

Module 2

DETERMINING THE COMMON CHALLENGE



MODULE OVERVIEW

Teacher teams are encouraged to work together toward a shared goal or common challenge so that they have a collective purpose. The common challenge is determined internally by your team as you examine student achievement and/or well-being information using an established data protocol. A common challenge should not be imposed on the team by outsiders, such as the principal or district leaders, because doing so may compromise the commitment of team members. When teacher teams don't feel consulted about school improvement initiatives, they may be less invested in these efforts. Instead, when team members determine and agree upon a common challenge, there is an increased likelihood that each person will work toward accomplishing it.

In this module, teams are guided through a process to determine a common challenge that is worthy of your time and will positively impact student outcomes. The common challenge is your team's agreed-upon problem of practice, and it drives the work of your team. The Innovation Configuration (IC) Map displayed in Figure 2.1 describes the ideal process for identifying a common challenge for teams to consider while working through this module.



◀ **INTRODUCTION TO MODULE 2**
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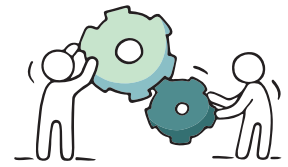
ACT 1: WORK HARDER, NOT SMARTER

Tom, the principal at Alta Vista Elementary School, believes that teachers should collaborate regularly to improve student achievement. He has devised a schedule to provide grade-level teacher teams with 60 minutes of common collaboration time every week, which he perceives as a luxury because when he was a teacher, there wasn't any time during the workday to collaborate with colleagues—he had to do everything on his own. Now, as a principal, Tom has hired additional teachers to provide art, music, and PE enrichment to students, so grade-level teams have protected time for planning and collaboration. Tom believes this arrangement will allow teachers the time they need to make data-based decisions that will improve student achievement.

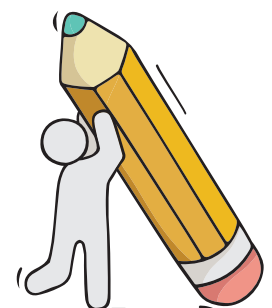
Since the schoolwide focus is on writing, Tom expects each of the grade-level teams to discuss their students' writing and determine ways to make improvements. Tom has emphasized to the fourth-grade teachers that their students' writing is especially critical because of the state-mandated fourth-grade writing test given each year. Tom is very concerned because only 35% of fourth-grade students were proficient on last year's writing test, which was a decrease from 43% proficiency the year before. The superintendent was not pleased with the drop and indicated to Tom that the scores had better increase this year.

According to the schedule, every Thursday after recess, the fourth-grade teachers meet in an empty classroom that is used for professional development. "What are we supposed to do today? Were we supposed to bring something?" Ashley, one of the teachers, asks. Dan replies, "Tom wants us to work on writing, but with being out sick two days and the assembly, I haven't had time for writing." Tamra, the third teacher, stays quiet. She's worked on having students include textual evidence to strengthen their writing, but from experience, she knows that if she speaks up, Ashley and Dan will probably accuse her of being a goody-two-shoes. For the next 60 minutes, Ashley, Dan, and Tamra sit at the same table, but each plans independently of one another.

NOTES



When teacher teams don't feel consulted about school improvement initiatives, they may be less invested in these efforts.



While your team goes through the Collective Efficacy Cycle together each quarter, you are also encouraged to engage in learning on your own and in addition to the evidence-based practice. Jot some notes for yourself in Figure 2.2 about your own learning interests. Are there particular areas you want to learn more about? Perhaps you've heard about Restorative Practices but want to know more. Maybe you want to improve your skill when checking for understanding.

FIGURE 2.2 A MINDFUL MOMENT

What have I noticed about students' academic progress and well-being? What learning interests do I have? What learning will I engage in on my own? What learning can I do with colleagues? What is my or our first step?

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WHY TEAMS NEED GOALS

In education and in life, good things begin with a goal: a common challenge unites the team. The common challenge serves as an anchor for the team, helping to ground the work while creating the conditions for team members to uncover potential. These are the enabling conditions for collective efficacy to develop. Without a common challenge, team learning is less efficient.

