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Teaching and Learning Teams as an Implementation Architecture for System Improvement: A PLC+ Case Study

James Marshall
San Diego State University, USA
Angela Hinton
Spartanburg School District Two, South Carolina, USA

ABSTRACT

This single-district case study reports a program evaluation of Spartanburg School District Two's Teaching and Learning Teams (TLTs), aligned locally to the PLC+ framework, as the implementation architecture used to organize, scale, and sustain instructional improvement across schools. Using a convergent mixed-evidence approach, the evaluation integrated semi-structured interviews with district and school personnel (n = 18), a districtwide educator survey (n = 487) including paired retrospective items, a key informant interview (n = 1), and aggregated student achievement indicators reviewed descriptively across the implementation period. Interview findings documented consistent TLT routines anchored in standards unpacking, shared learning intention and success criteria language, and recurring cycles of formative evidence review tied to instructional response. Survey results reflected substantial before-to-current shifts in core clarity routines and broad agreement that instructional planning, student learning, and engagement improved. Educators also described changes in student learning behaviors, including increased articulation of learning goals, more criteria-anchored feedback interactions, and stronger progress monitoring. District outcome indicators are presented as descriptive evidence aligned with the implementation period. The case illustrates how an implementation architecture can organize instructional work, stabilize expectations, and enable sustained improvement across a complex, multi-initiative district context.

***Keywords*:** professional learning communities; PLC+; implementation architecture; system improvement; instructional leadership; program evaluation; teacher clarity

Efforts to improve instructional quality at scale often falter—not because districts lack effective practices, but because they lack durable implementation structures. Professional learning communities (PLCs) were developed to address fragmented instructional practice by organizing educators around shared responsibility for student learning and collaborative inquiry (DuFour et al., 2010; Hord, 1997). Yet collaborative time alone does not guarantee coherence. Without disciplined routines that clarify intended learning, establish shared evidence of mastery, and require instructional response, collaboration can drift toward coordination rather than realizing intended improvement.

Teacher clarity, defined through the articulation of learning intentions and success criteria and reinforced through formative evidence cycles, has been consistently linked to stronger student outcomes (Fisher et al., 2018; Hattie, 2023). In practice, however, clarity does not scale automatically. Even when educators understand the concepts, the challenge is translating clarity into routine planning, common evidence use, and consistent student-facing language across classrooms and schools. Such challenges are not theoretical. Often, what we describe is, at its foundation, an implementation problem. As Marshall (2023) argues, increasing professional knowledge proves insufficient without predictable application; initiatives succeed when leaders align intended outcomes with the structures, supports, systems, and expectations required to turn learning into action.

This program evaluation investigates both the implementation and the impact of a PLC-focused district-wide initiative. It examines South Carolina Spartanburg School District Two's Teaching and Learning Teams (TLTs), aligned locally to the PLC+ framework, as the district's primary collaborative implementation structure for scaling an early instructional focus on teacher clarity. PLC+ extends traditional PLC work by emphasizing disciplined cycles of collaborative planning and response, centering shared learning expectations, common evidence of student learning, and explicit instructional action within team routines (Fisher & Frey, 2025). In this formulation, collaboration is not an end in itself; it is the vehicle through which teams clarify learning, interpret evidence, and determine instructional response. In Spartanburg, that vehicle was enacted through TLTs as the standing structure for instructional decision-making across school contexts. The contribution of this case is *not* primarily the identification of a single effective instructional practice; rather, it is the documentation of how a district designed and sustained an implementation architecture that made instructional improvement routines predictable, repeatable, and scalable across contexts.

The evaluation benefits from educator-participant survey results, semi-structured interviews, and descriptive student outcome evidence to address the following five evaluation questions:

(1) How have educators implemented TLTs/PLC+ focused on teacher clarity?
(2) How did instructional planning and classroom practice shift during implementation?
(3) How did enactment vary across teams and contexts?
(4) What changes were observed in student learning and achievement?
(5) What supports sustained or expanded the initiative across sites?

