



Framework

# Professional Learning Communities

June 2019

## 1. Background & introduction

This framework describes how professional learning communities (PLCs) matter for quality education, as they play an important role in the professional development and motivation of school leaders.

VVOB together with its partners Rwanda Education Board (REB) and the University of Rwanda – College of Education (UR-CE) are implementing a Multi-Year programme “Leading, Teaching and Learning Together (LTLT)/ Umusemburo w’Ireme ry’Uburezi Programme” (2017-2021) to promote the quality of basic education through enhancing school leadership and developing a school-based teacher support system. The programme focuses on advancing the implementation of the Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) while supporting the improvement of learning outcomes, especially in Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

To achieve this, VVOB and its partners work on the development and design, implementation and evaluation of continuous professional development (CPD) trajectories for District Education Officials, Sector Education Inspectors (SEIs), Head Teachers (HT) & Deputy Head Teachers (DHT), School Based Mentors (SBMs), School Subject Leaders (SSLs) and Heads of Department through a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Diploma in Effective School Leadership and CPD Certificates in Educational Mentorship and Coaching (CEMC).

These CPD trajectories consist of 2 modalities: participation in certified CPD programmes and engagement in PLCs under the guidance of trained SEIs.

### a. CPD Diploma Programme in Effective School Leadership for School Leaders

This programme aims at equipping head teachers and deputy head teachers with the competences to fulfil their roles as school leaders. The standards for effective school leadership from REB form the backbone of the programme. The programme is offered as a year-long programme with 18 contact days.

The programme was first offered by UR-CE as a Diploma Programme in 2016 when 397 head teachers from schools with a primary section graduated (1 head teacher per sector was enrolled). Monitoring, evaluation and research formed the basis for an extensive revision of the programme in 2017 (VVOB, 2016a) and minor revisions in 2018 and 2019. Between 2018 and 2021, all head teachers from primary schools (including 9-year and 12-year basic education schools) in 6 districts and all head teachers and deputy head teachers from secondary schools (including 9-year and 12-year basic education schools) in 14 districts will enrol in the programme. During this period, about 2000 school leaders from 1322 schools will be targeted. District Directors of Education (DDEs) and District Education Officers (DEOs) from 17 districts enrol in the programme in 2019.

As of 2019, the Diploma Programme is offered as a blended programme (VVOB, 2019). In between face to face sessions, participants take part in online discussions, activities and readings.

### b. CPD Certificate Programme in Educational Mentorship and Coaching for SEIs

This programme is delivered by URCE with the aim of equipping SEIs with the competences to coach school leaders effectively based on their oversight role for quality education in their sectors. Secondly, the programme focuses on equipping SEIs with the skills to initiate and sustain PLCs of school leaders.

In 2014-2016, VVOB trained 120 SEIs (4 SEIs per district). Regular coaching and feedback helped SEIs and head teachers to improve the quality of their PLCs. An impact study from 2016 showed the effectiveness the approach and resulted in recommendations for finetuning of the interventions. In 2017, the training was revised and developed into a Programme certified by the UR-CE. This programme was first offered in 2018 to 139 SEIs.

<sup>1</sup> REB (2016). School-based mentor program framework 2017-2022. Kigali: Rwanda Education Board

To date, 220 SEIs in the 17 intervention districts have taken part in the programme. A refresher and reflection workshop for all SEIs is planned about one year after finishing the programme.

### c. PLCs for School Leaders under guidance of SEIs

As inspectors at the local level, SEIs play a central role in collecting and analysing school performance data. These data form the basis of identifying areas for improvement and establishing collaboration among schools. Through their engagement in PLCs, SEIs obtain better insight in school performance and take more data-driven decisions. Currently, 220 PLCs are operational in 17 districts, reaching 816 school leaders. District Directors of Educations have been trained to oversee the implementation.

## 2. Rationale for PLCs

VVOB's experience has shown that trainings alone are insufficient and need to be complemented by strategies that provide continuous support and involve school leaders themselves (EDT, 2017). If implemented well, PLCs can be an effective form of professional development (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). They bridge the gap between theory, policy and practice, focus on practice, 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). Their cost-effectiveness and embeddedness into existing structures at sector level contribute to their sustainability as an instrument for professional development.

