

Guidelines for Interpreting and Scoring Benchmarks

7.7 Faculty collaborate in professional learning communities to develop, implement, and continuously improve the effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction to result in high levels of student achievement.

I. What does this benchmark indicate for school performance?

Benchmark 7.7 is about the way the school is organized. It is about structuring teachers' work around a professional learning communities model. In such a model, teachers meet in designated teams based on teaching assignments to plan and improve curriculum and instruction. Together, they examine and agree on what to teach (standards-based content and skills) and how to teach it well for all their students. They take responsibility for carrying out team decisions and for making changes to their own teaching if warranted, based on team analysis of student learning results.

While Benchmark 8.5 (also about learning communities) focuses even more directly on the *assessment* responsibilities of teachers in professional learning communities, this benchmark focuses on the fundamental commitment of the school to adopt the PLC model in the first place. Research shows that the continuous improvement of curriculum and instruction necessary for high levels of student achievement happens most effectively when teachers work in same subject or same grade teams. Thus, Benchmark 7.7 requires excellent Catholic schools to structure teacher assignments in ways that allow and require them to work in relevant teams. Further, this benchmark indicates that the work of these teams focuses specifically on developing and implementing curriculum and instruction, and monitoring how well it works on the basis of what and how well students learn.

The simple fact that teachers sometimes (or even often) meet together to plan lessons and activities does not equate with establishing a functioning learning communities model. In professional learning communities, teachers are *accountable* to each other and to the school for working together to increase achievement.

II. As a review team member, what evidence do I look for?

Here are a few fundamental guiding questions to ask in order to be able to point to examples of the extent to which the practices described in Benchmark 7.7 are actually taking place in the school:

- Are there clearly established teacher teams? Can one find a list of clearly established teacher teams? Can each teacher identify his/her team? Is there a

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schedule that identifies regular meeting dates for teams? Is every faculty member included on a team?

- Are there minutes for professional learning community meetings? Do the minutes reflect discussion and identification of learning goals for students and collected learning results data? Do the minutes indicate analysis of student data and decisions made about what to do next so that more students learn?
- Are there indications that teachers feel responsible for what happens at their team meetings? As a result of professional learning community meetings what has changed in lesson plans because of team decisions?

III. What are the key differences between the levels of the rubric?

At level **3-Fully Meets Benchmark**,

the school is organized so teachers meet regularly in designated subject/grade teams to work on delivering agreed upon curriculum and instruction so that all students meet high expectations. PLCs are the way teachers work throughout the school.

At level **4-Exceeds Benchmark**,

not only are active PLCs the way teachers work, but the quality of their work reflects a knowledge and understanding of best practices in developing, implementing, and improving curriculum and instruction. They know how to use data collection strategies and technology to analyze a wide range of relevant student learning data that includes standardized tests and classroom based assessments. Their measures allow them to determine both current performance and student growth in order to set learning goals and devise instructional plans to reach them. At level 4, the school has invested in professional development to help teachers work more effectively in their PLCs. “Effectively” is clearly measured in terms of student achievement.

At level **2-Partially Meets Benchmark**,

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the school recognizes that students benefit when teachers work together and it is beginning to find concrete ways to support teacher teams, although the teams may be ad hoc and/or voluntary. Teachers generally value working together, but do not yet feel accountable to adjust their own curriculum and instruction in light of their collaboration. The teams that do exist may look more at school-wide issues (like increasing technology use in classes) rather than setting measurable goals for increasing student achievement in their classes.

At level **1-Does Not Meet Benchmark,**

teacher autonomy in making curriculum and instruction decisions is generally the norm and the preferred way of operating.

NOTE: Accurate and useful scoring of school performance on this benchmark depends hugely on a correct understanding of “professional learning communities.” Virtually every Catholic school places value on community, often speaking of the school “family.” Thus, it can be easy to mistake congeniality and collegiality for “learning community.” Of course teachers meet together; of course they share materials, etc. when asked. To be operating in a PLC model, the teams must be planned, regular, intentional, goal oriented, and accountable for learning results. (See glossary for definition.)

IV. What are some key suggestions for improvement?

To move from level 1 to level 2,

- Begin to build a culture of collaboration
- Provide opportunities for teachers to work in teams and to experiment with the learning community model; reward them for doing so

To move from level 2 to level 3

- Make a case for moving to a learning community model and achieve consensus to try it
- Organize all teachers into PLCs
- Provide professional development about the work of PLCs
- Monitor and support the PLCs

To move from level 3 to 4,

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- Provide ongoing professional development for teacher teams focused especially on acquiring, analyzing and using learning results to set goals, adjust instruction, and increase student achievement and growth
- Design creative ways to ensure that every professional in the school is part of a relevant professional learning community
- Provide regular opportunities and set expectations for teams sharing learning results in public faculty meetings

V. What are key terms for common understanding? (Refer to Glossary for the key terms listed below.)

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Data team

Value added