The study further contributes by documenting implementation routines and associated outcome patterns over time, while recognizing that district improvement occurs in complex environments shaped by multiple concurrent initiatives (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2016). In this sense, the case contributes to the literature on scale and coherence by illustrating how an implementation architecture, rather than any single initiative, can organize instructional work, stabilize expectations, and enable sustained improvement over time.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

PLCs were developed to address fragmentation in instructional practice by organizing educators around shared responsibility for student learning and collaborative inquiry (DuFour et al., 2010; Hord, 1997). At their strongest, PLCs shift responsibility for learning from isolated classrooms to collaborative teams that clarify expectations, interpret evidence, and coordinate instructional response. However, collaboration alone does not ensure coherence. Without disciplined routines for defining learning, establishing shared evidence, and determining response, collaboration can remain procedural rather than instructional (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2016). Collaboration becomes improvement when routines make evidence use and instructional response predictable.

PLC+ as a Content-Agnostic Improvement Vehicle

PLC+ extends PLC practice by making the improvement cycle explicit and disciplined. Fisher and Frey (2025) describe PLC+ as structured around five guiding questions: Where are we going? Where are we now? How do we move learning forward? What did we learn today? Who benefited and did not benefit? These questions organize collaborative inquiry into recurring cycles in which teams clarify goals, analyze evidence, implement instructional responses, and learn from results over time.

A key feature of PLC+ is that it is agnostic to instructional content. It defines how teams engage in inquiry, evidence use, and response, but not what specific instructional priorities must be adopted. As such, PLC+ can carry different improvement aims depending on local context. In this case, the district enacted PLC+ through the use of TLTs to support an early instructional focus on teacher clarity. PLC+ provided the process, teacher clarity provided the instructional emphasis, and TLTs functioned as the structure that made the work routine and visible across schools.

Clarity as an Instructional Anchor Within the PLC+ Cycle

Teacher clarity has been consistently associated with positive student outcomes. In the Visible Learning MetaX (2026) synthesis, an online evidence repository that continuously synthesizes and updates findings from educational meta-analyses, teacher clarity has a weighted mean effect size of 0.85 (101 studies; 14,853 students; 239 effects). Hattie (2023) similarly identifies clarity as a high-impact influence on achievement, emphasizing the importance of clear learning expectations and

criteria for success. Fisher et al. (2018) operationalize clarity through learning intentions, success criteria, and formative feedback cycles.

Within PLC+ routines, clarity strengthens each phase of the inquiry cycle. It sharpens goal-setting by requiring teams to translate standards into explicit learning intentions and criteria for success. It improves evidence interpretation because student work is evaluated against shared criteria. It increases the precision of instructional response by linking evidence directly to agreed expectations. In this way, teacher clarity functions both as classroom practice and as a tool that improves the quality of collaborative decision-making.

Clarity practices, however, do not scale automatically. Without shared expectations and opportunities for calibration, teachers may use learning intentions, criteria, and formative evidence inconsistently. As Marshall (2023) argues, improvement depends not only on knowledge but on predictable application; initiatives succeed when learning is embedded in routines that support consistent enactment. When clarity is integrated within recurring PLC+ cycles, it becomes less dependent on individual variation and more likely to appear as shared practice across teams.

Initiatives, Programs, and Implementation Architecture

A central distinction in this study is between programs and initiatives. Programs typically refer to discrete interventions or resources, whereas initiatives encompass the design, implementation, and refinement processes required to translate ideas into sustained practice (Marshall, 2023). Research on implementation and improvement consistently shows that durable change depends on alignment between intended outcomes, organizational routines, and instructional practice, not simply adoption of effective programs (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2016).

This distinction is particularly important in district-scale reform. When improvement efforts are treated as discrete events—such as professional development sessions or curriculum adoptions—they are often layered onto existing practice without structural integration. Even well-regarded programs can yield limited results when implementation is not supported; without alignment, initiatives may compete for attention or fragment instructional practice (Marshall, 2004). Research on scale and coherence emphasizes that sustained improvement depends on the routines and conditions that stabilize practice across contexts (Coburn, 2003; Datnow & Park, 2014). Improvement science similarly highlights the role of disciplined cycles of inquiry supported by enabling systems and norms (Bryk et al., 2015).

