



NATIONAL FRAMEWORK  
FOR  
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCs) OF HEADTEACHERS

December 2022

## Foreword

The Rwandan government considers education as a pillar to achieve its vision of becoming a middle-income country. Quality school leadership and teaching are the ways to realise this aspiration. The mission of the Ministry of Education and the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB) is to provide quality education to all Rwandan children.

Achieving this mission requires investment in key aspects of education including Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers and headteachers. CPDs can be implemented through training programmes complemented by professional learning communities.

In collaboration with its Development Partners (DPs), REB has developed a Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework for headteachers with the purpose of strengthening their school leadership practices. The Professional learning community of headteachers is understood as a platform where headteachers meet regularly to share expertise, experiences, challenges, and learning, and works collaboratively to improve school leadership practices. It is expected that improved school leadership practices will lead to effective teaching and learning and ultimately to improved student learning outcomes.

REB strongly believes in PLCs as a way of not only improving leadership and teaching practices but also a way of supporting schools to voluntarily share resources. REB acknowledges strong partnerships and collaboration with its partners who contributed to the development of this framework and will continue to support its implementation.

We take this opportunity to request concerned education stakeholders to play their role for the successful implementation of PLCs. We will continue to collaboratively promote quality education by strengthening the school leadership support system and look forward to achieving improved learning outcomes.

  
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## Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>CPD</b>	Continuous Professional Development
<b>DEOs</b>	District Education Officers
<b>DoD</b>	Director of Discipline/Deputy Headteacher in Charge of Discipline
<b>DoS</b>	Director of Studies/ Deputy Headteacher in Charge of studies
<b>DPs</b>	Development partners
<b>ESSP</b>	Education Sector Strategic Plan
<b>HT</b>	Headteacher
<b>LLL</b>	Local Leader of Learning
<b>MINEDUC</b>	Ministry of Education
<b>NESA</b>	National Examination and School Inspection Authority
<b>NLL</b>	National Leaders of Learning
<b>PLC</b>	Professional learning communities
<b>REB</b>	Rwanda Basic Education Board
<b>SEI</b>	Sector Education Inspector

## 1. Background

Several studies recognize the importance of effective school leadership towards quality teaching and student learning outcomes. As school leadership is widely considered to be integral to the effectiveness of schools (Harris, 2013), the need for continuous professional development is seen as an important element in strengthening leadership in African schools and in enhancing schools' potential across the continent to deliver good education and promote school effectiveness and school improvement.

In Rwanda, like in other African countries, continuous professional development (CPD) for headteachers is needed for two major reasons. Firstly, headteachers are recruited and appointed with no prior training or formal education in school leadership roles (Bush et al., 2011). Secondly, many schools are often ineffective, delivering poor school and learning outcomes and persistently underperforming on many global school effectiveness and performance tables (Pont et al., 2008).

Research has shown that if implemented well, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be an effective form of professional development (Ingvarson et al., 2005; Vescio et al., 2008). They bridge the gap between theory, policy, and practice, focusing on practice. They provide opportunities for participants to break out of their isolation, create a forum for sharing and contribute to job satisfaction and motivation (Vande Walle & Fransen, 2017). The professional development that occurs within PLCs has been shown to hold great promise for improving school quality (Bush, 2018; Uworwabayeho et al., 2020; Vescio et al., 2008). School leaders learn from each other, work through the identification of problems and develop shared solutions. Additional research shows that participating in the PLC itself provides possible opportunities to hone leadership skills (Wilson, 2016). The research shows that PLCs offer the most practical opportunities for headteachers to apply and build on what was learned during their academic programmes.

In a multi-approach analysis on PLCs in sub-Saharan Africa, Soares et al. (2020) found that PLCs can be organized as standalone professional development initiatives or part of a broader professional development program. They found that the frequency, duration, and the size of PLC

groups have a lot of variation, whereby in some countries PLCs varies from weekly to monthly; and the meeting duration varied from 30 minutes to 8 hours.

