PLCs “require that [team] members reflect openly and honestly together about their own practice, intentionally seeking ways to do their work better and continually building their capacity to do so.” Failure to collect, present, and analyze evidence of student learning and the reluctance to make work public are major barriers to effective professional learning communities (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2005).

“One mark of schools that make headway on the achievement gap appears to be their propensity to promote and organize conversations based in evidence of student progress.” (Little, 2006, p. 10)

“In our work, we help practitioners frame the next level of work by examining what they are currently doing, looking at evidence of student learning for clues about what is strongest in their practice and where they might see opportunities for improvement, [and] strengthening the capacity of colleagues to work collectively on instructional issues.” (Elmore & City, 2007, p. 26)

Excellence in education requires that teachers work in collaborative teams to clarify the learning intentions and success criteria of their lessons, gather evidence of student learning, and discuss the effectiveness of their teaching based on that evidence. “Teachers [need] to share evidence about their teaching with their colleagues”; in fact, “the key question is whether teaching can shift from an immature to mature profession, from opinions to evidence.” The education profession will not mature as a profession until professional dialogue focuses on evidence of student learning rather than opinions (Hattie, 2009, pp. 252, 259).

For the first two years, none of the schools in the study experienced gains in student achievement. The dramatic gains only occurred when collaborative teams focused the collaborative inquiry on “jointly and recursively identifying appropriate and worthwhile goals for student learning; finding or developing appropriate means to assess student progress toward those goals; bringing to the table the expertise of colleagues and others who can assist in accomplishing these goals; planning, preparing, and delivering lessons; using evidence from the classroom to evaluate instruction; and, finally, reflecting on the process to determine next steps” (Gallimore et al., 2009, p. 549).
“In high-poverty schools that are helping students learn at high levels, look at student achievement data” to identify which students need additional support and which need greater challenges. But this evidence of student learning is also being used to inform teacher practice. Teachers discuss why one member of the team is having success teaching a particular concept and another is not, and “what the more successful teacher can teach the less successful teacher” (Chenoweth, 2009, p. 41).

In schools that double student performance, teachers use results from common unit and interim assessments to help members of collaborative teams compare strategies and adopt those that are most effective. Instructional practice is out in the open, the subject of public and professional conversation, and the source of ongoing, job-embedded professional development (Odden & Archibald, 2009).

“The expansion of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is indicative of the increased emphasis on teacher collaboration as the means of powerful professional development. . . . PLCs are an indication of a broader trend toward professional development that is increasingly collaborative, data-driven, and peer facilitated, all with a focus on classroom practice.” (Barber & Mourshed, 2009)