From this perspective, an implementation architecture refers to the routines, tools, roles, and feedback loops that make instructional work repeatable, improvable, and coherent over time (Elmore, 2004; Honig, 2006; Penuel et al., 2011). In this case, TLTs—aligned with PLC+—functioned as that architecture. The district embedded clarity routines, including standards unpacking, learning intentions, success criteria, formative evidence review, and instructional response, within recurring collaborative cycles. Rather than treating PLC+ or teacher clarity as isolated interventions, this study examines how a structured collaborative framework organized instructional work over time and how patterns of practice and outcomes aligned with that structure.

METHODS

This study was designed as a process-focused program evaluation with outcome evaluation components and is presented as a descriptive single-district case study (Yin, 2018). The evaluation examined Spartanburg School District Two's TLT initiative, aligned locally to the PLC+ framework, to understand how the district's collaborative implementation architecture was enacted, how teacher clarity practices developed within that structure, and how instructional practices and district outcome indicators evolved over multiple years. Consistent with program evaluation approaches, the study emphasizes implementation processes and associated outcomes rather than causal attribution, and, therefore, it is not intended as an impact evaluation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011).

The evaluation plan was screened by San Diego State University's Institutional Review Board and determined to be not subject to IRB review (IRB-25-0372; determination issued August 28, 2025). Regardless, data handling and reporting procedures followed applicable privacy regulations and professional ethical standards, including reporting in aggregate form and maintaining confidentiality of interview participants.

District and Program Context

Spartanburg School District Two implemented TLTs as its primary collaborative instructional structure across schools. TLTs operationalized the PLC+ improvement cycle through recurring routines in which teams (a) clarified intended learning by unpacking standards, (b) defined success criteria, (c) reviewed common formative evidence aligned to those expectations,

and (d) determined instructional response based on patterns in student performance (Fisher et al., 2019a). Teacher clarity was introduced as an early instructional priority within this cycle, emphasizing learning intentions, success criteria, and alignment of formative assessment to those criteria (Hattie, 2023; Fisher et al., 2018). Over time, the initiative deepened to include stronger calibration of expectations and evidence, greater coherence across classrooms and grade levels, and more precise instructional language for planning and interpreting student work.

The initiative evolved across multiple years with identifiable phases of emphasis while maintaining TLTs as the primary implementation architecture rather than layering parallel structures. Table 1 presents the year-by-year implementation by summarizing professional learning phases, system supports, and major implementation milestones.

Table 1

Initiative Implementation: Summary of Milestones by Year

Time Period	Primary Focus	Milestones and Examples
2018–2020	Building PLC/TLT fidelity and protocols	• Visible Learning conference attendance (2018) • Leading Impact Teams training and pilot work • Learning by Doing focus for TLT reset
2020–2022	Clarity during pandemic context	• Distance Learning Playbook distributed • Monthly Tier I PD cascade • Continued Core Collaborative support • Reported statewide rank improvements in Grades 3–8 ELA/Math from 2020–21 to 2021–22
2022–2024	Deepening Teacher Clarity and leadership learning	• Teacher Clarity certification (Sept 2022, 40 participants) • Institutes on Teacher Clarity Playbook and Success Criteria Playbook • PLC+ institute for secondary • Success Criteria certification (Dec 2023) • Teacher Clarity Playbook as system text (2023–24) • System walkthroughs (Jan 2024) • Curriculum guide integration (May 2024)
2024–2025	Expansion to scaffolding/GRR while sustaining clarity routines	• How Scaffolding Works as Tier I system text • Onsite GRR training (Sept & Oct 2024) • Teacher Clarity institute (Jan 2025) • Student assessment workshop (Mar 2025).

Data Sources

The evaluation integrates four sources of evidence: semi-structured interviews, districtwide survey data, aggregated student performance indicators, and a key informant interview used to contextualize the implementation timeline and program description.

Interviews

Between December 2025 and January 2026, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 individuals directly engaged in TLT implementation: four principals, one assistant principal, eight instructional coaches (including English/Language Arts and mathematics), and five classroom teachers—across elementary, middle, and high school contexts. Purposive selection was used to capture role-based and school-level variation, including schools identified by the district as having greater experience with TLTs and related professional learning. Protocols were aligned to the five

evaluation questions and elicited descriptions of planning routines, formative evidence use, collaborative dynamics, instructional shifts, student learning behaviors, and sustaining conditions.