The same paper showed that in certain PLCs, the facilitator; who often undergoes prior training; is in charge of guiding the technical conversation, whereas in others, the facilitator is in charge of administrative duties such as taking attendance, registering notes, scheduling meetings etc. While the facilitator plays in some cases both roles, or where there is no designated facilitator and teachers in a PLC take turns in facilitation responsibilities. Lastly, some PLCs there may or may not involve specialist input in subject/pedagogical knowledge to enhance the technical discussion. Additionally, some PLCs provide incentives from financial incentives, such as a travel stipend, to professional incentives, such as professional development credit in Ghana. The amount of structure and prescriptiveness in the materials used to lead PLC meetings varied.

Kools & Stoll (2016) define a Professional Learning Community (PLC) as *“an inclusive and mutually supportive group of people with a collaborative, reflective, and growth-oriented approach towards investigating and learning more about their practice in order to improve all students’ learning”*. A PLC is defined as a group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students. Further, glossary of education reform suggests that PLCs serve to two broad purposes: (1) improving the skills and knowledge of educators through collaborative study, expertise exchange, and professional dialogue, and (2) improving the educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment of students through stronger leadership and teaching (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2014). PLCs, while sometimes describing professional development for teachers, here refer to the professional development of headteachers.

In Rwanda, schools in the same sector are performing differently: some are performing well while others are performing poorly. This is an indication that schools are still working in isolation and the culture of collective responsibility is still lacking. Headteachers should be concerned not only about their own schools and students’ performance but also about the performance of nearby schools. PLCs can be a solution to this problem by strengthening collaboration and peer learning among headteachers within the same sector. Newly recruited or unexperienced school leaders will learn from experienced school leaders.

Reference will be made to two good examples of CPD support of school leadership through PLCs of headteachers in Rwanda.

First, VVOB in collaboration with REB and the University of Rwanda – College of Education, recognizing that offering trainings to school leaders without provision of after training support would not be sufficient, initiated PLCs to complement the Diploma Programme in Effective School Leadership. These PLCs are facilitated by SEIs after completing the Certificate Program in Educational Mentorship and Coaching. A full PLC cycle takes one year, with one PLC session organized per quarter. Each session is intended to be part of an action-oriented cycle designed to identify school and sector challenges, develop school improvement plans (SIPs) that are aligned with the Sector Education Improvement Plan (SEIP), engage school leaders in sharing best practices and reflecting on and disseminating best practices in school leadership.

The other example is the support of Building Learning Foundation (BLF). BLF established Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) since 2018 as part of its overarching Leadership for Learning strategy which aimed at establishing a self-led system where highly performing headteachers can improve the performance of exceptionally underperforming ones in their districts and sectors. In each district and sector, high-performing headteachers are selected and appointed as National Leaders of Learning (NLLs) and Local Leaders of Learning (LLLs). The selection criteria for NLLs and LLLs include having quality school improvement plan (SIP) in place which is understood and can be explained by stakeholders, improving pupils' learning outcomes and performance of the school including a competent headteacher for 5 years or more for NLLs or 3 years and more for LLLs, how the school works closely with the community including parents and local community leaders and the capacity as well as the willingness of a headteacher to develop self and others.

It is with this regard that Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB) in collaboration with its partners (DPs) in education is committed to promoting Professional Learning Communities of headteachers as part of their Continuous Professional Development (CPD). This framework is designed to provide provision of key aspects needed for effective implementation of professional development of headteachers. It includes the operational definition of PLC, the structure, how they should be facilitated, conditions for successful PLCs, financial implications, and monitoring and evaluation.

## 2. Definition of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

PLCs can serve an important function for Continuous Professional Development (CPD). In their review of empirical research on PLCs, Nguyen et al. (2021) found that PLCs are considered as a network, a space, an approach, and a process. Which are defined as following:

- PLC as a **network** of individuals (e.g., teachers, headteachers). These individuals share a common interest in learning and teaching and a desire for collaborative improvement around student learning and school improvement. This network functions ideally based on equal sharing and collaboration. The members in a PLC network have a degree of professional interdependence.
- PLC as a **space** for professional learning. PLCs may be present in physical and/or virtual spaces. Such spaces tend to be deliberately organized with the aim of promoting collaborative enquiry, professional dialogue, and other collaborative activities. These can be organized around a specific topic or set of topics.
- PLC as an **approach** to or strategy for professional development.
- PLC as a **process** of establishing a collaborative environment to promote learning for teachers and headteachers. In some cases, the PLC may follow a specific process, strategically identifying challenges, proposing solutions, practicing these solutions, and reflecting on that change. Others may follow other approaches and processes.