We want and need to know how we can contribute to advancing student learning. When thinking about using a new strategy to advance student learning, we often ask ourselves these questions:

- What's the purpose?
- What do I need to accomplish?
- How will I do it?
- How am I doing?

Knowing these questions are on our minds, our teams must discuss how each of these questions can be answered by individuals as well as by the collective team. Through these discussions, our team determines what progress and monitoring look like. If student work will be collected as evidence, how and when will that be done? The common challenge is the glue that holds our team together: it provides the purpose and direction. A clear common challenge allows us to monitor our implementation of a strategy, adjust as necessary, and compare the implementation maneuvers we've made with colleagues. Essentially, our learning helps our team turn reflection into public dialogue. Without the glue of a common challenge, our team's commitment to the strategy is likely to wane.

Teachers' learning is a lifelong process—learning shouldn't stop once we earn a degree or credential.

DATA COLLECTION

The first step of the Collective Efficacy Cycle is guided by assessment of student learning and/or well-being. The common challenge is determined after analyzing our students' current performance levels using evidence of learning. It's important that teams don't generalize the needs of the whole class based on the observed needs of a few students. Instead, teams should collaboratively decide what evidence of learning will be collected and analyzed. Sources of this evidence include formal assessments, benchmark assessments, student interviews, tests, quizzes and/or activities, and student voice or observation data.

Teams are encouraged to gather multiple pieces of evidence, even if some of the data overlap because this provides a more complete picture of a student or student group. Evidence can be gathered from four sources:

- Conversations with students
- Observational information
- Student work products
- Formative and/or summative assessments

Use Figure 2.3 to record your thoughts about your team’s current data collection and analysis practices. Be specific, as detailed information helps teams to make better decisions.

FIGURE 2.3 INDEPENDENT REFLECTION ABOUT CURRENT DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PRACTICES

QUESTION	MY THOUGHTS ABOUT OUR CURRENT PRACTICES	CONSIDERATIONS TO STRENGTHEN OUR PRACTICES
<p>What assessments does our team have access to? What do we use?</p>		
<p>What assessments, or common assessment items, do we discuss as a team?</p>		
<p>What do I want to learn from my colleagues?</p>		
<p>How does our team determine what students already know?</p>		
<p>In what ways do we gather information about student strengths, interests, and talents? How might this information be useful?</p>		
<p>What role does student perception/voice play when we analyze data?</p>		

Use the information from your reflection in Figure 2.3 to begin a conversation with your team about practices of gathering and analyzing data. Take notes in the “My Thoughts” column of Figure 2.4, and then fill in the next column as you discuss your team’s thoughts collectively. You can refer to this when deciding your next steps as a team.



◀ **A SIXTH-GRADE TEAM DETERMINES THE COMMON CHALLENGE**
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FIGURE 2.4 FOCUSING OUR DATA COLLECTION		
QUESTION	MY THOUGHTS	OUR COLLECTIVE THOUGHTS
What is our purpose for gathering these data?		
What data sources will help us to answer our question about current levels of student performance? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversations with students • Observational information • Student work products 		
When will the pre- and post-data be collected?		

TEAM DATA GATHERING

Once the team has agreed upon the purpose and data to be collected, determine the schedule, and note the people responsible in Figure 2.5. This will ensure that the data is provided and easily accessed at the next meeting.

FIGURE 2.5 DATA COLLECTION SCHEDULE

DATA NEEDED	PERSON(S) RESPONSIBLE	DATE NEEDED

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DATA ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

Once a team has gathered enough data, the next step requires an analysis of the data to determine potential steps to move forward. A protocol is often a powerful resource for keeping your team focused and efficient during data analysis.

It is easy and, at times, tempting to veer into topics that are not going to impact student achievement or well-being. A protocol helps teams to avoid deviating from the meeting purpose, which is to uncover what students know and don't know. The following Protocol for Examining Data is adapted from the National School Reform Faculty and may be useful as your team determines a common challenge that is based upon identified student needs.



