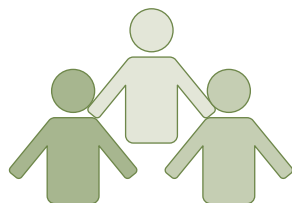


CHAPTER 2



School Community Leaders & Coaches

A Roadmap for Building a Professional Learning Infrastructure

Many teachers have never even seen a classroom where the technology is being utilized to truly meet every student where they are at and help push them forward; it is almost hard for them to imagine a classroom that functions that way.

—Clark Richardson (@cdrich86),
technology integration specialist

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning seeks to shift the classroom from a teacher-focused and teacher-paced learning environment to a student-centered space where learners have some control over the time, place, pace, and path of their learning. Professional development should mirror this shift in the realm of professional learning. Instead of periodic all-staff training sessions that often follow a “sit and get” model, professional development focused on blended learning should combine targeted training, one-on-one coaching, and professional learning communities (PLCs) to place the focus on the learners—in this case, the teachers—to ensure they feel supported as they learn about blended learning models, teaching strategies, and technology tools.

To effectively support teachers transitioning to a blended model, schools must reimagine their approach to professional learning. Instead of a handful of professional development days, professional learning must be built into the school schedule so it’s ongoing, relevant, and effective.

This chapter will:

- Define the scope of professional learning as it relates to this book
- Share a simple yet effective strategy for training teachers in a whole group setting
- Introduce the one-on-one coaching cycle
- Describe the purpose a professional learning community fulfills for a long-term professional learning strategy

BLENDED LEARNING DEMANDS A NEW APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The impact of technology on the way we learn and engage with the world demands that educators integrate technology seamlessly into their teaching practice to ensure students learn important life skills in conjunction with the subject matter. In my last book, *Blended Learning in Action* (Tucker, Wycoff, & Green, 2016), I wrote that when blended learning is implemented successfully, it enables the following hallmarks of best teaching and learning practices:

- **Personalization:** providing unique learning pathways for individual students
- **Agency:** giving learners opportunities to participate in key decisions
- **Authentic audience:** giving learners opportunities to create for a real audience both locally and globally
- **Connectivity:** providing learners opportunities to learn collaboratively with peers and experts both locally and globally
- **Creativity:** providing learners individual and collaborative opportunities to make things that matter

To reach these hallmarks of best teaching and learning practices, teachers both aspiring and current have to understand and appreciate the value of technology for both increasing student academic success and improving teacher effectiveness. However, a 2013 report titled *Learning in the 21st Century*, which was based on data collected by education nonprofit Project Tomorrow, revealed some stark differences in the way aspiring educators view technology's role in education compared to current classroom teachers. Fifty-one percent of current classroom teachers believe technology can make lessons more interactive, 37% feel that technology could allow for more student-centered learning, 38% think technology can help them to create more relevant lessons, and only 23% feel that technology could increase the connection between teacher and students (Project Tomorrow, 2013).

This data suggests that teachers both aspiring and current need a better understanding of how technology can make lessons more engaging by placing students at the center of learning in the classroom. Training must focus on technology's

ability to spark student creativity, allow for student ownership over their learning, and foster collaboration. However, using technology in the classroom is a daunting task for many teachers who lack the time, support, and confidence to experiment. It's critical that school districts rethink their approach to professional development and weave professional learning into the fabric of the school day to provide ongoing learning opportunities for teachers. Learning cannot be isolated to a few staff development days each school year.

So how do we bridge the gap and get all educators to recognize the value of technology? How do we help teachers see that technology, when used effectively, has the potential to positively impact student academic success and teacher effectiveness? The short answer is professional learning. This book strives to provide a more in-depth answer to the challenge of scaling high-quality professional learning.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: DEFINING THE SCOPE