In this framework, PLCs are defined as *a platform where headteachers meet regularly, to share expertise, experiences, challenges, and learning, and works collaboratively to improve school leadership practices, which leads to effective teaching and learning and ultimately to improved student learning outcomes.*

### 3. PLC structure

Based on previous and on-going experiences in Rwanda, this framework proposes three categories of PLCs namely structured PLCs, Semi-structured PLCs, and unstructured PLCs. The implementation of PLC sessions will depend on the selected structure of the PLCs.

#### A. STRUCTURED PLCs.

These are compulsory PLCs facilitated by Sector Education Inspectors (SEIs). The sessions shall be organized on quarterly basis and shall take place in schools on rotational basis. At the end of each session members agree upon actions to be accomplished before the next session. These PLCs shall focus on School Improvement Planning, and the discussions will be structured in an action-oriented cycle: *identification, planning, review, and reflection* (see Figure 1). These structured PLCs can be stand-alone through the provision of guidelines, or they may be part of a professional development initiative.

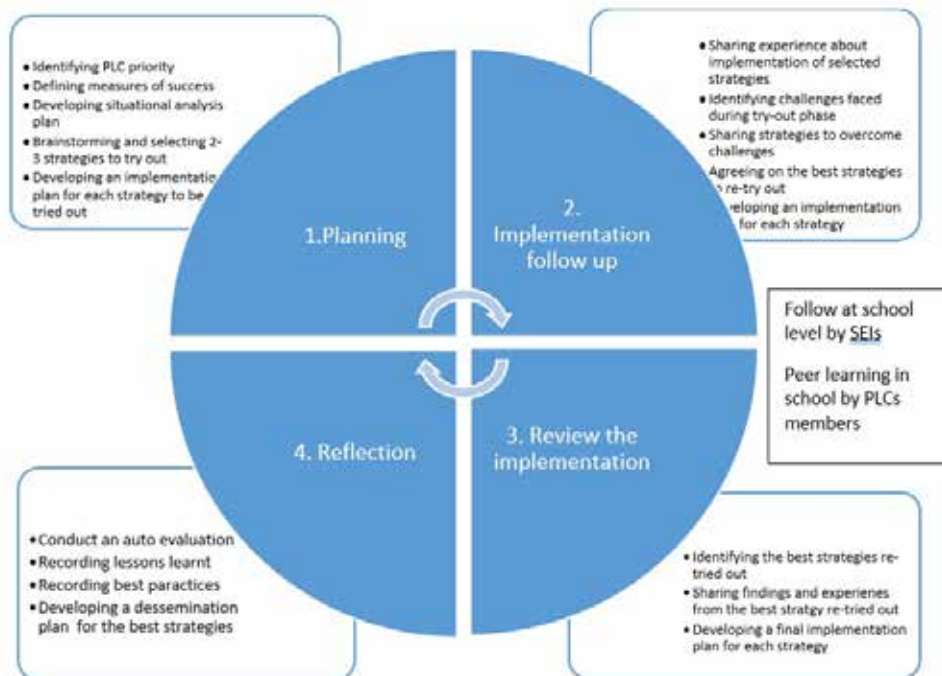


Figure 1: Action-oriented cycle for PLCs

### B. SEMI-STRUCTURED PLCs

These PLCs will be facilitated by a selected/trained HT, such as a LLL or NLL. They will be organized on monthly basis and will include topics planned from district level PLCs and other topics that are important to their geographical context. The role of the facilitator is threefold: First, they work closely with DEOs or SEIs for the capacity building of other headteachers in the district/sector. They work with headteachers to support their leadership development in priority areas, with a focus on Rwanda's Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) priorities. Secondly, they create a culture of continuous improvement within and between schools, particularly, focusing on challenges affecting school leadership in Rwanda. Lastly, they monitor the implementation of PLC actions and use data to inform the next PLC meeting. The sessions can take place in schools and on rotational basis.