◀ THE TEAM SELECTS AN EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE TO ADDRESS THE COMMON CHALLENGE
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Protocol for Examining Data

Suggested Time: 45 minutes

Purpose: This protocol is for use and guiding a group through the analysis of data to identify strengths and common challenges.

Materials: Copies of data for team members, highlighters, chart paper, and the note-taking guides in Figures 2.6 and 2.7

Checklist of Support Activation

- Multiple forms of data are used
- Evidence and research inform decisions

Sample Questions to Support Activation

- How have we used multiple forms of data today to drive our decisions?
- What evidence-based research impacted our decision making?
- What might be other factors that could be impacting the data?
- How do these data affirm what we currently think?
- How do these data disrupt what we currently think and why?

Sample Sentence Starters to Support Activation

- These data are different than what I originally thought because . . .
- A possible cause why the data indicates _____ is _____.

FIGURE 2.6 MY NOTES FROM DATA ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

QUESTION	MY THOUGHTS	OUR COLLECTIVE THOUGHTS
<p>Step 1: What parts of these data catch our attention? Just the facts.</p>		
<p>Step 2: What do the data tell us? What do the data <i>not</i> tell us?</p>		
<p>Step 3: What good news is there to celebrate?</p>		
<p>Step 4: What are possible common challenges suggested by the data?</p>		
<p>Step 5: What are our key conclusions?</p>		

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FIGURE 2.7 MY NOTES TO NARROW DOWN POSSIBLE COMMON CHALLENGES

POSSIBLE COMMON CHALLENGES

WHO WILL PRESENT THIS CHALLENGE TO THE GROUP?

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COMMON CHALLENGE PROTOCOL

Now that there is an understanding of current student proficiency levels, areas of strength, and places for improvement, your team can identify a common challenge. Use the quality checklist shown in Figure 2.8 to monitor the development of the common challenge to be investigated.

FIGURE 2.8 COMMON CHALLENGE QUALITY CHECKLIST

- Is the common challenge grounded in the data?

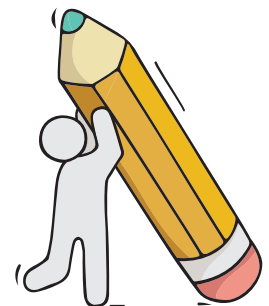
- Is the common challenge observable and actionable?

- Will addressing the common challenge make a significant difference in students' learning and/or well-being?

- Is the common challenge something that the team is curious about?

- Does the common challenge mobilize and motivate the team to engage in the work?

NOTES



Once your PLC team has developed a quality common challenge, effective and efficient progress toward addressing that common challenge requires you to fine-tune your work together. This tuning process helps avoid common challenges that are too big or too broad, that have too much packed into a single challenge, or that are related to something outside the limits of the team.

Common Challenge Tuning Protocol

Suggested Time: Up to 25 minutes per possible common challenge

Purpose: There are times when the PLC+ team as a whole will share a common challenge and other times when an individual team member is looking for the support of their colleagues. The following protocol can be used to explore the common challenge at both levels.

Materials: The activator will need to gather or delegate the gathering of all materials, such as chart paper, highlighters, sticky notes, and other resources, to engage in this process.

Getting Started: Identify an activator for this protocol, and assign a timekeeper and, if desired, a recorder. Because the activator is assisting the team and moving the discussion forward, we advise that the activator not simultaneously serve as a presenter. Another activator can assume this role during this time.

Step 1: Presenter shares common challenge and describes (5 minutes)

- Where it came from; who was involved in identifying it and its connection to data
- Context of other school or district efforts to address a problem

Step 2: Team members ask factual clarifying questions (5 minutes).

Step 3: Presenter steps back (remains silent 8 to 10 minutes) while team members provide

- **Warm feedback:** Aspects of the common challenge that, based on the criteria and list of potential challenges, make them think this will work well to address student needs
- **Cool feedback:** Concerns or suggestions about the common challenge, including suggestions for fine-tuning
- **Stretches:** Other things the presenter may not have thought about but might support the goals of the PLC+

REACHING CONSENSUS ON THE COMMON CHALLENGE

Once all the possible common challenges have been discussed, it is time to reach an agreement on the one that will drive your team's inquiry cycle.

