their approach in response to feedback from participating staff. Facilitators made mid-course adjustments to tailor the training supports for each cohort of participating youth workers.

Providing staff with a specific curriculum to implement.

A goal of the Expanded Learning PLC for front line staff is to improve access to and quality of content-focused activities. The evaluations showed that participating staff appreciated access to curricular resources that helped them meet this goal. EL staff reported using the new activities in their programs. Even so, some staff faced implementation challenges like breaking down complex concepts and modifying activities to fit into an allotted time. The structured PLC sessions are ideal times to discuss these challenges with colleagues.

Notably, this best practice was absent from the literature on school day PLC models yet appeared in each review of the 12 evaluations of the Expanded Learning PLCs for front line staff. It is likely that school day teachers do not need specific curricular resources since they receive formal training on developing and using curriculum, which may account for why it is not found in the literature.

Expanded Learning PLC models can differ from the school day model in focus, structure, and reach or participation across or within organizations. As shown in Table 1 the Expanded Learning PLC model that targets front line staff is designed to improve the access and quality of content-focused activities. These PLCs incorporate more direct instruction than the school day model; however, this modification addresses the varied levels of professional preparation among EL staff members, as few have formal training in either youth work, instructional practices or in specific content areas (e.g., wellness or character development). Another notable difference is that where the school day PLC tends to reach one organization, PLCs for front line staff can reach multiple organizations.

A PLC Model that Focuses on Managers

PLC facilitators shared an alternate PLC model that is being used in the Expanded Learning field. This Expanded Learning PLC model targets mid-level and senior managers⁴¹ and supports these professionals to develop innovative approaches to organizational and/

or systemic improvements. This model also shares some similarities with the school day PLC model.

Much like the school day model, the Expanded Learning PLC for managers uses discussion-based meetings as a primary training strategy, but also incorporates supports for continued knowledge sharing between meetings. Unlike the school day model, Expanded Learning PLCs for managers are more likely to include managers from different organizations.

Some of the PLC best practices that trainers mentioned being used in the Expanded Learning PLC for managers include:

Soliciting an explicit commitment to engage in the PLC.

To get a commitment from managers, trainers suggest clearly stating what participants will learn in the PLC and communicating the time required to participate.

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 <p>Focus Desired PLC outcome(s)</p>	Continuous instructional improvement	Improve access to & quality of content-focused* activities	Innovative approaches to organizational & systemic change & improvement
 <p>Structure How PLC is organized</p>	Series of discussion based meetings	Training on specific curricula On-site coaching Training on how to facilitate group activities	Series of discussion based meetings Support for ongoing discussion between meetings (resource sharing, newsletters, topic briefs, etc.)
 <p>Reach Participation across or within organizations</p>	Focused – teachers from one school participate in the PLC	Broad – staff from multiple organizations participate in the PLC or Focused – multiple staff from one organization participate in the PLC	Broad – mid-level & senior managers from multiple organizations participate in the PLC

*Content-focused activities expose youth to various topics and the primary goal of these activities is for youth to learn more about the specific content area.

⁴¹ Site Coordinators are considered mid-level managers. Senior level managers are professionals who oversee multiple programs and/or coordinate the work of an entire agency.

Using a participatory approach to setting goals.

According to trainers, using a participatory approach to setting goals promotes buy-in and gives managers a sense of ownership over their learning.

Sharing knowledge with the field.

An expert trainer asserts that Expanded Learning PLCs for managers focus more on benefits to the EL field than other PLC models. As a result of participating in the PLC, managers should have a resource to share with the broader EL community that summarizes valuable guidance on topics of interest.

Selecting an Expanded Learning PLC Model

Organizations should select the PLC model that is best suited to their professional development goals and desired outcomes. The learning focus, training strategies and reach of a PLC model can

be modified to meet the needs of participants. In fact, there is evidence that some PLC facilitators are already blending the models. For example, one Expanded Learning PLC for front line staff included Site Coordinators in select trainings so that these managers could better support their staff.⁴² The PLC facilitators, who served as key informants, believe that program-wide change is more likely to occur if Site Coordinators participate in the PLC.

Thus far, the Expanded Learning PLC for front line staff is the most prominent model in the Expanded Learning field in California. This model addresses the demand for more content-focused activities and the ongoing struggle to strengthen the practices of front line staff.



⁴² Public Profit LLC., 2014

THE BENEFITS OF USING PLCS IN THE EXPANDED LEARNING FIELD



An Evaluation Framework

To date, there are 12 evaluation reports of the PLC initiatives supported by the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation. The PLC evaluations use a variety of methods, including surveys, observations, interviews, and participatory variations of traditional focus groups.⁴³ Table 3 (see Appendix) provides details on each of the 12 evaluations, including PLC model and types of data used. The present section contains an overview of the key findings from the Wellness, STEM, and Character Development PLC evaluations.