### C. UNSTRUCTURED PLCs.

For these PLCs, headteachers identify their learning needs, the focus, and objectives of their learning. They can be organized whenever needed and facilitated by any headteacher as agreed upon. An example of such PLCs is a visit of a good performing school by PLC members.

PLC priorities to be discussed during the PLC sessions will be selected by headteachers themselves based on available data with the purpose of improving teaching and learning and ultimately students' learning outcomes. Reference will be made to the Sector Education Improvement Plans, the five professional standards for effective school leadership, national policies, and strategies such as the ESSP and other sources of data which highlight the school leadership challenges in the sector. After identifying these priorities, headteachers will deeply analyse them and come up with strategies to address the identified priorities at the school level before the next PLC session.

In preparation for PLCs sessions, HTs need to know the status of a variety of issues and the situation of the school. Headteachers should come to every PLC session with data showing how the identified challenges are being addressed for the purpose of improving teaching and learning. Every sector should have a plan that clearly shows what will be done throughout the year and this plan is shared with district for support, monitoring and evaluation. Depending on the needs,

Deputy Headteachers and/or other education stakeholders can be invited to the PLC sessions of headteachers.

#### 4. Conditions for successful PLCs

For an effective PLC session, certain conditions can help facilitate successful discussions and activities (Katz et al., 2009; Wenger et al., 2011).

##### PURPOSE AND FOCUS

As noted in the definition, PLCs serve a specific purpose. PLCs are true to their core purpose of learning and should avoid being a general dissemination channel to headteachers. This purpose is supported by the PLC principles. Headteachers learn from each other; they are self-motivated and set their own agenda; they act on the learning that takes place; they are supported by specific resources; they build a culture of continuous improvement. PLC members define the purpose of each session and allocate enough time to the issue being discussed. At the end of the session, they should be able to establish whether or not they achieved their objectives. Following the session, actions should be taken back at the school and a review of how these actions may or may not have led to school level change should be reviewed at the next PLC.

PLC sessions will be goal-driven exchanges facilitated and guided by SEIs or an appointed Local Leader of Learning as they have expertise in the area of school leadership. PLC member activities will be driven by shared roles or responsibilities rather than on general educational goals or theories. That is, discussions should have an applied purpose though it is recognized that some discussions may refer to various leadership approaches. The purpose and priorities that will serve as a focus for PLCs are commonly agreed upon as per PLC members individual needs.

##### 1. RELATIONSHIPS

During a PLC session, members share information openly, including successes and failures, and they trust and respect each other. Some of the information shared could be sensitive, which means that confidentiality is important for PLCs members. Having strong trusted networks facilitates PLC discussions.

## 2. COLLABORATION

PLC members engage in intensive interactions where they present their beliefs and best practices to investigate, explore, reflect together, and adopt. It is expected that they will work together collaborating to identify challenges and jointly create solutions.

## 3. INQUIRY

PLCs are enquiry- and evidence-driven, focused on the development and implementation of solutions for specific issues in the context of schools within the sector. Members collectively question teaching and leadership routines, examine teaching and learning and engage in supporting each other's professional growth. Inquiry is the process by which the collaborative network can identify challenges and create solutions to common challenges.

## 4. LEADERSHIP

PLC members share roles and responsibilities in the session, i.e., setting agenda, leading on specific tasks. Similar to the overall school leadership approach, leadership is shared and distributed among the members. However, each session should have a leader to drive the meeting agenda and ensure there is a productive outcome from the session. As noted above, that leader could be an SEI, LLL or another HT.

## 5. ACCOUNTABILITY

PLC members hold each other accountable for agreed upon decisions and targets set in the sessions. This accountability is demonstrated during the reflection sessions where members can pose questions, discuss reasons for successes or failures and provide support so that each member can be successful and grow.