Step 1: Consider the possible common challenges.

- What are the relative strengths of and barriers to each?
- How does each possible challenge rate on the common challenge quality checklist in Figure 2.8?

Step 2: Propose a common challenge.

- Members formulate a proposed common challenge, amending it to reflect the discussion.
- Members work together to solve problems and to fine-tune the proposed common challenge.
- Test for agreement:
 - I will fully support our inquiry cycle investigating this common challenge.
 - I am in support of my colleagues' decision.
 - I will not block this decision.

The activator asks, "Are there any further questions or concerns about the common challenge we have selected?" If there is no further discussion, then agreement has been reached. If there is a call of concern, the person raising the concern re-examines by repeating Steps 1 and 2.

Step 3: Debrief the process using a plus/delta system. Make notes about refinements for future processes in Figure 2.9.

- What did the group do well?
- What could have been improved?

NOTES

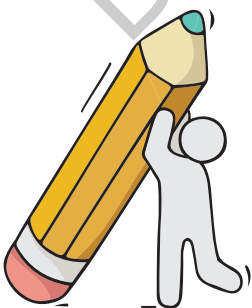


FIGURE 2.4 DEBRIEFING THE PROCESS

Our common challenge for this inquiry cycle is:

Date:

Notes for future refinements:

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Step 4: Plan for collecting evidence.

Now that your team has identified your common challenge, you might develop or adopt a common assessment that will be used as an initial assessment and as a post-assessment (see Figure 2.10). Or you can agree to collect another type of evidence, such as writing samples, self-assessment data, or vocabulary charts. Teams involved in a Collective Efficacy Cycle may include teachers who teach different subjects or grade levels. The key is that they have a common challenge and can collect evidence about the impact of their efforts. A cross-department team may collect student writing that reflects the instruction students received on writing claim, evidence, and reasoning papers across English, science, history, and technical subjects. A cross-grade-level team may want to focus on vocabulary development across a three-year span (for example, third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers) to see how their efforts are impacting learning. Sometimes teams create their own assessments, and other times there are tools available that can be used for this purpose. Collecting evidence allows your team to gauge the impact of your efforts and to monitor the progress and achievement of students.

FIGURE 2.10 INITIAL AND POST-ASSESSMENT PLANS

Initial and Post-Assessment:

Date, Time, Location(s):

Materials Needed:

Source: Adapted from City et al. (2010).

A NOTE ABOUT SCHOOL-BASED DATA DISCUSSIONS

The Collective Efficacy Cycle is powerful because it is determined by a teacher team. This marks a shift from the thinking that school-based data teams must be formally commissioned to analyze data and publish long-range plans for the school community. While well-intended to make data-based decisions to improve student learning, these plans usually fall flat, and often quickly. According to Heather Hill, a researcher at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, an examination of 10 recent research studies on whole-team data discussions indicates that there were “zero impacts of getting teachers to be really productive, understand what kids don’t know, and change their instruction” (as cited by Geller, 2021).

The problem with data-centric discussions is that there is a tendency for well-intentioned teachers to rationalize and justify students’ low performance. After looking at a summative assessment, a teacher may make comments such as “Juan was having a bad week during testing. That’s why he didn’t do well on the assessment” and “That test is poorly written. It’s no wonder the kids can’t show what they know.” While these statements may be true, teachers are less apt to do anything different in their classrooms after sitting through whole-team data discussions in which the data are explained away. In fact, data teams spend about 85% of their time focused on why the students did or did not perform well and only 15% of their time on actions that they can take to improve learning (Evans et al., 2019). Further, group conversations often drift toward strategies with limited impact, such as using a worksheet or trying a different activity with students. Since teachers and administrators often feel that there isn’t enough time, they resort to quick fixes (Geller, 2021).

