



A New Framework for High-Impact PLCs

Why It's Time to Re-Energize Your PLCs

PLC time is supposed to be sacred; a space for educators to collaborate, reflect, and, most importantly, move the needle for students. But somewhere along the way, many teams lost steam. Meetings became routine. Goals got fuzzy. And what was once a promising structure started to feel like...just another meeting.

That's why Otus has partnered with [FIRST Educational Resources](#). Their team brings a research-backed framework that helps districts go beyond surface-level collaboration, and Otus provides the tools to put those strategies into action. Together, we're helping schools build PLCs that *actually* work.

The PLC Landscape in 2025

If your teachers are saying things like:

- *We aren't sure what we're supposed to be doing in PLC meetings.*
- *Prepping for PLCs feels like a second full-time job.*
- *How do I collaborate when I'm the only one in my role?*

...they're not alone.

And to be clear, these are not complaints. They're signals, clues that your PLC structure needs a reset. The research is clear: collaborative teams can drive real change in student learning. But only when the time is structured, purposeful, and built around impact.

According to the [Gates Foundation's Teachers Know Best](#) study, PLCs ranked dead last in teacher satisfaction with PD formats. The problem? A top-down approach that often misses what teachers actually need: clarity, autonomy, and connection to the classroom.

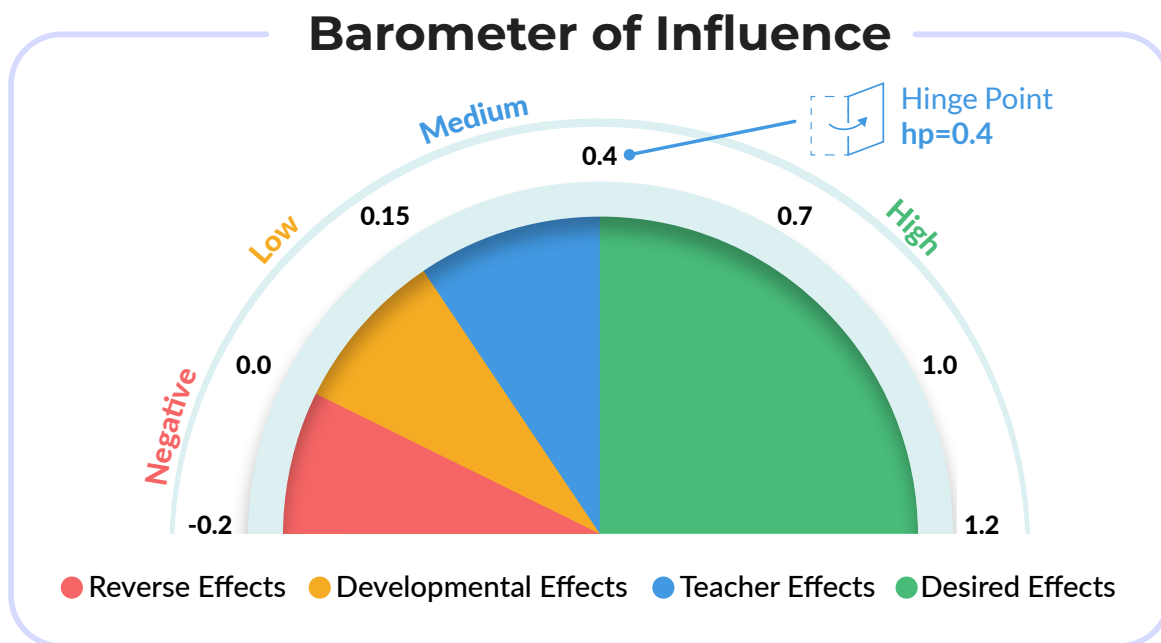
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Guiding Principles of High-Impact PLCs

Not all PLC time is created equal. So, where should schools focus?

Start with what actually moves the needle.