## 5. Roles and responsibilities

Different education stakeholders at different levels in the education system will be involved in the PLC support for sustainability purposes. The following are the roles and responsibilities shared from the school level to national level.

### **1. Headteachers**

The headteacher's roles and responsibilities in the PLCs include but not limited to:

- Attend PLC sessions
- Share knowledge, skills, and resources with other school actors
- Provide required data such as termly and annual student achievement data (both school-based assessment & national exam results)
- Lead PLC sessions when requested
- Host a PLC sessions at their schools when requested.
- Implement at school level the strategies agreed upon in PLCs.

### **2. Sector Education Inspector**

The Sector Education Inspector's roles and responsibilities in the PLCs include but not limited to:

- Lead PLC sessions including priority identification and elaboration of its annual plan
- Facilitate PLC sessions on regular basis at least quarterly
- Monitor implementation of and the strategies agreed upon in PLCs
- Link headteachers with difficulties to the good performing schools for mutual support.

### **3. District Director of Education**

The District Director of Education's roles and responsibilities in the PLCs include but not limited to:

- Be aware of PLCs activities in the district
- Visit PLC sessions and provide support for their effective implementation.

### **4. Rwanda Basic Education Board**

The REB roles and responsibilities in the PLCs include but not limited to:

- Visit PLCs sessions to monitor their implementation and provide constructive feedback

- Identify and coordinate partners who support PLCs

#### 6. Financial and time implications for PLCs

Headteachers are responsible for their own professional development. As such, they shall ensure that they schedule for a PLC with their peers. The cost of attending or hosting PLCs shall be covered by the headteachers. In working together, headteachers with the support of SEIs shall decide on a best strategy to ensure that PLCs are financially sustainable.

#### 7. Monitoring and evaluation (M& E) of PLCs

To achieve the goal of the PLCs, it is important to monitor and evaluate the implementation. M&E reports will be analysed by different education actors mainly REB & Districts and sector education officials and appropriate measures will be taken based on lessons learned to improve school leadership practices. Reference is made to the rubric for monitoring the implementation of PLCs in Annex 1.

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Annexes

**MONITORING AND EVALUATION TOOLS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCs)**

**Annex 1: Rubric for evaluating Professional Learning Communities sessions**

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), when implemented effectively should lead to improved school leadership practices at the school level and eventually to improved teaching and learning. This rubric is designed to evaluate the effectiveness of PLC sessions. It includes two parts: PLC session evaluation and an evaluation of PLC implementation at the sector level.

**1. THE PLC SESSION EVALUATION**

The six enabling factors for effective PLCs are used as indicators to assess PLC sessions. It will be used by the PLC facilitator or other relevant stakeholder to assess the effectiveness of a PLC session. At the conclusion of each session, the facilitator must fill out this rubric, highlighting areas that need improvement for the subsequent session.

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>EXCELLENT</b>	<b>VERY GOOD</b>	<b>NEEDS IMPROVEMENT</b>	<b>MEANS OF VERIFICATION</b>
<b>1. Purpose and focus</b>	All PLC members demonstrate understanding of the purpose and objective of each session and allocate enough time to the matter. PLC members share a common understanding on improving the children's learning	Some PLC members demonstrate understanding of the purpose and objective of some sessions and allocate time to the matter.	PLC members never demonstrate understanding of the purpose and objective of each session and allocate enough time to the matter.	Explanation of PLC members on the purpose and focus.
<b>2. Relationships</b>	All PLC members share information openly, including successes and failures, and they trust and respect each other.	Some PLC members share information openly, including successes and failures, and they somehow trust and respect each other.	PLC members never share success stories and failure openly. They do not trust and respect each other.	Interaction of PLC members in the session PLC meeting actions