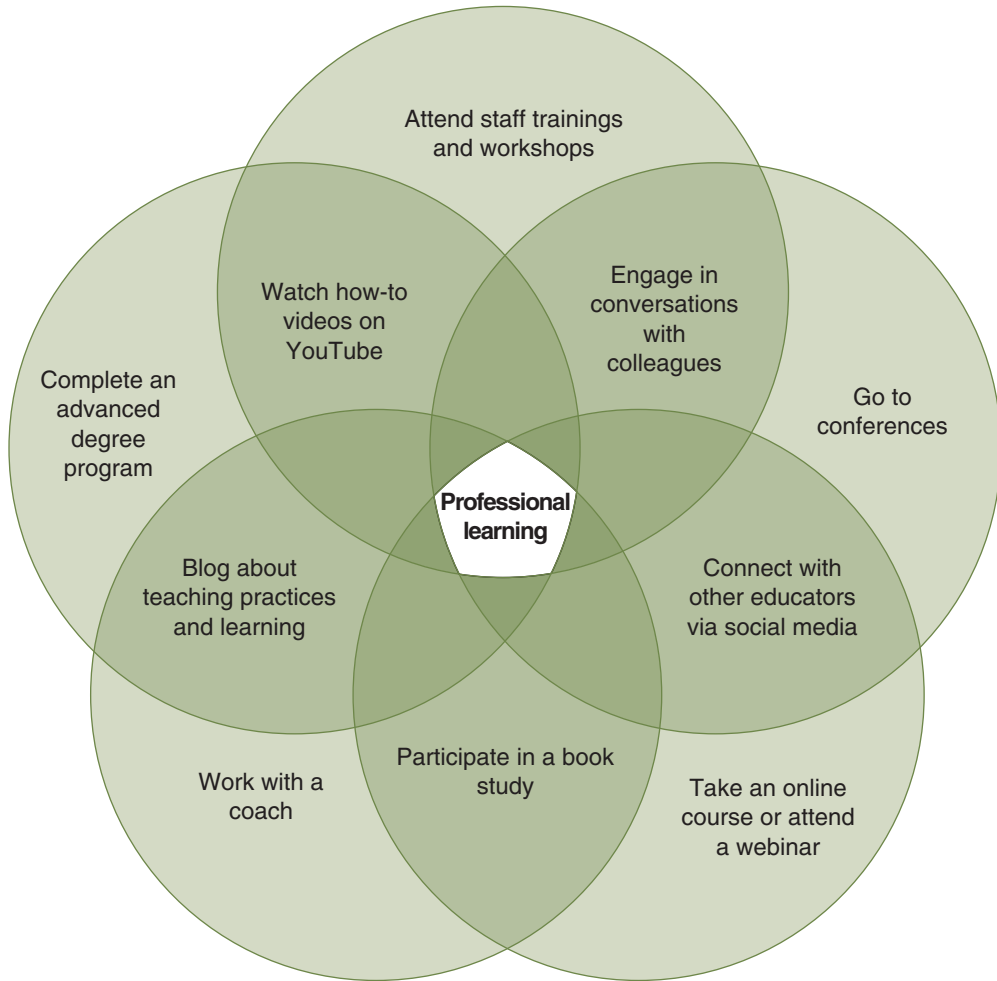
Professional development is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of learning activities aimed at helping professionals in the field of education continue learning and honing their skills. Because this definition is so broad, educators will hear *professional development* (PD) used to describe a wide array of learning opportunities, including workshops, all-staff training sessions, conferences, online courses, peer coaching, advanced degree programs, and more. In addition to these more formal approaches to professional learning, there are also informal ways that teachers learn, as pictured in Figure 2.1 on the next page. Informal learning is as valuable as formal learning because it is teacher driven. It may include engaging in conversations with colleagues about teaching strategies, watching YouTube videos, writing and reading blogs, or connecting with other educators via social media.

Professional development can be facilitated by outside experts and consultants, on-site teachers or administrators, staff from the district office, coaches, or outside organizations. Professional development can span a single day or be embedded into a teacher's schedule. Some professional development is required by the school, while other forms of it are optional.

So, the type of learning, length of learning, and person leading the learning can be wildly different depending on a person's interpretation of the term *professional development*. This broad definition can muddy the conversation about what effective professional development looks like for teachers, administrators, and other credentialed staff on a school campus. For the purpose of this book, I'm narrowing the scope of the conversation to the following three types of professional learning:

1. Targeted training led by experts or trainers
2. One-on-one coaching
3. Participation in a PLC that includes ongoing, non-evaluative peer coaching