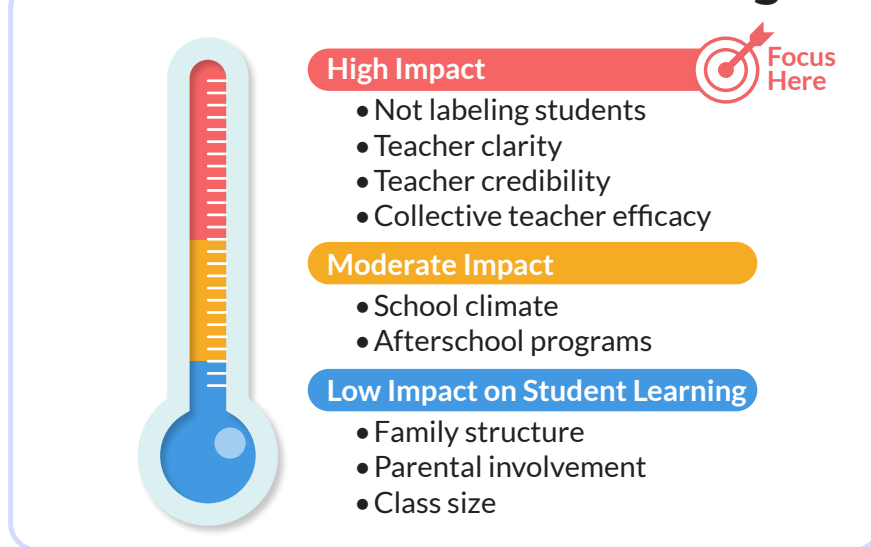
John Hattie, a renowned education researcher, analyzed more than 1,500 meta-analyses to [uncover what truly impacts student learning](#). His work is grounded in “effect sizes,” or measures that show how much a given strategy influences achievement. An effect size of 0.4 represents a typical year of student growth, so anything above that is greater-than-average, and 1.0+ is considered highly impactful.

Among the most impactful? Strategies that are baked into high-functioning PLCs, of course!

Here are just a few examples:

- **Collective teacher efficacy** (effect size: 1.34)
When teachers believe in their collective power to impact student outcomes, results follow. This isn't just about morale; it's more about building a shared culture of responsibility, reflection, and growth. PLCs are the space where that belief is nurtured and reinforced.
- **Teacher clarity** (effect size: 0.85)
Collaborative planning time helps educators align on learning targets, clarify expectations, and design instruction that makes learning goals transparent to students.
- **Formative assessment** (effect size: 0.39)
In strong PLCs, data isn't just collected; it's interpreted, discussed, and used to shape instruction in real time.
- **Feedback** (effect size: 0.92)
Whether it's giving feedback to students or to peers during PLCs, the quality of feedback matters. When teams engage in thoughtful reflection and peer-to-peer coaching, feedback becomes a two-way street.

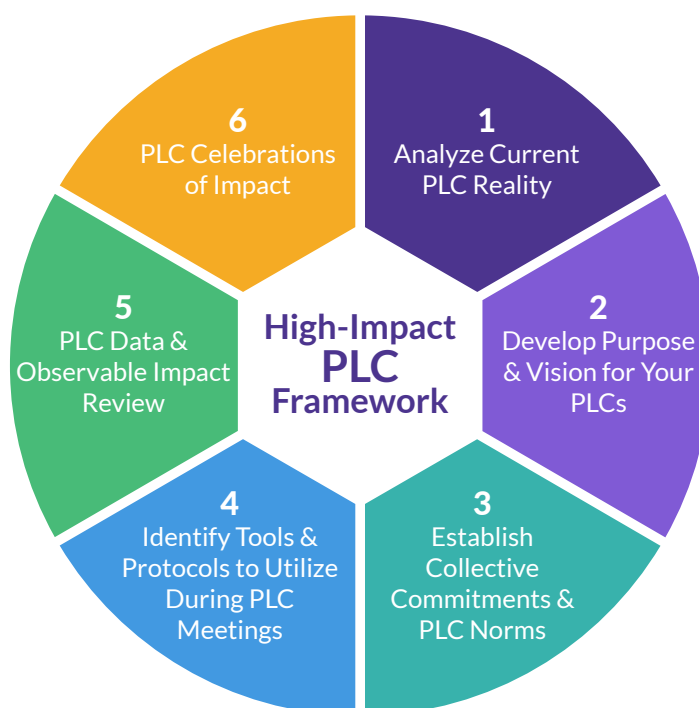
What Drives Student Learning?