Research has also underlined the importance of a competent and motivated leader for PLCs to introduce fresh insights and ideas and avoid group thinking (e.g. Brodie, 2013). VVOB's experience has confirmed the need for extensive coaching and feedback to help PLC members understand the bottom-up and collaborative nature of PLCs (VVOB, 2017).

Successful PLCs require the fulfilment of six key enablers (Katz, Earl, & Jaafar, 2009):

1. Purpose and focus: PLC members define the purpose and objective of each session and allocate enough time to the matter. Members share a common focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning in their schools.
2. Relationships: members share information openly, including successes and failures, and they trust and respect each other.
3. Collaboration: PLC members engage in intensive interactions where they present their beliefs and practices to investigation and practice.
4. Inquiry: members collectively question teaching and leadership routines, examine teaching and learning and engage in supporting each other's professional growth. Identification of challenges and solutions is informed by evidence.
5. Leadership: PLC members assume leadership roles within the PLC, e.g., setting the agenda, leading on specific tasks.
6. Accountability: PLC members hold each other accountable for implementing the decisions taken and ensuring the effectiveness of the PLC.

### 3. Description & Purpose

PLC sessions are conducted on a regular basis and are a platform at sector level where school leaders meet face to face with the objective of learning with and from each other through solving challenges and sharing good practices (REB- VVOB, 2016). During PLC sessions, members focus on finding solutions to challenges regarding the quality of teaching and learning in their schools.

The Teacher Development and Management policy has identified the need to make school leadership and management effective as a priority (strategic objective 6). Planned activities under this strategic objective include the establishment of professional standards for school leaders, the organisation of continuous professional development for school leaders and the creation of professional learning networks. Anticipating the approval of the policy, the School Leadership and Management Unit and VVOB have developed, piloted and researched professional learning networks for head teachers as a cost-effective form of in-service training (Ife, 2013).

The new ESSP (2018/19 to 2022/23) is structured around nine strategic priorities, of which strategic priority 9 (Strengthened governance and accountability across all levels of education) is particularly relevant for school leaders. Strategic priority 9 states that the focus on improved learning demands the development of strong school leadership. The ESSP highlights the challenge to transform the role of school leaders from a largely administrative role to becoming true leaders of their schools with more focus on leading teaching and learning in the school. The ESSP recognizes the need for training, capacity building and support, and refers to the key role of effective professional learning communities and positive learning environments in achieving this. School leaders also play an important role in the realisation of other strategic priorities in the ESSP, notably strategic priority 1 (enhanced quality learning outcomes that are relevant to Rwanda's social and economic development), strategic priority 2 (Strengthened CPD and management of teachers across all levels of education in Rwanda), and strategic priority 6 (Strengthened modern school infrastructure and facilities across all levels of education in Rwanda).

To further support SEIs and make sure PLC sessions are conducted in a focused and effective way, an action-oriented cycle was designed with the following purposes:

1. Identifying pressing school and sector challenges;
2. Developing School Improvement Plans (SIPs) that are aligned with the Sector Education Improvement Plan (SEIP);
3. Engaging school leaders in sharing interesting practices and learning from each other,
4. Reflecting on and disseminating best practices in school leadership.

A full cycle takes one school year, with 4 PLC sessions organized on a quarterly basis. At the end of each session, PLC members agree upon actions to accomplish before the next session. Inspired by REB's PDSI process for CPD (PDSI standing for Plan, Do, See and Improve), PLC sessions will follow a problem-solving structure: identification, planning, review and reflection. Implementation will be organized in each school between the planning and review sessions.

Hereafter, a brief outline of the action-oriented cycle and the purpose of each PLC session is given (Figure 2).

### 3.1 Identification session

During the first session, PLC members identify a challenge that will become the priority of that year and identify measures of success against which they will evaluate their actions. A list of Government priorities is provided to support PLC members in the identification of a challenge. The selected priority is a common challenge e.g. dropout, school feeding, implementation of CBC, etc. and it will be decided upon with reference to the individual SIP and the SEIP (Figure 1). All school leaders will carry out a situation analysis in their schools on the selected challenge.