FIGURE 2.1 Professional Learning Includes Both Formal and Informal Learning

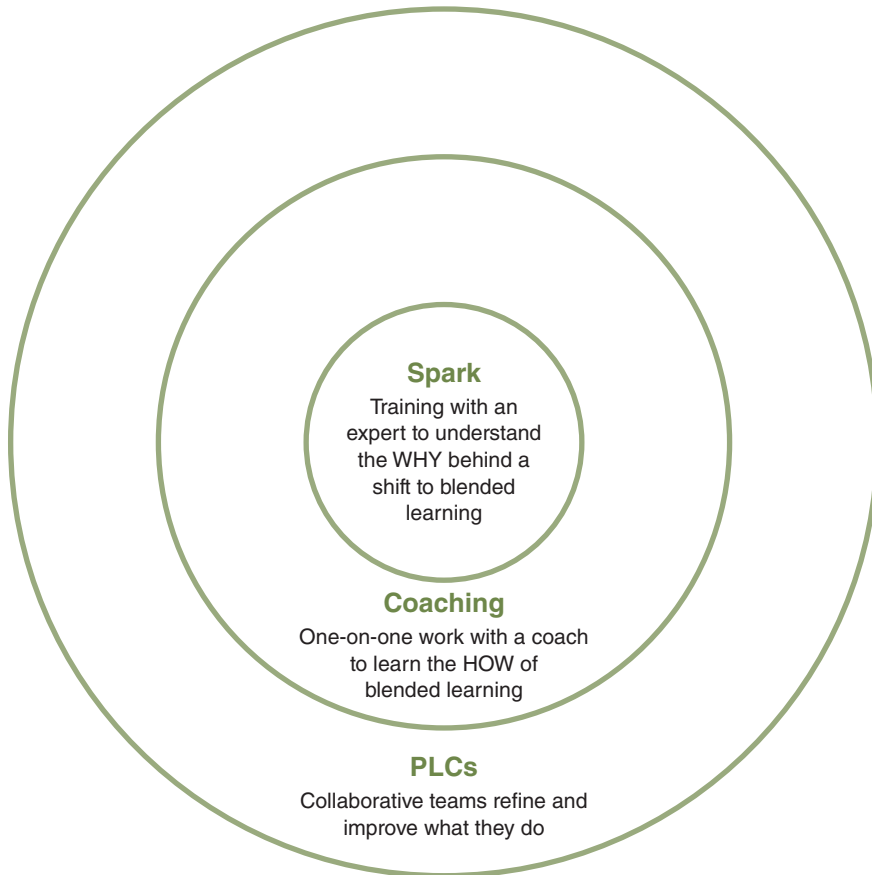


I've chosen these three specific types of professional learning because they allow for a gradual release of learning to educators over time, as pictured in Figure 2.2. Instead of treating professional learning as an event with a beginning and end, it must be embedded into the design of the school.

The Spark: Establish the WHY

Professional learning that follows a gradual release model should begin with a “spark” that hooks your teachers and gains their buy-in. Typically, an expert is brought into a school to establish the *why*, or the purpose of a shift to blended learning. I play this role for school districts frequently. I come in for 1 or 2 days of intensive blended learning training to articulate the value

FIGURE 2.2 Gradual Release of Professional Learning to Educators



of blended learning, provide a long-term vision for change, and get teachers excited about blended learning. It's important for teachers to see the value in the change, and that is something a dynamic presenter with expertise in the field can help facilitate effectively.

During this first stage, it is important to keep the scope of the training narrow to allow time for the expert to actively engage teachers in hands-on, practice-based work. Chapter 3 identifies a simple training approach experts can use to ensure these larger group training sessions provide a foundation on which the coaches and PLCs can build. If an expert does not actively engage participants, teachers are unlikely to walk away from the training willing and able to implement new strategies and use new forms of technology. The most effective whole group training sessions will also employ the strategies that school leaders want teachers to use after the training.

Blended Learning Coaches: Support the HOW

Following a whole group training session, blended learning coaches must take the information presented in the training and help the teachers figure out how to apply what they learned in their classrooms. Given the high ratio of teachers to coaches, it's most manageable to begin coaching teachers who are either leading a blended learning pilot or teachers who are early adopters. For the purposes of this book, I'll refer to these early adopters as *teacher trailblazers*. These folks are key to creating change on a campus.

Peter Senge identified innovative educators as a primary leverage for change in school and stated, "We must unleash the forces of innovation and passion of individuals" (as quoted in Sparks, 2001, p. 43). It's ideal to identify and support these innovative teacher trailblazers early in a shift to blended learning because they will embrace change and serve as models for other teachers who are more hesitant to try new teaching strategies. The coaching phase provides these pilot teachers and teacher trailblazers with consistent support and feedback as they implement new teaching techniques and blended learning models.