In other words, high-impact PLCs are more than just “collaborative time.” They’re the engine that drives many of the most effective teaching strategies. When educators examine student evidence, align instruction, and assess their collective impact, they’re tapping into some of the most powerful tools for improving learning.

FIRST Education’s 6-Step Framework for High-Impact PLCs

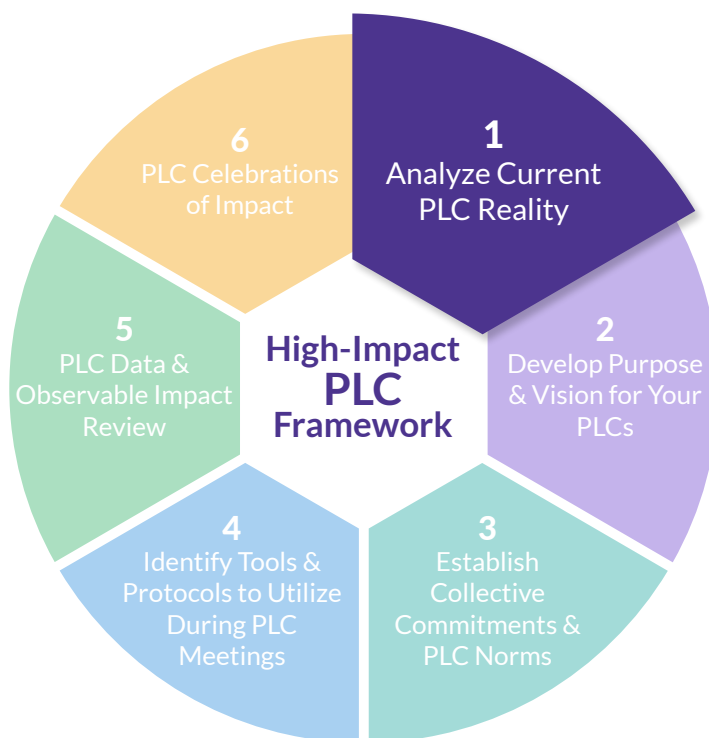
FIRST Education's 6-Step Framework for PLCs is a model for schools to **recalibrate their collaborative culture** from the ground up. Each step provides a clear purpose, a practical strategy, and tools you can use to start making changes today.



Step 1: Analyze Your Current PLC Reality

The foundation of a PLC rests on four core elements: mission, vision, values, and goals. By clearly defining these pillars, PLCs can create a shared understanding and a strong foundation for their work.

Before you move forward, you need to get real about where things stand. What's actually happening in your PLCs right now? Are meetings aligned across grade levels? Do they feel productive or just *performative*?



Why it matters: You can't fix what you haven't diagnosed.

Common pain points:

- Wide variation in PLC quality across grade levels or buildings
- Lack of consistency in meeting expectations or outcomes

What to do:

- Use a PLC analysis tool or rubric to assess current practices
- Gather anonymous feedback from teachers
- Observe a range of PLCs in action, not just the strongest ones