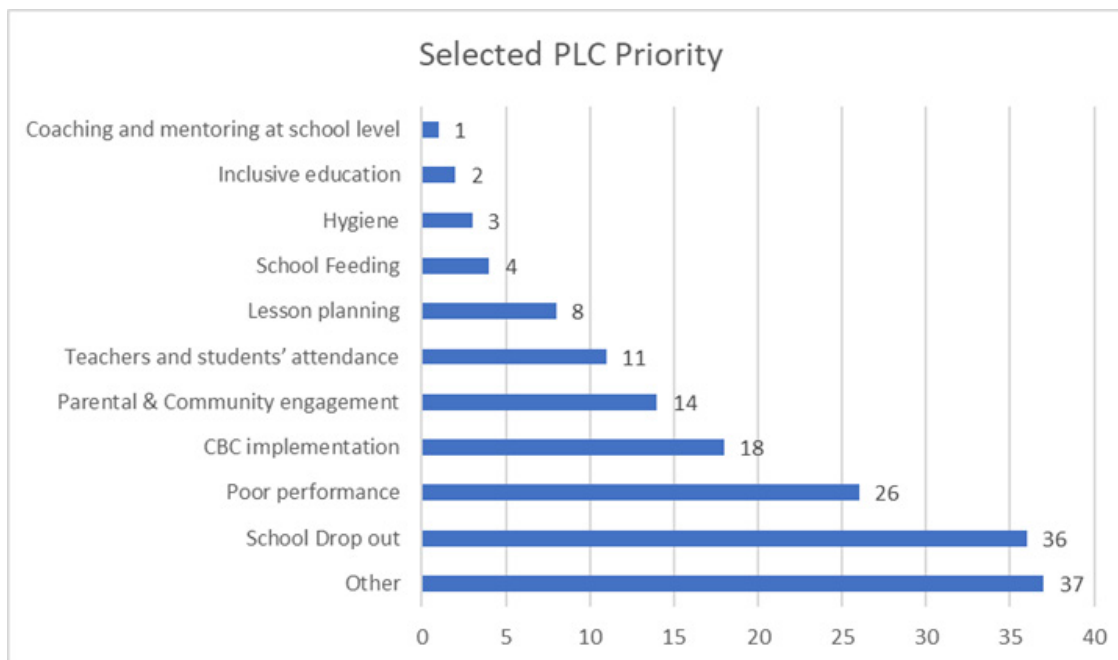


Figure 1: Selected PLC Priorities during 2019 school year

### 3.2 Planning session

During the second PLC session, based on the situation analysis, PLC members select strategies to try out in their schools to overcome the challenge. They develop an implementation plan for each strategy as part of their SIP.

### 3.3 Review session

In this session, members share experiences from try-outs and decide on the most appropriate strategy. As in session 2, members develop an implementation plan for this strategy and try it out in their schools.

### 3.4 Reflection and dissemination session

The reflection session completes the cycle. PLC members discuss the entire process, record lessons learnt, and build a step-by-step strategy that can be shared with other PLCs.

Each PLC session lasts approximately 2 hours and has two main sections:

- a. The first section will be focusing on the PLC priority and will take an hour and a half;
- b. The second section will be for AOB and lasts half an hour.