⁴³ An example of a participatory variation is having staff write several responses down to a question. These responses are then posted and group members are asked to group responses by themes.

⁴⁴ Kreider & Bouffard, 2005/2006.

⁴⁵ Kirkpatrick Partners, 2013.

The PLC evaluation findings are presented using research and evaluation expert Thomas Guskey's five-step framework for evaluating professional development initiatives.⁴⁴ Guskey's framework, shown in Figure 1, provides a lens through which to discuss the strength of PLC evaluation findings and to identify emerging best practices.

Guskey's model draws on the Kirkpatrick training evaluation framework and posits that effective trainings are characterized by five features:

1. Staff members react positively to the training. They perceive the trainer to be knowledgeable and trustworthy, and the training to be applicable to their work.
2. Staff members learn something that they did not otherwise know; this new knowledge reflects best practice in the field.
3. The organizations in which participants work support changes in staff members' behaviors, and can make adjustments to program structures to accommodate them.
4. Staff change their professional behaviors, and their new habits reflect the best practices shared in the training.
5. Once the new professional practices are in place, youths' experiences and subsequent outcomes change for the better.⁴⁵

We provide an overview of the PLC evaluation findings using Guskey's framework. A deeper dive into each of the content area (Wellness, STEM, and Character Development) describes the lessons learned and best practices garnered from that particular PLC.

Figure 1. Five Step Model for Evaluating Training for Educators



Expanded Learning Time PLC Evaluation Highlights

The PLC evaluations discussed in this paper are very diverse. As noted previously, the evaluations use a variety of methods to assess the PLCs and some methods changed across program years (see Table 3, Appendix). In addition, each PLC initiative had its own set of priorities and goals. In this review, it became apparent that some evaluations addressed all five steps of Guskey's model thoroughly, while others focused on one or more steps only. The major findings across evaluations were similar; as such we present the overarching findings across all the PLC initiatives below.

► 1 Participant Response

Overall, PLC participants were satisfied with the PLC sessions they attended. In both the Wellness and STEM PLCs, survey results indicated that 90% or more of participants were satisfied with their training.⁴⁶

► 2 Participant Learning

As a result of these high-quality professional development engagements, participating staff stated that they gained general knowledge and strengthened their content knowledge. A noteworthy proportion of Wellness PLC participants reported being knowledgeable about various topics in their content area and/or learning something new from the PLC, particularly during the last two years of implementation.

Likewise, STEM PLC participants reported deepening their STEM content knowledge. For instance, in the 2012-13 Oakland Science PLC evaluation all youth workers reported learning the steps to teach STEM concepts effectively, and in 2011-12 all staff reported gaining a greater understanding of questioning strategies that can be used to enhance youths' learning. In the 2013-14 Math PLC all participants reported understanding math concepts well enough to lead math activities effectively.

In an interview, a Site Coordinator who participated in the Character Development PLC noted "The BIC [PLC equipped] staff with tools on how to do positive reinforcement and [use] asset-based language." He felt that the time and resources dedicated to the PLC were well worth the effort. He comments, "I saw it as something that would benefit the work I was doing." A Site Coordinator supervising a Wellness PLC participant shared how beneficial it was to have a focus on gardening for the staff member:

"Since all the other instructors at my site [were] teaching different subjects and gardening is so unique... going to a place that he can actually develop with other people teaching the same subject matter was very important." —Site Coordinator, Gardening strand, Wellness PLC

The findings about knowledge gains represent EL staff members' perceived learning. Actual use of new knowledge and practice is discussed in *Participant Behavior*.

⁴⁶ Evaluations of the Character Development PLCs and The Power of Discovery: STEM2 initiatives have not focused on participants' responses or their learning.



▶ 3 Organizational Support and Change

The evaluations provide some evidence that participating in a PLC can improve an entire program. The Power of Discovery: STEM² and Character PLCs, in particular, demonstrate organizational changes. Evaluations of the Power of Discovery: STEM² PLC⁴⁷ show that participating programs increased frequency of math- and science- related events for families, such as family math nights and science fairs. Survey results indicated a 16% increase in the number of staff who reported planning STEM-related events with parents.

In an interview a Site Coordinator who was involved in the Character Development PLC reported seeing changes in the culture of the EL program stating, “Because I [as a Site Coordinator] am part of [the learning community] as well, we have the Coordinator Huddles and Community Builders...[This] allowed us to really embed these practices more deeply in most classrooms.”

Organizational change was more prevalent when Site Coordinators were involved in the PLC. This is apparent from the evaluations of the Character Development PLCs, which was the only PLC to include Site Coordinators in specific PLC activities. A participating Site Coordinator stated, “We were able to start consciously reframing the way that we taught students and I think that that also [offered] a benefit.