Professional Learning Communities: Develop and Refine the WHAT

Finally, teachers must be organized in PLCs and given dedicated time in their schedules to meet and use the various parts of the coaching cycle to provide one another with ongoing support and non-evaluative feedback. In this final step, the teachers own the professional learning and work collaboratively to ensure they continue learning and evolving as a group.

These three interconnected elements of professional development—targeted training with an expert, one-on-one coaching, and PLCs—should be part of a school's strategic plan to help educators shift to blended learning. However, it requires that leaders rethink the master schedule, use of facilities, goals of professional development, and budget priorities.

Even though I will be focusing on training, coaching, and PLCs, it's important to acknowledge how valuable it is for educators to pursue their own learning and interests by attending conferences, signing up for online courses, and connecting with other educators on social media to supplement these three types of learning. The more educators aggressively pursue their own learning, the more excited they will be to try new teaching strategies and technology tools.

THE SPARK: ON-SITE TARGETED TRAINING LED BY AN EXPERT

Everyone needs to be inspired. It's easy to become disillusioned with our profession. I've had moments during my career where I've thought, "I've

made an enormous mistake becoming a teacher. This is not what I signed up for!” Most educators experience these moments, which is why powerful professional development with an expert can be inspiring and rejuvenating. Any school or district trying to excite teachers to make a significant change in their approach to teaching should organize an event aimed at energizing teachers while also articulating *why* this shift is worth the time, energy, and effort. I call this moment “the spark.”

The spark is just the beginning of a larger movement aimed at supporting teachers. Too often, school districts plan a handful of professional development days over the course of the year and the learning ends there. Teachers do not have support as they consider how to implement new strategies in their classrooms. If a physical education teacher or choir teacher goes to a training session on a specific blended learning model, he or she may leave intrigued but is going to need support to figure out how to apply those strategies to his or her particular teaching assignments. If the professional development training is a stand-alone event, the spark will fizzle and teachers will revert to what is comfortable.

To turn the spark into a flame, single-day training sessions with an expert must be followed by coaching. Ideally, coaches work one-on-one with an educator to take a new strategy and figure out what it will look like in that educator’s classroom. If a training session is not tailored to a teacher’s specific grade level or subject area, which is often the case, then it’s the coach’s job to bridge that gap and help the teacher apply the strategy in the context of his or her teaching assignment.

ONE-ON-ONE COACHING

The value of a coach’s role in continued learning and development makes intuitive sense, but a coach also plays a pivotal role in supporting the coachee through moments of doubt and failure. For those of us who enjoy sports, we know that even athletes at the highest levels of competition have coaches who they credit with their development as players. Many athletes also touch on the important role their coaches play as mentors, providing a safe space for the athlete to practice and fail. For example, in an interview with Simon Briggs (2016) for *The Telegraph*, Andy Murray, arguably one of the best tennis players in the world, said, “Ivan [Lendl] is the best coach I’ve had. It was good to have someone who could normalise failing.” This quote speaks to the reality that everyone who is working to develop a skill needs a support system. We all need to feel it is okay to fail and that our failures are a necessary part of learning. A coach plays this key role in professional learning.

The coach cannot be the expert on everything, especially when it comes to the ever-changing landscape of technology, which is why targeted professional development in the form of single-day or multiday training with an expert is valuable to introduce both the coaches and the teachers to

new strategies and tools. After the initial spark is ignited by an expert, the coaches and PLCs on a campus must act as the long-term support network for teachers.

Coaching is identified by Joyce and Showers (2002) as the most effective factor in professional learning; however, most professional development still occurs in a single day. This approach to professional development fails to build in the necessary time to allow teachers to discuss strategies, practice strategies in a simulated environment with other teachers, and reflect on the best way to use a chosen strategy with their students. Building these key elements into all training sessions, whether small group or whole staff, is an important *first* step in supporting the shift to blended learning. Chapter 3 explores how to make the most of training sessions led by an expert or trainer.

In this book I will introduce a coaching cycle that supports teachers from the early stages of goal setting and lesson planning to teaching and reflecting. The specific coaching cycle described in this book (and pictured in Figure 2.3) includes (1) initial conversation and goal setting, (2) initial observation and debrief, (3) co-lesson planning, (4) real-time coaching, (5) model lessons and co-teaching, and (6) documenting, reflecting, and revisiting goals.

