

Building a Professional Learning Network

A professional learning network (PLN) is a group of individuals connecting with one another to enhance their professional practice through learning and relationships. Education-oriented PLNs are communities in which teachers exchange ideas with other teachers on a broad wealth of topics and tips to strengthen teaching and learning. PLNs are designed by individuals or groups who share common interests and they range from local professional communities to global online communities. Being part of a PLN can mean joining a group of local teachers or joining a community via social media, to engage in professional reflection, collaboration, and innovation.

1. Why is it important to be part of professional learning networks (PLNs)?
2. How can I benefit from engaging with teaching professionals both within and outside my school district?
3. How can I find professional learning networks (PLNs) that align with my needs?



to Consider

Ever-changing technology magnifies the many challenges of teaching. Teachers can mitigate these challenges by connecting with other teachers through professional learning networks or PLNs. A PLN is a group of educators connecting with one another to enhance their professional practice through personal learning and professional relationships. PLNs are a great way for teachers to identify and master specific educational technologies; meet professional development needs and priorities; and find inspiration, reflection, collaboration, and resources to implement in their educational practice.

Building a PLN can be as simple as joining a group of educators in the same school or joining a community of professionals via social media. At the local level, teachers can join PLNs within their schools or districts. Local PLNs allow teachers to receive just-in-time support from teachers in similar contexts, such as those teaching the same content or grade level. PLNs within the school district allow teachers to connect with colleagues with shared interests and reach out for just-in-time support. Teachers can also join PLNs through online communities beyond the school walls to share ideas and collaborate with other teachers from around the globe. Teachers can contribute to the exchange of educational strategies and opportunities for collaboration. Approaching key personnel like technology coaches, school leaders, or subject matter experts can help teachers to identify PLNs. On social media, teachers can join public groups dedicated to giving teaching tips and resources. Often, teachers identify and join regional PLNs through education conferences; whereas they identify and join nationwide or global PLNs through social media. Additionally, PLNs outside of the education sphere can include members of the community, like business owners or non-profit organization leaders, who can enhance teacher growth and provide opportunities for students to have authentic learning experiences outside the classroom.

Three key characteristics of PLNs are: information sharing, cultivating connections, and sharing diverse perspectives. PLNs facilitate learning from content sharing and communication, foster professional connections beyond course content, and provide multiple experiences that contribute to professional growth. Teachers can use multiple strategies to actively participate in online PLNs. Within an online PLN, teachers can be involved by posting questions, promoting discussion by answering others' questions, and receiving quick responses from other professionals in the PLN. Another strategy to be actively involved in an online PLN is to take a few minutes a day to skim through a PLN's Twitter feed or Facebook page. Some online PLNs also provide opportunities to participate in in-person or virtual meetups, fostering community and relationships among the members of the PLN.

KEY Elements