⁴⁷ Other STEM PLC evaluations did not address organizational supports.

It grounds the work that we are doing in a context, and as a Coordinator [I was] then able to support staff, hold [them] accountable to a framework.” In interviews, PLC facilitators identified having PLC participants share information with their colleagues as an effective strategy to drive program wide change. This may be an alternative if Site Coordinators are unable to participate in the PLC. According to PLC facilitators, sharing both role- and content-specific information learned in the PLC with other line staff promoted the spread of knowledge throughout a program and could forestall the loss of knowledge that can happen through staff turnover.

The 12 evaluations offered minimal evidence about how access to organizational supports helped staff implement new practices. Although participating staff and their supervisors were often enthusiastic about improving their practice, the realities of day-to-day life in EL programs seemed to pose a challenge to providing ongoing support. Recommendations made by the evaluation teams point to organizational supports that may be helpful to participants. The recommendations consistently suggest providing access to materials and supplies and offering staff paid time to attend PLC sessions and designated, paid time to plan how to use new practices. Site Coordinators are potential allies for participating staff as they may have the capacity to coordinate and/or advocate for these organizational supports. A comparison between two Math PLC participants illustrates the potential for Site Coordinators to impact the availability of these resources. The Math PLC participant whose Site Coordinator was uninvolved had limited access to necessary materials and pointed out how program features such as large group sizes and staff turnover made it difficult to implement math activities. In contrast, the PLC participant with an involved Site Coordinator had access to materials and received valuable feedback from his supervisor on his math activity lesson plans.

▶ 4 Participant Behavior

The PLC evaluations indicate that participating front line staff increased their self-reported confidence and feelings of professional efficacy in facilitating structured activities aligned with the PLC. Many participating EL staff reported using and appreciating the curricular resources available to them in their PLC, and stated that they developed strategies for



engaging youth in the specific content area. For example, youth surveys from programs participating in the Character Development PLC indicate that staff provided strong opportunities for youth leadership and engagement. Some of the facilitation techniques that staff improved, such as providing leadership opportunities and encouraging youth to try new skills, represent high-quality youth development practice⁴⁸.

This underscores how important it is for EL staff to have a strong foundation in positive youth development practice in order to implement the more sophisticated techniques taught in content-focused PLCs. In some cases, participating staff noted that being introduced to high quality practice in their PLCs affected the other activities they led. For instance, practitioners in Oakland used a general STEM activity structure (introduction, planning, hands-on activity, and reflection) to guide the facilitation of other enrichment activities.

▶ 5 Youth Outcomes

PLCs attempt to change youth experiences by bolstering staff members' practices. The PLC evaluations show that youth are receiving content in line with the focus of the PLCs. For example, in the Wellness PLC, site-level reports indicate that youth learned about wellness for roughly 4 hours a week during out-of-school time hours.

⁴⁸ Tamar-Mattis, Piha, & Adams, 2001.

There was also some evidence to suggest that youth both enjoyed and learned from these content-rich hours. In surveys, nearly three-quarters of the young people who participated in science activities led by PLC participants said that their after school program made science more interesting, made them excited about science, and made science seem more fun. Youth participating in programs supported by Character Development PLCs reported that they learned how to communicate their feelings and practiced persisting at difficult tasks.

The 2013-14 Evaluation of The Power of Discovery: STEM² explores the direct link between practitioners' beliefs and practices and youth reported outcomes. The evaluation found that staff's beliefs about the importance of STEM were associated with gains in students' self-reported math efficacy. Similarly, a higher level of staff-reported rigor in STEM activities was associated with declines in student reports of misconduct and gains in students' self-reported work habits, math efficacy, science interest, and science career aspirations. Additionally, increases in staff discussions with parents and teachers about STEM were associated with an increase in students' science and math efficacy.

Strength of Evaluations

The 12 evaluations of Expanded Learning PLCs included here have limitations. Each of the evaluations has small sample sizes. PLCs are small by design; they accept only a limited number of participants (15-20 practitioners per PLC) to encourage an intimate professional development experience. This makes sample size a challenge, as events that decrease the number of participants and which are common to EL programs — staff dropping out of the PLC, inconsistent participation even if they remain in the PLC, and challenges to data collection such as incomplete data — can compromise the strength of the evaluation findings. In some evaluations, similar concepts were measured differently over time. For example, youths' exposure to wellness activities was measured differently across the four years of Wellness PLC evaluations. The 12 evaluations consistently assess staff practices using surveys but have limited observational data to support these self-reported changes.

Overall the 12 evaluations offered minimal evidence to address the extent to which the provided organizational supports helped staff use what they learned. As a supplement to findings, recommendations made by the evaluators are used to indicate the organizational supports that might be helpful to PLC participants.