To provide district-level context, a semi-structured key informant interview was also conducted with the district administrator responsible for leading TLT implementation. The interview followed the same evaluation framework and explored the development of the initiative, implementation decisions, leadership supports, challenges, and sustainability. The interview was audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and analyzed using the same deductive coding procedures as the school-based interviews.

Survey

A districtwide educator survey was administered from December 15, 2025, to January 5, 2026 ($n = 487$). Items assessed instructional planning, clarity-related practices, student learning and engagement, collaboration, and district supports, with open-ended prompts on perceived drivers and challenges. The only respondent descriptors available were school site and tenure in TLTs; responses reflected participation across district schools and across multiple stages of implementation.

Student performance evidence

Student performance evidence consisted of aggregated district-level assessment indicators and other district-available outcome trends reviewed across the implementation period. These indicators were interpreted descriptively to contextualize reported instructional shifts and educator descriptions of student learning changes.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded deductively and was organized around the five evaluation questions. Interview analysis used an a priori coding structure aligned to the question areas (implementation, instructional shifts, variation, student learning and achievement, and sustaining conditions). Within each area, transcripts were coded for recurring routines, mechanisms, and participant descriptions (e.g., standards unpacking, success criteria, evidence review, response planning, calibration, protected time, coaching). As recommended by Miles et al. (2019), analytic memos and iterative comparison of coded excerpts were used to refine code definitions, collapse related codes into broader themes, and verify that themes reflected patterns evident across participants rather than isolated comments. Themes were retained when they represented coherent patterns across interviews and were supported by multiple participants, while discrepant perspectives were preserved where they added explanatory nuance.

To clarify scope and avoid overstating convergence, theme frequencies were calculated conservatively: a theme was counted only when explicitly referenced by an interviewee and counted once per interviewee regardless of repetition within the transcript. Frequencies were examined across roles and school levels to describe patterns of consistency and variation.

Survey analysis was descriptive and aligned to the same evaluation question areas. Likert items were summarized using distributions. Pre-initiative and current response distributions were compared using McNemar's test for paired dichotomous responses following recoding of Likert-scale responses into agree/strongly agree versus all other categories (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree). Open-ended responses were coded thematically and compared to interview themes to identify convergence and divergence across methods.

Survey items were analyzed across multiple evaluation questions when they provided evidence relevant to more than one construct (e.g., implementation, instructional shift, and student-facing enactment). As a result, some items appear in multiple tables; these are not treated as independent measures but as indicators of overlapping dimensions of practice within the implementation architecture. Items related to success criteria appear most frequently, reflecting both their central role within the teacher clarity framework and their prominence as the primary instructional focus of the TLT initiative. Because success criteria shape planning, evidence interpretation, feedback, and student engagement, their recurrence across tables reflects their integrative role within the implementation architecture rather than a single isolated construct.

Finally, evidence was triangulated across interviews, survey patterns, and student performance indicators. Interviews were used to describe mechanisms and contextual nuance, survey findings to assess breadth, and student performance indicators to provide descriptive outcome context during the implementation period.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was supported through multiple strategies consistent with qualitative case study and program evaluation research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of interview, survey,

district outcome, and key informant data, allowing findings to be examined across multiple sources. Transferability was supported through detailed description of the district context, participants, implementation processes, and collaborative structures, enabling readers to judge the applicability of findings to similar settings. Dependability was enhanced through standardized interview protocols aligned to the evaluation questions, consistent deductive coding procedures, analytic memos documenting coding decisions, and conservative rules for counting theme frequencies. Confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in participant quotations, triangulating findings across data sources, and preserving discrepant perspectives where they contributed to understanding variation in implementation.

FINDINGS

Findings are organized around the five evaluation questions. Across these questions, results are interpreted through the lens of TLTs as an implementation architecture, with attention to how routines, roles, and expectations organized instructional work and influenced patterns of enactment across contexts.

Evaluation Question 1: How Have Educators Implemented TLTs/PLC+ Aligned with Teacher Clarity?