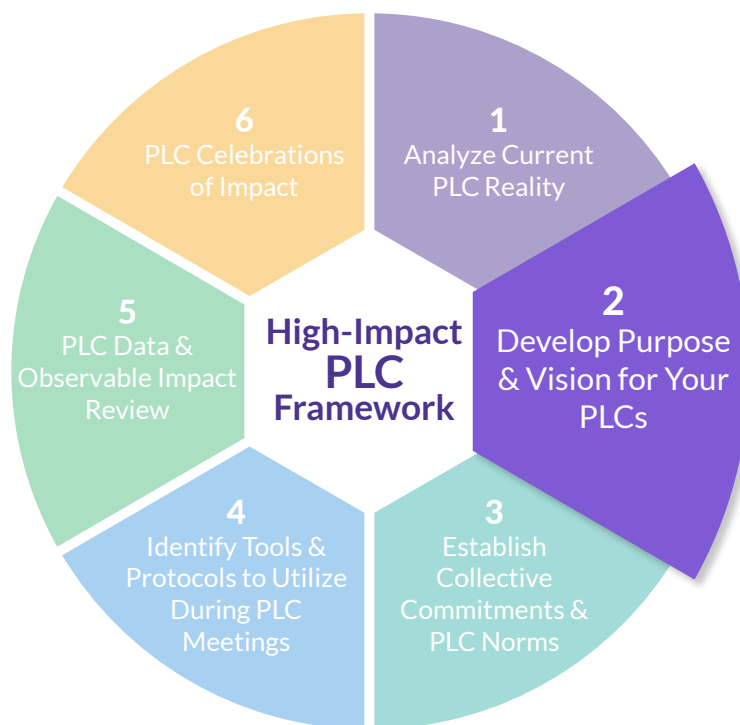
What success looks like: You'll have a clear map of strengths and areas of opportunity. This step surfaces patterns to address systematically, not individually.

Resource

Use our [PLC Reality Analysis](#) to assess your current PLC landscape with structure and clarity. Collect teacher feedback and identify patterns across teams.

Step 2: Develop Purpose and Vision

Don't assume your teams know the "why." Define it, *together*.



Why it matters: Teachers need to know why they're meeting, not just when and where.

Common pain points:

- Vague goals like "talk about data"
- Different interpretations of what success looks like

What to do:

- Identify what high- and low-impact PLCs look like
- Draft a shared purpose statement centered on observable impact
- Define your vision with input from across roles and departments

What success looks like: Every team can articulate the purpose of their collaboration and how it ties to student outcomes.



Resource

Use our [Worst/Best Protocol Sheet](#) to define what high- and low-impact PLCs look like in your context. It sparks critical discussion, surfaces assumptions, and helps your team build a shared understanding of what you're working toward.

Then, use the [PLC Vision Planning Template](#) to turn those insights into a clear, unified vision that guides your school or district's collaborative work moving forward.

Step 3: Establish Norms and Collective Commitments

Once your team agrees on the *why* and the *what*, it's time to define the *how*. Clear norms eliminate confusion, surface misalignment, and give teams a healthy baseline to work from, especially when conflict or resistance arise.



Why it matters: Norms create structure, especially when trust is low or teams are newly formed.

Common pain points:

- Personalities dominate meetings
- Side conversations derail focus
- Inconsistent expectations across facilitators

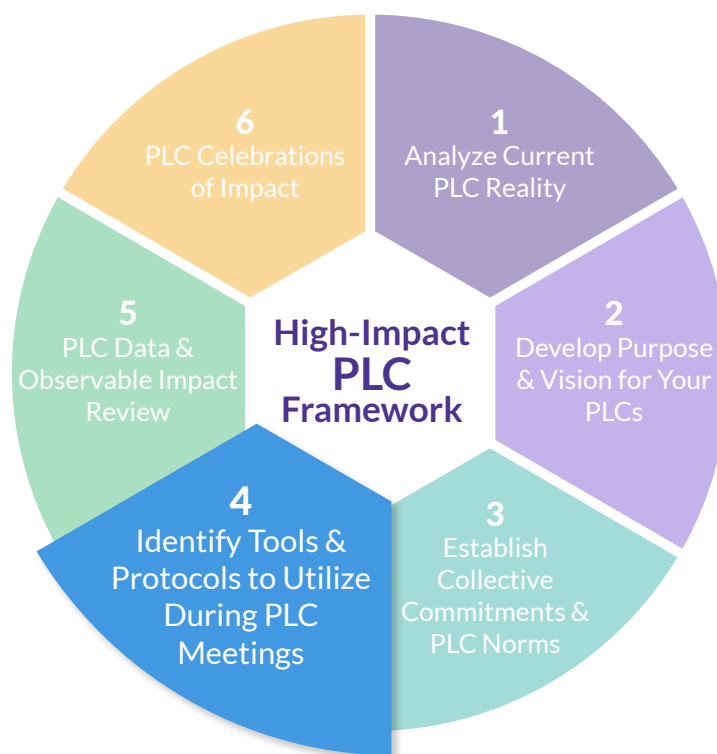
What to do:

- Co-create 3-5 team norms that are posted and reviewed often
- Define what each norm looks like in action (e.g., "Be present" means laptops closed)
- Build in accountability: use a rotating facilitator or self-check rubric

What success looks like: Meetings are focused, productive, and respectful—even when tensions run high. Over time, norms shift from something teams review at the start of a meeting to something they live by. New members adopt the culture quickly, and facilitators spend less time managing behavior and more time guiding instructionally rich conversations.