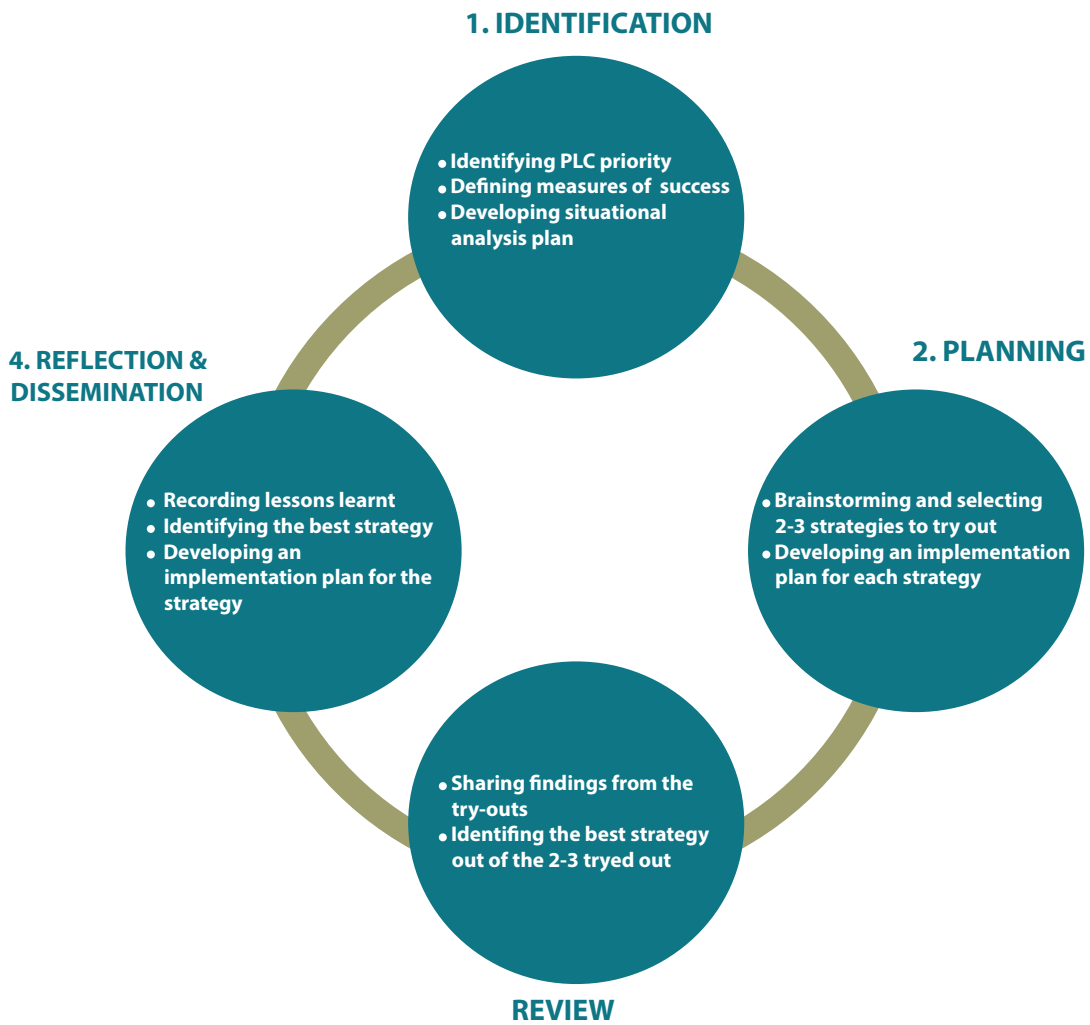


Figure 2: Action-oriented cycle for PLCs consisting of 4 sessions

**Table 1: Description of each PLC session**

PLC-sessions	Timeline
Session 1: Identification	February
<p><b>Objectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying a PLC priority</li> <li>Identifying measures of success</li> </ul> <p><b>Activities during the PLC</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify one PLC priority to be explored during the year</li> <li>Analyse the priority thoroughly and comprehensively</li> <li>Indicate measures of success to observe the achievement of the priority</li> <li>Develop a plan for a situational analysis at school level on the identified priority</li> </ul> <p><b>Resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guidelines to identify a PLC priority</li> <li>Situational Analysis template</li> <li>Measures of success template</li> <li>List of examples of challenges based on Government priorities</li> <li>Follow-up</li> <li>Carry-out a situation analysis at individual schools</li> </ul>	
Session 2: Planning	May
<p><b>Objectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share findings from the situational analysis at school level</li> <li>Select 2-3 strategies to try-out to address the PLC priority</li> <li>Develop an implementation plan for 2-3 strategies</li> </ul> <p><b>Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share findings from the situational analysis at school level</li> <li>Develop a sector Problem Tree basing on findings from the situational analysis</li> <li>Develop a Solution Tree basing on practices already in place</li> <li>Select 2-3 strategies to try out in the upcoming quarter</li> <li>Identify measures of success for each strategy</li> <li>Develop a customized implementation plan for each strategy</li> </ul> <p><b>Resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Case studies on the selected PLC priority</li> <li>Implementation plan template</li> </ul> <p><b>Follow-up</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trying out the 2-3 strategies</li> <li>Recording processes and lessons learnt</li> </ul>	