Despite the limitations, these evaluations have several strengths that make them important starting points for learning more about PLCs in the EL field. They provide a multi-year view of PLCs, allowing lessons

learned and best practices to emerge over time. The evaluations also use more than one method of data collection or analysis — observations, surveys, and interviews — and as such give a holistic picture of PLC models and staff and youth outcomes. In addition to the overarching findings, each PLC offers content-specific best practices and lessons learned. The next section takes a closer look at each content area in turn.



Wellness PLC Evaluation Highlights

The Wellness PLC was born out of a need to support Oakland's publicly funded Expanded Learning programs in providing youth with structured physical recreation and sports activities as part of a District priority to teach young people about health. The PLC began in 2010 with a focus on gardening and physical activity, and an emphasis on building programs' capacity to advocate for stronger wellness practices in their schools. Beginning in 2012-13, the Wellness PLC expanded to include cooking and nutrition. Wellness PLC participants choose to participate in one of three different content-area strands, each of which meets 5-6 times annually and includes site coaching as funding allows.

“Since all the other instructors at my site [were] teaching different subjects and gardening is so unique... going to a place that he can actually develop with other people teaching the same subject matter was very important.”

—Site Coordinator, Gardening strand, Wellness PLC

The reach of the Wellness PLC expanded over the four years of its implementation, doubling the number of participating programs since its formation in 2010. The continued engagement of front line staff signals

Wellness PLC Model

2010-11 and 2011-12

- 5-6 monthly meetings

2012-13

- 5-6 monthly meetings
- Introduction of strands: Nutrition, Gardening, and Physical Activity

2013-14

- 5-6 monthly meetings
- Introduction of on-site observations and coaching from Strand Leads

the relevance and interest in wellness amongst Oakland after school programs.

To date, there are four evaluations of the Wellness PLC, one for each year of implementation. The evaluations used participant surveys, individual and group interviews, and/or observations with youth workers to describe the effect

of the Wellness PLC. The Wellness PLC focused on a variety of different practices, including goal setting, getting youth excited about wellness activities, and structuring activities effectively. Participating EL



staff increased their self-reported confidence and feelings of professional efficacy for practices related to facilitating structured wellness activities. Five best practices emerged from the Wellness PLCs across the four years of evaluations (see text box).

Based on the evaluation evidence, the Wellness PLC provided high-quality training that taught youth workers content knowledge and improved their confidence in their facilitation skills. Youth had regular access to wellness activities in their out-of-school time hours. Missing from the evaluations, however, is evidence that youth workers received consistent organizational supports. The evaluations recommend that organizations compensate youth workers for attending PLC meetings to ensure consistent participation so that practitioners have the opportunity to fully develop their wellness skills. Other recommendations, including those about access to materials and supplies and paid time for planning, could encourage youth workers to practice what they learned.

There were three PLC components that youth workers asked for year after year:

1. A consistent place to access shared resources. The Wellness PLC used an online resource page that worked well
2. Easy-to-implement wellness activities.
3. To do this, PLC trainers may need to conduct a knowledge and skill assessment at the start of the PLC and adjust their strategy accordingly.

Best Practices for Wellness Activities

Encouraging all youth to participate

Youth workers make an intentional effort to ensure youth stay engaged. Having youth collaborate, incorporating games, and allowing youth to choose what types of activities they'd like to do.

Reward youth in health conscious ways

This can include limiting sweet treats and rewarding youth with activities such as bowling, ice-skating, or their favorite outside game.

Provide youth leadership opportunities

High quality youth development programs give youth opportunities to lead, take ownership and have responsibility. This practice is just as relevant and powerful in wellness activities.

Keep connections to the school day

Be aware of the local school's wellness activities and complement them with wellness activities in EL programs.

Embedding academic content

Practice is the name of the game here. Youth should be able to apply math, science, English and other content in the wellness activities.

“[The most obvious benefit to the youth] was how much fun they were having in the garden and how excited they were about growing things and discovering things in the garden...[it impacted] not just what they were eating that day but their knowledge and ability to make healthy choices.”

— Site Coordinator, Gardening strand, Wellness PLC

STEM-Themed PLC Evaluation Highlights

As STEM becomes an increasingly popular topic in education, the demand for STEM enrichment activities also rises. Over the course of four years (2010-2014), Oakland implemented a Science PLC for three years and the Math PLC for one year. During that same time, the statewide Power of Discovery JumpStarting STEM Pilot and the Power of Discovery: STEM² initiative worked with front line staff from across the state of California. Due to the similarity in the topics, the major findings from all of the STEM-themed evaluations are discussed in this section. The evaluations rely on surveys of front line staff and on observations of program activities to understand how the PLCs improved STEM-related practices.