Step 4: Identify the Right Tools

Now it's time to operationalize your PLCs. What data will teams use? How will they document impact? Where will they review student work or track growth?



Why it matters: Without the right tools, collaboration stalls or becomes anecdotal.

Common pain points:

- Teams waste time locating data or materials
- Lack of clarity on which tools to use (and how to use them)

What to do:

- Decide what data matters most for your PLC goals
- Choose platforms that bring assessment, instructional planning, and progress monitoring together
- Train facilitators to model use of tools in real PLC sessions

What success looks like: Teachers spend less time hunting for data and more time using it to make instructional decisions.



How Otus helps

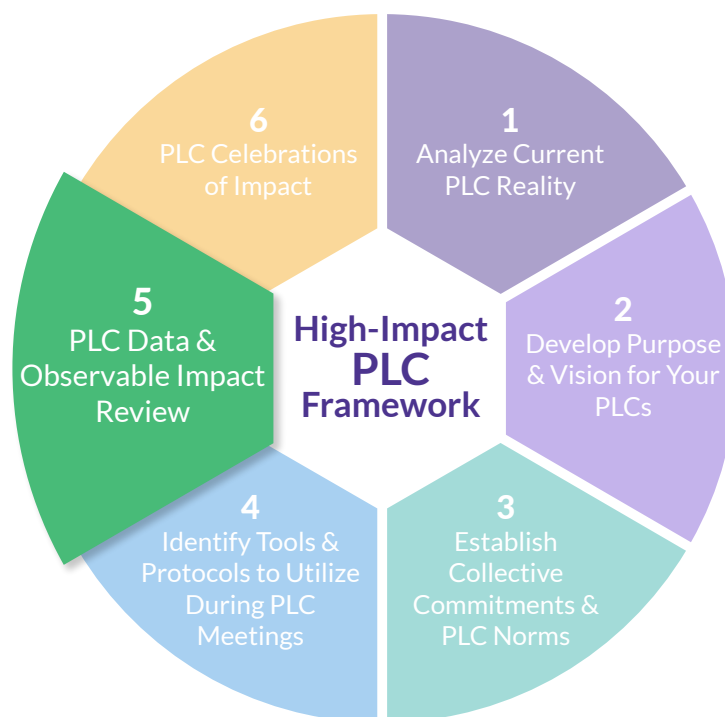
With Otus, educators can bring together student data, assessment results, rubrics, and progress monitoring into one place – [turning PLC time into strategy time](#).

Step 5: Review Data and Observable Impact

Here's where **everything** clicks.

In FIRST's model, teams use a Team Impact Plan to document:

- A shared challenge (academic or behavioral)
- The “worst” and “best” version of that challenge
- The teacher actions they'll try
- What they expect to see in student behavior or performance



Why it matters: If you don't check for impact, collaboration becomes theoretical.

Common pain points:

- Teams focus on inputs (what they did) instead of outcomes (what changed)
- Reflection is rushed or skipped altogether

What to do:

- Use a Team Impact Plan (see resource below) to document actions, expected outcomes, and timelines
- Set 2-, 4-, and 6-week checkpoints for follow-up
- Have teams reflect: What did we try? What happened? What's next?