**Session 3: Review**

**August**

**Objectives**

- Share experiences from the try-outs
- Identify the most appropriate strategy
- Develop a final implementation plan for the chosen strategy

**Activities**

- Share findings about the 2-3 different strategies
- Discuss and decide upon the best strategy (solution to address the PLC priority)
- Develop a final implementation plan for the selected strategy customized for each school
- Develop measures of success for this implementation plan

**Resources**

- Template to record the try-outs
- Guidelines to identify/develop the best strategy
- Implementation plan template (including the measures of success template)

**Follow-up**

- Implement the selected strategy

**Session 4: Reflection**

**November**

**Objectives**

- Group evaluation on the process and outcomes

**Activities**

- Reflect on the action-oriented PLC cycle
- Record best practices
- Document lessons learnt
- Enrich the detailed implementation plan for the selected strategy

**Resources**

- Auto-evaluation template
- Template to record best practices & lessons learnt



## 4. Scope

VVOB facilitates PLCs in 17 districts. Table 2 describes which groups of HTs and DHTs are members of the PLCs in each district.

**Table 2: Overview of supported PLCs per district**

District	Group of Head Teachers and Deputy Head Teachers	VVOB Programme (SBMs and SSLs)
1. Kirehe	Primary and 9&12YBE	Primary Education (PE)
2. Gatsibo	Primary and 9&12YBE	Primary Education (PE)
3. Nyagatare	Primary and 9&12YBE	Primary Education (PE)
4. Kayonza	Primary, 9&12YBE and Secondary	Primary & Secondary Education (PE&SE)
5. Nyabihu	Primary, 9&12YBE and Secondary	Primary & Secondary Education (PE&SE)
6. Rusizi	Primary, 9&12YBE and Secondary	Primary & Secondary Education (PE&SE)
7. Gicumbi	9&12YBE and Secondary only	Secondary Education (SE)
8. Rwamagana	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)
9. Nyamasheke	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)
10. Karongi	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)
11. Rubavu	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)
12. Ngororero	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)
13. Musanze	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)
14. Nyanza	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)
15. Gisagara	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)
16. Nyaruguru	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)
17. Kamonyi	9&12YBE and Secondary	Secondary Education (SE)

## 5. Assessment of Practices

Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of PLC sessions is done through a variety of instruments and activities to ensure that capacity development interventions result in demonstrable, sustainable and desirable changes in leadership practices (VVOB, 2018):

- As part of their formative assessment, participants in the Diploma Programme submit eight practice-based written assignments that challenge them to relate the course content to their school practice in collaboration with school stakeholders. Similarly, SEIs submit an assignment after each of their 4 sessions. Some of these assignments require engagement in a PLC.
- Throughout the Diploma Programme, participants construct a Portfolio of Evidence that documents how they implement each professional standard for school leaders as a result of taking part in the programme. Compulsory elements in the Portfolio of Evidence are minutes of PLC sessions and a critical reflection on the role of the PLC in their professional development. Similarly, SEIs document how the certificate programme has helped them to implement their oversight role of quality implementation of education policy and strategy at the sector level, including organizing PLCs.
- Each PLC is visited twice during each cycle by trainers and REB staff to support members in implementing what they have learned and providing them with constructive feedback. Data from field visits are interpreted and consequences for follow up are discussed in reflection workshops with the trainers.

In 2019, an e-monitoring system for PLCs using KoBo toolbox is piloted (VVOB, 2019). Online monitoring forms for each PLC session have been developed. These are completed and uploaded by SEIs after each session. The use of e-monitoring may result in more efficient and effective monitoring due to a more direct feedback loop (i.e. results can be presented directly after the form has been filled in), reduced data entry errors and a lower risk of losing collected data. Through an online dashboard, SEIs can monitor the performance of their PLC compared to other PLCs. Finally, e-monitoring tools such as KoBo toolbox allow the addition of photos, voice recordings and videos which enrich textual or numeric data.

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