EL staff in Oakland Science and Math PLCs reported changes in a variety of STEM-related practices, such as leading STEM activities regularly, encouraging youth to ask questions during activities, and supporting youths' understanding of STEM concepts. EL staff consistently reported or demonstrated an ability to engage youth in science and knowledge of how to structure STEM activities. In addition, participating PLC staff noted how being introduced to the structure of STEM activities, which includes an introduction, planning, a hands-on activity and reflection, improved other activities they led. Namely, EL staff used the STEM activity structure to guide the facilitation of other enrichment activities.

STEM PLC Models

2010-14 Oakland Science and Math PLCs

- 5-7 monthly meetings

Power of Discovery: JumpStarting STEM Pilot

- Needs and readiness assessment
- In person and virtual professional development
- Materials support
- Individual check-ins

Power of Discovery: STEM²

- Technical assistance
- One-on-one meetings
- Regional quarterly meetings

In The Power of Discovery: STEM² evaluation conducted in 2014, a program staff participant survey indicated that participants spent more time implementing STEM activities and interacting with school-day teachers and parents about STEM than before. Survey results about participants' STEM-related beliefs and their efficacy in implementing STEM showed statistically significant increases correlated to the amount of training they attended.



Overall, the Oakland Science and Math PLC evaluations indicate that the training increased engagement, interest, and self-efficacy in science for staff and youth alike. Preparing EL staff to teach STEM with the right tools appears to make science less intimidating for those staff, while making science activities more engaging for students. The evaluation of The Power of Discovery: STEM² PLC found that participants did not change their attitudes about STEM, but did dedicate more time to STEM instruction than before.

Some of the Oakland Science and Math PLC best practices, shown in the text box, shed new light on those identified in the review of the Wellness PLCs. STEM PLC participants, like their Wellness PLC counterparts, also desired a shared place to access resources. The resources that participants found most helpful were a packaged STEM curriculum and a consistent activity structure featuring an introduction, one or more hands-on activities, and time for reflection. Oakland Science and Math PLC participants also noted that activities that required inexpensive materials were ideal.

Observation and coaching were also critical to success of the PLC. In interviews, participants and trainers agreed that the more coaching visits participants received, the more they were able to improve their practice. Similarly, a trainer from The Power of Discovery: STEM² noted in an interview that participants view site visits as an especially helpful component of the PLC.

“I used to have a hard time putting my lessons together but now because of [the] Science Learning Community I can transform a regular lesson into a science lesson.”

— Oakland Science LC participant, 2010-11

STEM PLC Best Practices

Consistent communication between PLC meetings

Communications between meetings can help participants continue their conversations and stay current on PLC logistics such as meeting times, locations, and agenda topics. A PLC social networking or web page may be useful.

Share PLC results with stakeholders

Newsletters, presentations, and meetings are potential forums for sharing PLC results which may result in broader learning in the field and enhanced support from stakeholders.

Developing co-facilitators

Over time, distributing leadership locally to PLC participants generates a ‘by us-for us’ culture, helps participants feel ownership over the process, allows them to better identify and solve collective problems, and can even mitigate turnover.

Coaching Visits

Coaches observe staff while they lead activities and can offer valuable feedback to staff.

Peer-to-peer sharing and problem solving

Talk with peers about best practices and common challenges and how to overcome them. These conversations can help staff expand their instructional “toolbox.”

Opportunities to observe activities

Seeing experienced trainers lead STEM activities can help EL staff make appropriate modifications to their own practice.

Frequent PLC participant presentations

Early and frequent opportunities for EL staff to receive feedback will give participants as much time as possible to improve practice, and staff will be better positioned to recognize their growth.

Character Development PLC Evaluation Highlights

Be the Change Consulting implemented the Character Development PLC in collaboration with the Oakland Unified School District. This PLC used The Building Intentional Communities (BIC) curriculum which focuses on social and moral values, shared community values and beliefs, social justice, behavioral self-management, social and emotional development, and critical thinking. The Character Development PLC used two training modes to accomplish these goals.

Enrichment track

Enrichment sites received the packaged BIC curriculum and materials, including program-wide “Blasters” to build community among youth. They also participated in monthly trainings to implement the “Leaders of Today” weekly enrichment class.

Intensive track

Intensive sites received the same curricular resources as Enrichment track programs along with monthly supervisor meetings called “Coordinator Huddles” for cross-site collaboration, six one-on-one coaching sessions for participating staff, monthly coaching for staff members leading “Leaders of Today,” and quarterly sessions for all staff focused on improving program culture called “Climate Builder” trainings.

Be the Change and the District adopted the Enrichment and Intensive tracks training model in the second year of implementation, because the evaluation findings from the first year of implementation (2011-12) demonstrated that the intensive track was more effective.