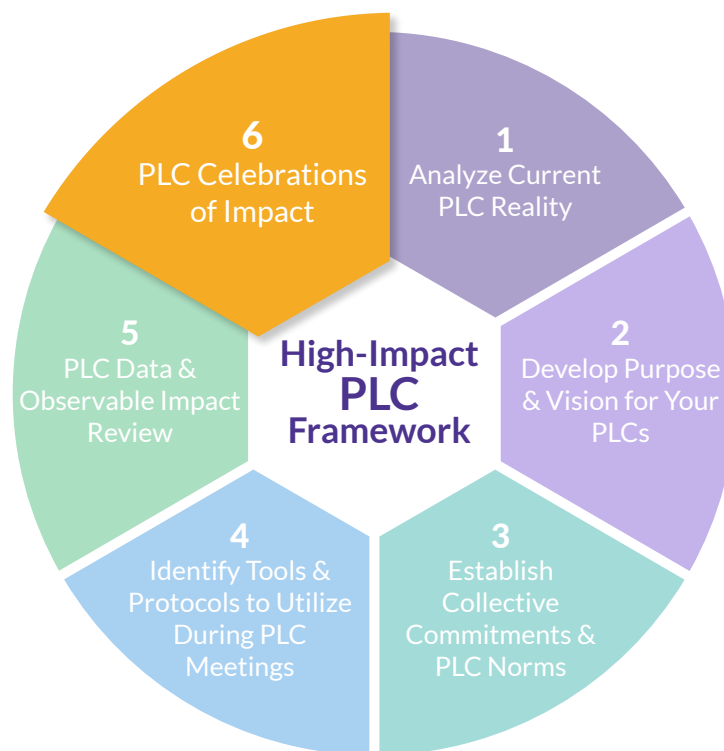
What success looks like: Teams can name how their collaboration led to a change in student behavior, performance, or engagement.

Resource

Use the [Team Impact Plan Template](#) to document the actions your PLC is taking, why those actions matter, and the outcomes you're working toward. This template will help guide a meaningful, results-oriented discussion.

Step 6: Celebrate Growth

Too often, PLCs skip this step. But it matters more than you think. When teams see how their efforts have paid off—in student motivation, engagement, or achievement—they build momentum and belief. That's the foundation of collective efficacy, the single most powerful influence on student achievement.



Why it matters: Success builds momentum. Without celebration, PLCs feel like more work.

Common pain points:

- Teams finish a cycle and immediately move on
- Wins aren't shared beyond the team

What to do:

- End each PLC cycle with a reflection and showcase (e.g., student work, data trends)
- Highlight growth during staff meetings or newsletters
- Create a digital "Wall of Impact" to collect team successes

What success looks like: Teachers feel validated, students see results, and momentum spreads across the school.

Reflections from Successful High-Impact PLC

Schools across the country are using FIRST Educational Resources' model to rebuild trust in their PLCs, tailor support to each team's starting point, and, most importantly, **see real results** in classrooms.

Lake Ridge Middle School (VA)

At Lake Ridge Middle School in Virginia, collaboration with FIRST Educational Resources led to a more personalized, responsive PLC process. Instead of a one-size-fits-all model, school leaders and teachers worked together to reflect, align, and [co-design a PLC plan](#) that directly benefited students.

Prince William County Public Schools (VA)

With over 98 schools in the district, scaling professional learning was no small task. But thanks to a cohort-based approach and structured support from FIRST, Prince William County [created a unified collaboration framework](#) that empowered each school to make their PLCs meaningful.

"CLTs (PLCs) are not just planning sessions," said Tiffany Hardy, Director of Professional Learning. "They are times to look through our curricula and our resources, evaluate what's expected, talk about the various strategies we could take, then talk about what we know about our kids, what works, what doesn't, implement, come back, talk about what worked, what didn't, what the written data and the student work samples are saying about the instruction, make adjustments, go in and observe each other, come back, debrief. It's a whole collective cycle."

Ontario Christian School (CA)

At Ontario Christian School, [the shift to standards-based grading](#) was part of a larger push to align grading practices with what students truly know and can do. That shift has gone hand in hand with their PLC efforts, helping teams better analyze evidence of learning and take strategic next steps.

"We partnered with FIRST Education to support our transition to standards-based grading," said LuAnna Odom, Director of Academics. "They brought incredible resources and even hosted a K-12 family information night at our school. It was a great reminder—don't just make the change and assume people will get it. We made sure families were learning alongside us."