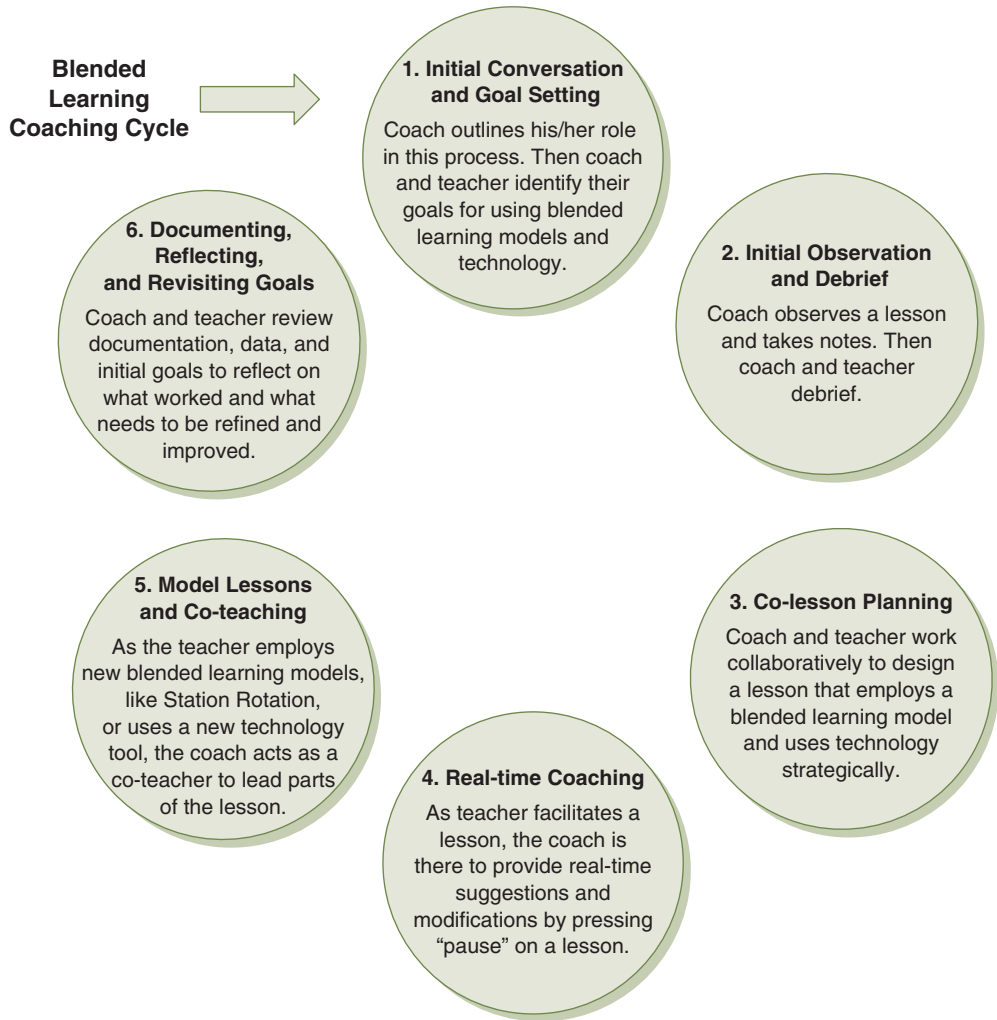
Depending on a teacher's progress and needs, a coach can repeat steps as many times as necessary. I've spent several sessions lesson planning with teachers who struggle to conceptualize a blended lesson that does not follow a linear whole group agenda. Other teachers feel confident lesson planning after only one session and prefer to plan on their own and share their lessons with me via Google Docs for feedback. Similarly, some teachers feel more comfortable trying something new if I am there to co-teach, so I spend time in their classrooms leading a station or lending support as students navigate a blended lesson. The coaching cycle is flexible, and progress through the steps can be customized for individual teachers.