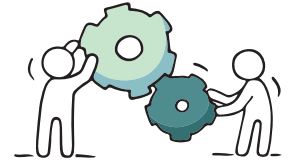


◀ **HOW TEAMS CAN AVOID BEING OVERWHELMED BY DATA**
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In addition to teachers not gaining high-impact instructional wisdom from these data-focused meetings, valuable time is consumed. Sitting through unproductive meetings results in many lost opportunities to be responsive to students’ needs. Instead of engaging in perfunctory data-centric conversations, teachers’ time could be better spent engaging in more relevant conversations that encourage them to reflect on their teaching practices. For example, it might be useful for teachers to discuss what high-quality teaching really means by engaging in a microteaching session in which a teacher shares a video clip and talks through the thinking that is represented in each instructional move. Of course, these discussions should include evidence of student learning using work samples and other relevant pieces of data.

While data-centric meetings may not be the best use of teachers’ precious time, it’s not to say that we shouldn’t look at the data. A more meaningful approach is to provide time for teachers to analyze student achievement and guide their self-reflections, focusing the conversation on what needs to be done to ensure learning.

ACT 2: WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER



Tom, the principal at Alta Vista Elementary School, believes that teachers should collaborate regularly to improve student achievement. To that end, he and the school's Instructional Leadership Team researched the value of teacher collaboration and jointly determined how they could structure instructional time to support teams to work together to improve student learning. As a result of these conversations, additional teachers were hired to provide art, music, and PE enrichment to students so grade-level teams could have protected time for planning and collaboration. Tom and the Instructional Leadership Team then devised a schedule that provides grade-level teacher teams with 60 minutes of common collaboration time every week.

Every Thursday after recess, the fourth-grade teachers meet in an empty classroom that is used for professional learning. When they arrive, the space is set up with a projector and other materials for teams to quickly access, such as chart paper, markers, sticky notes, and the district's established pacing guides. The team already knows what's on today's agenda because Ashley provided a draft and asked for input from Dan and Tamra on Monday. She then finalized the agenda and uploaded it to a shared folder where the team could access it.

Today, Ashley, Dan, and Tamra have brought students' informative writing about extreme weather, as this was the topic decided by the team at last week's collaboration session. They are reading students' work from each other's classes and are making piles according to the established success criteria when Tom walks into the room. "Hey everyone, how did writing go this week? When I visited your classrooms, I noticed that kids were using at least one source to write about extreme weather. That was so cool! And, when I was in Tamra's class, I saw that students were partnered up to peer edit. Each student had their own checklist of the success criteria. I was blown away by how the kids could guide each other to add more details or to improve the organization. What are you finding as you read the papers?"

MODULE 2 RECAP: WHAT DID WE LEARN?



Yay, team! Now that you've used data to determine a common challenge, your team is beginning to cultivate collective efficacy in a systematic way.

Consider any specific team actions that felt efficacious and note them in Figure 2.11. Questions to consider in this reflection that are related to the common challenge include:



◀ **COLLECTIVE EFFICACY REFLECTION**
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- Did we collect initial assessment data?
- Did we identify students' strengths and needs?

FIGURE 2.11 COLLECTIVE EFFICACY CYCLE REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

QUESTION	MY THOUGHTS/DEGREE OF COLLECTIVE EFFICACY				
<p>Mastery Experiences: In what ways was our team successful?</p> <p>Identify specific instances when our actions were skillful.</p>	1	2	3	4	5
<p>Trust: Was there a sense of trust among the team while determining the common challenge?</p> <p>Note instances when trust was strong.</p>	1	2	3	4	5
<p>Problem Solving: In what ways did we work together to solve problems?</p> <p>Describe when and how the team supported each other.</p>	1	2	3	4	5
<p>Assets-Orientation: When faced with a problem, did we maintain an assets-oriented stance?</p> <p>Note any situations when the team built upon students' strengths, interests, and background knowledge.</p>	1	2	3	4	5
<p>Efficiency: Did we adhere to agreed-upon protocols and use our time well?</p> <p>Write down times when our meetings felt productive.</p>	1	2	3	4	5
<p>Optimism: What was the general tenor/emotional tone of our meetings?</p> <p>Describe instances when we supported each other to maintain a positive outlook.</p>	1	2	3	4	5



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