Expanded Learning programs were placed into one of the training tracks based on their readiness to engage with the BIC curriculum. Factors considered included staff members’ availability for in-person training and coaching and the strength of foundational youth development principles in the program as a whole. Be the Change and the District used the Program Pathway (Figure 2) to identify sites’ readiness and to communicate the changes that participating sites could anticipate over multiple years of PLC involvement.

Character Development PLC Model

2011-12 Building Intentional Communities

- Three tiers:
 - » 2-day trainings
 - » 4-part trainings
 - » Yearlong intensive training & coaching

2011-12 Building Intentional Communities

- Two modes:
 - » Enrichment mode receives curriculum, materials, technical assistance
 - » Intensive mode receives trainings and coaching sessions, and a 4-part program climate training series

Character Education Best Practices

Promote positive program culture

Youth know core values of the program and hold one another accountable to these values. The program uses a reward system to promote positive behavior.

Provide youth leadership opportunities

Youth are involved in helping establish program rules and have opportunities to make plans and execute them. Staff teach youth leadership skills.

Involve youth in conflict management

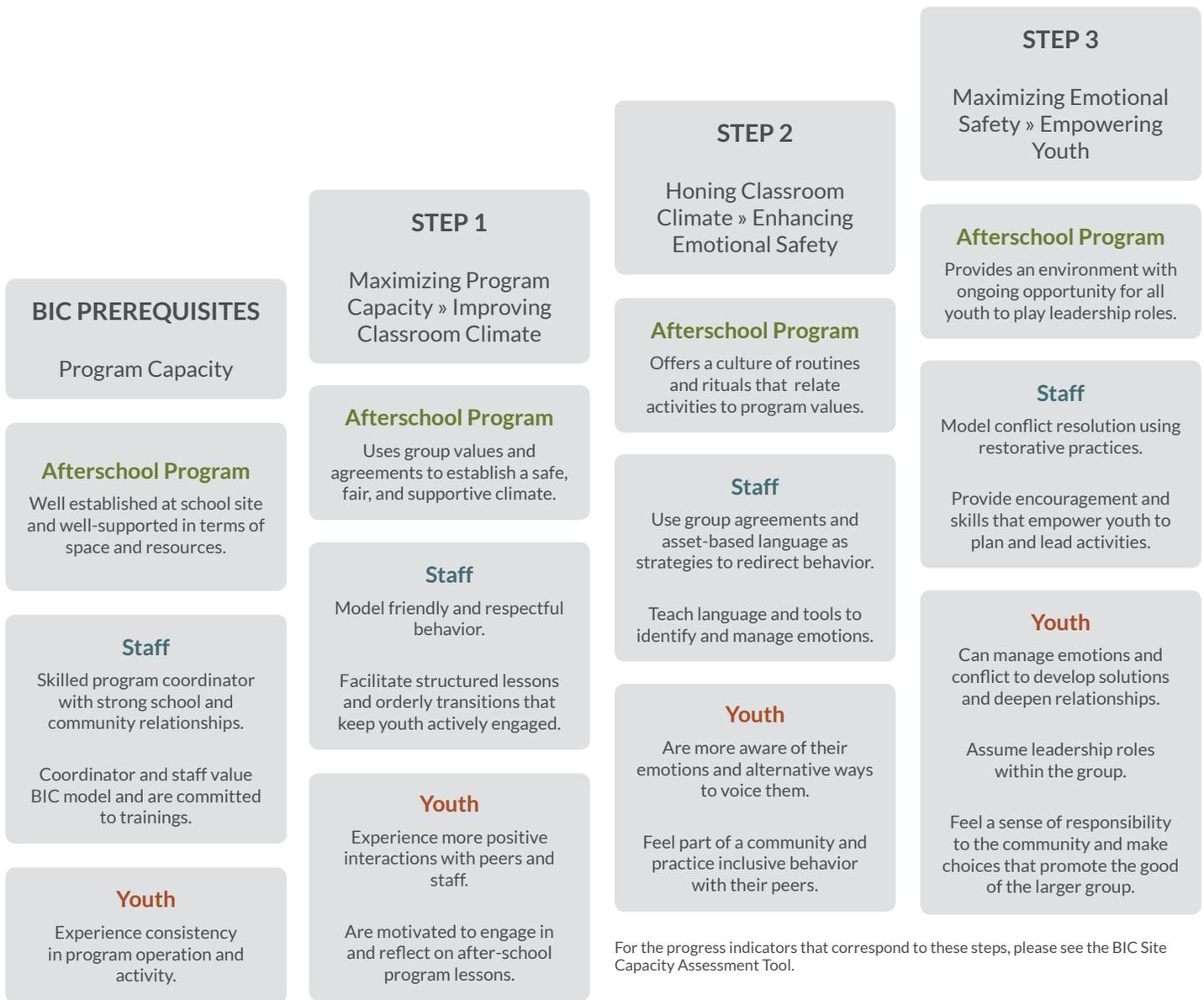
Teach youth social and conflict management skills and involve them in coming up with a solution when conflict arises.