Clear communication of student proficiency on standards is not only a grading win, but a **PLC superpower**. [Ontario Christian uses Otus](#) to give every teacher and team a consistent, transparent view of progress. This shared understanding strengthens their PLCs by making it easier to analyze student learning, identify needs, and collaborate on next steps.

Want to know if your PLC is on track? Try asking:

- *Do our meetings lead to action, or just more questions?*
- *Can we name a change in practice that came from PLC time?*
- *Are we tracking the impact of our collaboration on students?*

If not, it might be time for recalibration.

Downloadable Resources

We've put together a collection of free templates to help you reflect, recalibrate, and build the kind of PLCs that actually drive student growth:

- [PLC Reality Analysis](#)
- [Worst/Best Protocol Sheet](#)
- [PLC Vision Planning Template](#)
- [Team Impact Plan Template](#)

How Otus Brings High-Impact PLCs to Life

Even the best PLC frameworks fall flat without the right tools to support them. That's precisely where Otus comes in.

With Otus, educators can clarify learning goals, analyze student evidence, and document next steps, all in one place. Visual dashboards, shared assessments, and progress monitoring tools make it easy to turn collaboration into meaningful action.

When teachers have clear, actionable insights into student needs, PLC time becomes more than a meeting. **It becomes a force for growth.**



Explore Otus for PLCs



1 PLC Reality Analysis



PLC Reality Analysis

Directions: Use this template to reflect on your PLC's current reality, successes, challenges, and questions across key focus areas.

Use the four columns to reflect on your PLC's current state and guide future improvements. As you complete each section, consider the **5 Pillars of Effective PLCs: Collaboration, Continuous Learning, Shared Responsibility, Focus on Results, and Implementing Effective Instruction**.

Current Reality	Successes	Challenges	Questions/Wonders
What's happening now in your PLC?	What's working well? What strategies or behaviors are helping your PLC grow?	What's holding you back? Identify barriers, habits, or resource gaps.	What are you still unsure about? What do you need clarity on as you move forward?

Based on your reflections, outline clear next steps:

- What will your team do next?
- How will you build momentum or remove barriers?
- What support is needed, and who's responsible?

2 Worst/Best Protocol Sheet



Worst/Best Protocol Sheet

Directions: Compare low- and high-impact PLC practices to build a shared understanding of what effective collaboration should look and feel like.

Support Structure: What type of meeting are you reflecting on?

Staff Meeting | Department Meeting | Collaborative Meeting | PD Day | Other:

Section A - Low Impact

Describe what this structure looks like at its worst by listing specific behaviors, characteristics, or outcomes that signal low impact. Consider what participants might be doing, saying, or demonstrating.

Section B - High Impact

Now flip it. For each item in Section A, identify the **opposite high-impact version**. What would this structure look like **at its best**?

Section C - Prioritize

Review the high-impact ideas in Section B and **choose the most critical characteristics** to focus on.

3 PLC Vision Planning Template



PLC Vision Planning Template

Directions: In Column 1, identify your PLC commitments. In Column 2, describe what those commitments would look like in practice if fully implemented.

Commitments	If this commitment was happening at the highest level, we would observe...
Commitment 1	
Commitment 2	
Commitment 3	
Commitment 4	

4 Team Impact Plan Template



Team Impact Plan Template

Directions: Document a shared instructional challenge, set goals, and outline the actions your team will take to drive measurable student growth.

Begin by listing the instructional challenges your team is currently facing.

From the brainstorm, choose the most pressing instructional challenge your team will focus on.

Our Current Reality	Our Vision for Our Students	Our Vision for Our Educators
What is happening now with your students and instructional practices?	What would success look like?	What would teachers be doing differently or better?

Identify 2–3 areas where your team needs to grow (from the shaded box above) in order to move from your current reality to your vision. Consider what knowledge or skills educators need to build, and what actions or support students need from you next.

Our impact statement:

"If we focus on _____, then we will observe our students _____."

Action planning for our CLTs

In the next 72 hours	In the next 14 days	In the next 6 weeks

Impact review date: _____

When we did _____, we noticed _____ in our students.