Chapters 5–10 will focus on each step of the coaching cycle and explain how coaches can maximize the effectiveness of coaching by leveraging technology. Each step in the coaching cycle plays an important role in developing trust between coach and teacher as well as in supporting the teacher in designing, implementing, and reflecting on her or his blended learning journey.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCs)

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are designed to transform schools into learning communities where teachers are connected to develop and share knowledge. They are a “vehicle for establishing collegial relationships and for building capacity for change within a school” (Blankenship & Ruona,

FIGURE 2.3 Blended Learning Coaching Cycle



2007). Given how rapidly technology is changing the landscape of learning, it’s imperative that schools have a long-term strategy for developing and sharing knowledge. Teachers can no longer afford to teach and learn in isolation. For schools to meet the myriad challenges they face, teachers must work in collaborative teams to identify challenges, design solutions, collect data, and reflect on their practice together. Teachers often feel they work in silos and rarely have time to meet with their peers to discuss their teaching practices. The goal of a PLC is to facilitate professional dialogue and continue the learning on a campus through inquiry and action. PLCs create time and space for colleagues to collaborate and learn from one another.

Due to scheduling challenges, some schools make participation in teacher teams voluntary, while at other schools participation is a requirement and time to meet is built into the master schedule. When participation in a PLC is voluntary, the percentage of teachers participating tends to be low and those who opt in are typically more motivated to keep learning. Those eager teachers are likely to be your blended learning trailblazers, so it's helpful to have them lead change on a campus and collaborate regularly with the teachers who are more reluctant to embrace change. This is why it's more effective to build PLCs into the schedule to ensure all teachers participate. Chapter 12 will delve further into the purpose, structure, and benefits of grouping teachers in the PLC and leveraging teachers who've experienced one-on-one coaching to support their peers in the shift to blended learning.

Technology isn't going away. It's changing rapidly. Even teachers who successfully shift to blended learning will need ongoing support to continue adding tools to their toolboxes and experimenting with new ways to engage students with that technology. This is the role PLCs can play in a long-term professional learning strategy.

WRAP UP

The tidal wave of technology has pushed many educators into early retirement due to fear of having to learn how to teach with it. However, learning how to teach in new ways should not be so scary that it drives people from the profession. It should be exciting. If our goal as educators is to cultivate lifelong learners, then we must model lifelong learning as well. Educators who continue to learn, grow, and experiment stay passionate about their work, which translates into students who, in turn, are interested and excited to learn.

Unfortunately, many teachers resent being asked to change because they don't feel supported. They may already be frustrated by large class sizes, lack of access to resources, pressure to teach specific standards, or too many new initiatives introduced without the necessary follow-through. Teachers face myriad challenges that drain their energy and cause them to push back when asked to make significant changes. So leadership must think about how it can cultivate a culture that values and prioritizes a professional learning infrastructure that offers teachers long-term support as they make fundamental changes to their teaching.

The most effective way to produce long-term, sustainable change is to offer ongoing support, feedback, and learning opportunities in the form of targeted training; on-site, one-on-one coaching; and participation in PLCs. This model is particularly effective because it personalizes professional development, allowing colleagues to work together to improve their practice all year long.

BOOK STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What types of professional learning do your teachers typically experience in a school year? Do you bring experts on-site to train teachers? Do you encourage teachers to attend conferences to learn?
2. How much training is offered to teachers each school year? Does your school have a set number of professional development days used for training? Is there any ongoing training available to teachers? Is there a way to build more informal training opportunities into your current schedule?
3. Who typically leads training sessions? Are trainers usually hired from outside of the district? Are there people on campus (e.g., instructional coaches) who are responsible for developing whole staff and small group training sessions? How successful have those sessions been? How do you measure the success of a training session (e.g., teacher ratings, percentage of teachers implementing new strategies or technology tools)?
4. How do you identify the topics or skills that will be the focus of the training sessions you organize? How do you engage your teachers' voices in this process to ensure that training sessions are on topics of value and interest to them?
5. Are training sessions hands-on and practice based? How do you currently encourage your teachers to take what they've learned in training and attempt to apply it in the classroom? Are there any follow-up routines or protocols in place to reinforce training sessions and ensure teachers feel supported during implementation?
6. Do teachers have access to coaching now? If so, how successful has that been? If not, what challenges might exist with introducing coaching as a long-term strategy for supporting teachers as they shift to blended learning?
7. Are you currently using PLCs? If so, how much time do your PLCs have together in a given day, week, or month? Is there any structure given to their time together? If you do not currently use PLCs, what might be the value of incorporating them into your schedule? What might the challenges of introducing PLCs be given your current schedule and school culture?