The evaluations of the Character Development PLC span two years (2011-12 and 2012-13) and use staff and youth surveys and activity observations. While there are relatively few Character Development PLC evaluations compared to the other two content areas, the available evaluations are unique in that they include an in-depth review of PLC implementation, as well as leverage available program observations and youth survey data collected as part of the District-wide Oakland school-based after school programs evaluation.

Figure 2. BIC Program Pathway

Building Intentional Communities

After-school Program Pathway



Source: Created by Public Profit and Be the Change Consulting.

“The BIC [PLC equipped] staff with tools on how to do positive reinforcement and asset-based language.”

– Site Coordinator at Intensive Track site.

The implementation evaluation identifies supports needed by staff. The first is site capacity: the BIC curriculum presupposes program stability, including consistent programming, sufficient materials and space, a seasoned Site Coordinator and strong community and school relationships. Participating programs varied substantially in terms of their organizational capacity, affecting their ability to engage fully in the PLC.

“Working with an entire organization, not letting the PLC live in an isolated training base is important.”

— BIC Coach

The Character Development PLC involved Site Coordinators in cohort-based trainings. According to Site Coordinators this whole staff professional development approach positively affected program culture and staff practice more broadly. This training approach has the potential to address the common challenge of staff turnover in after school.

EL staff in the Character Development PLC used the specialized BIC curriculum with youth at least weekly. Other practice areas in which PLC participants showed growth include program culture, youth engagement and leadership, conflict management, and positive behavior guidance.

“It feels really good when you see your after school program student implementing [BIC] during the day...they’re using BIC words, playing some of the games, saying, ‘Okay, let’s go talk it out...’”

— PLC participant

Staff who participated in the Intensive track experienced the strongest positive changes in character education practices.

Staff faced some challenges in implementing the BIC curriculum with youth. One ongoing challenge was modifying the curriculum to fit into the duration of activities at their programs. Other implementation challenges included tailoring the material to meet the needs of youth, breaking down complex concepts into manageable pieces for youth, and getting the curriculum to “stick” when youth get so many different messages from different programs.

The Character Development PLC appeared to improve youth workers’ ability to provide high quality experiences for youth. Notably, participating programs enhanced youth

leadership opportunities and youth engagement, which are traditionally the most challenging areas for programs to improve. The Character Development PLC evaluations also highlighted the importance of site- and staff- level readiness factors. Participating programs varied substantially in terms of their program culture and staff members’ facilitation skills, affecting participants’ abilities to engage fully with the BIC curriculum. In some cases, BIC coaches focused on basic classroom management, as neither staff nor their programs were equipped to engage with more advanced character education practices.

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT'S NEXT

This review of 12 evaluation reports from the Wellness, STEM, and Character Development PLC initiatives illustrate the promise of using PLCs as a training strategy for Expanded Learning staff. The PLC model used in these initiatives is different than in the school day, using more direct instruction and relying on a common curriculum while sustaining the focus on collaborative, adult-oriented learning of a common topic. The modifications to the PLC model address the reality that staff in Expanded Learning programs have less field-specific professional training and limited time to develop curricula and lesson plans. Even with these differences, the PLCs used best practices that aligned with the research: developing PLC participants into co-facilitators, encouraging in-person and virtual collaboration among participants and diligently meeting the learning and professional needs of participating staff.

The findings from the 12 evaluation reports paint an encouraging picture about the potential for PLCs to improve staff practices.

The findings from the 12 evaluation reports paint an encouraging picture about the potential for PLCs to improve staff practices. Participating staff were highly satisfied with their PLC experiences and left the PLC with stronger content knowledge. The new facilitation strategies that staff learned helped strengthen their practice overall, regardless of the content focus. These benefits are more likely to occur if staff attended PLC activities consistently. Organizations can further support staff members' continued engagement and use of new practices by providing staff with paid time

to go to structured trainings and paid time to plan how to incorporate new practices into their programs. There is only limited evidence to suggest that youth outcomes were directly related to changes in staff members' practices, however, available evidence demonstrates that youth received more content focused enrichment activities.

Challenges and Considerations

PLCs are an opportunity to make an intentional investment in the professional development of EL staff, yet there are several considerations to explore before doing so.

One such consideration is an organization's capacity to support staff to participate in a PLC. At a minimum organizations should provide paid time for staff to attend training sessions, access to materials and supplies, and designated, paid time to plan how to incorporate new practices. As seen with the Character PLCs, strong leadership, stable resources and consistent programming may also be necessary preconditions for staff to implement innovative new practices.