<b>3. Collaboration</b>	All PLC members engage in intensive interactions where they present their beliefs and practices to investigation and practice.	Some PLC members engage in interactions. They present their beliefs and practices to investigation and practice.	PLC members never engage in interactions. They never present their beliefs and practices to investigation and practice.	PLC sessions minutes.
<b>4. Inquiry</b>	All PLC members collectively question teaching and leadership routines, examine teaching and learning and engage in supporting each other's professional growth.	Some PLC members collectively question teaching and leadership routines, examine teaching and learning and engage in supporting each other's professional growth.	PLC members never question teaching and leadership routines, examine teaching and learning and engage in supporting each other's professional growth.	PLC sessions minutes. Feedback provided in the PLC sessions.
<b>5. Leadership</b>	PLC members assume leadership roles within the PLC, e.g., setting the agenda, leading on specific tasks.	Some PLC members assume leadership roles within the PLC, e.g., setting the agenda, leading on specific tasks.	Very few PLC members assume leadership roles within the PLC, e.g., setting the agenda, leading on specific tasks. Decision making is limited to very few influential members.	PLC sessions minutes.
<b>6. Accountability</b>	PLC members hold each other accountable for implementing the decisions taken and ensuring the functionality of the PLC.	Some PLC members hold each other accountable for implementing the decisions taken and ensuring the functionality of the PLC.	PLC members do not hold each other accountable for implementing the decisions taken and ensuring the functionality of the PLC.	List of those who do not implement decisions taken in PLC. PLC sessions minutes.

## 2. EVALUATION OF PLC IMPLEMENTATION AT THE SECTOR LEVEL

This rubric serves to monitor the implementation of PLCs at the sector level. It may be used by district education authorities, REB, and any other relevant stakeholders interested in promoting PLC. The evaluation can be conducted at the end of an academic year and include areas that need improvement for the subsequent year.

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>EXCELLENT</b>	<b>VERY GOOD</b>	<b>NEEDS IMPROVEMENT</b>	<b>MEANS OF VERIFICATION</b>
<b>PLC session Plan</b>	The sector has a plan for structured PLC sessions (quarterly) and plans for semi-structured and unstructured PLCs.	The sector has a plan for structured PLC sessions (quarterly).	The sector does not have a plan for PLC sessions.	PLC session plan
<b>Session attendance</b>	All members attended all PLC sessions including structured semi-structured PLC session and at least two unstructured PLC sessions are organized in a term.	More than 80% of members attended all sessions and least one unstructured PLCs is organized per term.	Below 80% of members attended all sessions.	Attendance list in all PLC sessions organized
<b>PLC session recorded</b>	All PLC sessions are recorded and shared with relevant stakeholders.	More than 80% of the planned sessions have meeting minutes	Below 80% of the planned sessions have meeting minutes	Availability of PLC session minute.
<b>PLC priorities implementation at school level</b>	The sector has recorded at least 2 priorities that are successfully addressed through PLC.	The sector has recorded at least one priority successfully addressed through PLC.	No tangible achievement is observed.	PLC report at the end of the learning cycle.

## Annex 2: Guidance for peer learning school visit

To improve school leadership practices, it is important for headteachers to observe each other's practices in an unstructured PLC format. This guidance is designed to support PLC members (including the hosting team) prepare and conduct effective peer learning school visits. In this guidance hosting team is referred to as the team from the school being visited by other PLC members.

Stages	Topic	Description
<b>BEFORE THE VISIT</b>	<b>Preparation of the visit</b>	During the session, PLC members should agree on the school to visit next. To ensure that the session is focused, PLC members shall set the objectives of the visit and highlight the priorities to be addressed.
	<b>Expected result of the visit</b>	Peer learning: PLC members will learn school leadership practices in relation to the objectives of the visit.
	<b>Preparation of individual interest areas from the visit</b>	Each PLC member will prepare individual learning interests related to the objectives of the visit for further understanding of the practice.
<b>DURING THE VISIT</b>	<b>Preparation of the logistics</b>	Both visiting team and hosting team will prepare needed logistics.
	<b>Exploration of school leadership practices.</b> <b>Peer exchange session</b>	The hosting school will facilitate the exploration of school leadership practices.  After the exploration, the peers will meet to discuss, exchange and document lessons learnt about school leadership practices.  The facilitator will ensure that the 6 enabling conditions for successful PLCs are fulfilled.  PLC members will agree on a strategy to implement in their schools and report on this in the next PLC session.