A related concern is the organization's ability to invest in a PLC. This approach is more intensive than sending staff to one-day workshops and requires a larger financial commitment. The estimated cost of funding one staff member to participate

in a full-year PLC is roughly \$1,300 which covers the cost of a PLC facilitator, curricula, five to eight training sessions that last roughly 2 hours, training supplies, and individual coaching sessions. Organizations should also factor in the cost to send staff to training and provide additional planning time. Considering the average hourly wage of staff,⁴⁹ organizations should budget \$500 or more per participant for additional staff time. This estimate will be higher for mid-level and senior staff who earn higher salaries than part-

⁴⁹ The average wage for staff used in this calculation is \$10.75 and reflects the findings of a 2006 national survey of the after school workforce (National After School Association, 2006). The estimate includes a total of 46 hours including eight PLC sessions, 3 hours each, and 20 hours of additional planning time, and two 1-hour coaching sessions. The exact cost for staff time is \$494.50. This estimate does not include costs of payroll taxes.

PLCs are more intensive than sending staff to one-day workshops and require a larger financial commitment.

time front line staff. Organizations that find it difficult to cover the cost of a PLC should consider partnering with other organizations to share costs, and pursuing professional development grants.

Another consideration is selecting the learning focus for the PLC, as this affects which youth workers will be engaged. An Expanded Learning PLC model for front line staff was used in the PLC initiatives that are the focus of this white paper. Findings suggest that front line staff will get more out of PLCs if they are comfortable using basic instructional practices such as group management. This PLC model may not be suitable for struggling staff. However, this may not be the case if the content focus of the PLC can support novice instructors; the fundamentals of positive youth development may be one such content area.

Knowing that there is still a lot to learn should not preclude organizations from using a PLC model.

A final consideration is selecting a PLC facilitator. Organizations should look for facilitators who have prior experience working with youth, are familiar with the topic of the PLC, show a strong interest in understanding the PLC participants and the programs they work in, and who have a record of being able to support adult learners one-on-one and in group settings. Oakland has had success employing co-facilitators for their PLCs, pairing a district representative who knows programs and staff well with an experienced trainer with strong content knowledge.

In interviews PLC facilitators shared that one of the most important components of PLCs for EL staff is individual coaching sessions. In their discussion of PLCs for informal science educators, Kasad et al. (2014) mention that creating a sustainable and scalable coaching model will be challenging for EL

providers because it requires a large amount of staff resources that are not available to many EL programs. To address this challenge, they suggest seeking partnerships with organizations that can share costs.

Moving Forward

The research on the use of PLCs in the Expanded Learning field is minimal at best. Future research is needed to better understand the opportunities and challenges that exist for adopting PLCs as a professional development strategy in the field. Some potential directions for future research are exploring additional PLC models, identifying other organizational supports needed by participating staff, understanding ways that youth benefit from improvements in staff practices and tracking how mid-course changes to meet PLC participants' needs affect staff practices and youth outcomes. There is also very little known about how prolonged participation (over one year) in a PLC can affect youth workers' practices. Knowing that there is still a lot to learn should not preclude organizations from using a PLC model. Lessons learned through both research and practice are needed to advance the EL field's knowledge about how best to use PLCs as a professional development strategy.



Appendix

Table 3: Methods and data sources used in PLC evaluations.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS					
Topic	PLC Model	Surveys	Focus Groups	Interviews	Observations
2010 – 2011 Oakland Wellness PLC	5 meetings	X	X	X	X
2011 – 2012 Oakland Wellness PLC	6 meetings	X		X	X
2012 – 2013 Oakland Wellness PLC	5-6 meetings for each content area: nutrition, gardening, physical activity	X	X	X	
2013 – 2014 Oakland Wellness PLC	5-6 meetings for each content area: nutrition, gardening, physical activity	X	X		
SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, AND MATH					
Topic	PLC Model	Surveys	Focus Groups	Interviews	Observations
2010 – 2011 Oakland Science PLC	6 monthly workshops	X	X		X
2011 – 2012 Oakland Science PLC	7 monthly workshops	X			X
2012 – 2013 Oakland Science PLC	8 monthly workshops	X			
2013 – 2014 Oakland Math PLC	7 monthly training meetings	X	X	X	X
2012 JumpStarting STEM Pilot	Needs and readiness assessment, in person and virtual professional development, materials support, individual check-ins	X			X
2013 The Power of Discovery: STEM ²	Technical assistance, one-on-one meetings, regional quarterly meetings	X			X
CHARACTER EDUCATION					
Topic	PLC Model	Surveys	Focus Groups	Interviews	Observations
2011 – 2012 Building Intentional Communities	Three Tiers: 2-day trainings; 4-part trainings; yearlong intensive training/ coaching	X			X
2012 – 2013 Building Intentional Communities	Two modes: Enrichment mode receives curriculum, materials, technical assistance; Intensive mode receives trainings and coaching sessions, & a 4-part program climate training series	X	X		X

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