Interview and survey evidence describe TLTs as the district's primary implementation structure for teacher clarity. Interviewees most consistently described a standards-first planning routine supported by shared clarity language and recurring evidence-to-response cycles. Table 2 presents a summary of survey findings aligned with supporting interview themes and interviewee statements.

Interviewees most frequently described standards-first planning, supported by shared clarity language and recurring evidence-to-response cycles. Nearly all interviewees referenced unpacking standards as the starting point for planning (94%, 17/18), often described as identifying "nouns and verbs," and most referenced structured review of formative evidence in TLT meetings (89%, 16/18), including bringing back evidence and being pressed to specify "what we did for each group." Survey paired items align with these descriptions through large retrospective shifts in standards analysis, learning intentions and success criteria routines, assessment alignment, embedded formative checks, and evidence-based instructional adjustment.

Interviewees also described implementation as a deliberate effort to standardize instructional language and expectations. A majority referenced vocabulary alignment around "learning intentions" and "success criteria" (61%, 11/18), including returning to prior targets to "clean up" language so it was student-friendly and skill-aligned. Variation was acknowledged as well: two-thirds of interviewees referenced differences in team engagement or meeting dynamics (67%, 12/18), contrasting meetings that functioned as a "checkbox" with teams where members "share that responsibility" for interpreting evidence and determining response. Survey indicators tied to classroom transfer and student-facing enactment provide a parallel cue that some routines are harder to enact consistently than others, even when planning routines are well established.

Evaluation Question 2: How Did Instructional Planning and Classroom Practice Shift During Implementation?

Interview and survey evidence describe meaningful shifts in instructional planning and classroom practice during implementation. At the global level, 85% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that instructional planning improved, and 78% agreed or strongly agreed that student learning and engagement improved. Table 3 presents a summary of survey findings aligned with supporting interview themes and interviewee statements.

Interviewees most frequently described planning shifts as changes in sequence and specificity: moving from activity-first planning toward defining learning and success first, then selecting tasks and evidence accordingly. A large majority described increased clarity about what students were expected to learn and what would count as evidence of mastery (89%, 16/18), and interviewees described this shift as more than a change in wording. One principal described the difference as selecting tasks that "exhibit that success criteria," reflecting a change in the logic of lesson design rather than an add-on requirement. Interviewees also described formative practice becoming more central to instructional response, including "bring[ing] back that data" and pressing toward next steps, with leaders emphasizing that evidence review was incomplete without clarity about "what we did for each group." Survey paired items align with these descriptions through large retrospective shifts in student-facing clarity routines (e.g., revisiting learning intentions and using success criteria to guide feedback and self-assessment) and in evidence-based practices (e.g., embedded formative checks, assessment alignment, and real-time instructional adjustment).

Table 2

Implementation of TLTs/PLC+ aligned with Teacher Clarity

Survey-reported Changes in Practice: Percentage Selecting "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" (n = 487)	Interview Mentions (n = 18)	Key Interview Findings
Standards unpacking as planning anchor		
I analyze standards to separate the key concepts (nouns) from the skills (verbs): 30.0% to 89.6% (Δ = +59.6%), $\chi^2(1) = 260.03$, $p < .001$	94% (17/18)	Interviewees described standards-first planning, often framed as identifying "nouns and verbs," before drafting learning intentions and success criteria. "[A]lways start with looking at the standard, unpacking the standard… what are the nouns, what are the verbs, what's our outcome looking like." "[C]hoose what students are doing that exhibits that success criteria."
Formative evidence review in TLTs and evidence-to-response		
I align assessments directly to learning intentions and success criteria: 44.7% to 95.1% (Δ = +50.3%), $\chi^2(1) = 215.04$, $p < .001$	89% (16/18)	Interviewees emphasized bringing student evidence into TLTs, identifying patterns, and moving beyond interpretation to explicit instructional response (e.g., "what we did for each group"). "[B]ring back that data and say, 'Okay, where are these kids? Where are gaps? What do we do to move forward?'"
I embed formative checks for understanding throughout lessons: 46.0% to 91.1% (Δ = +45.1%), $\chi^2(1) = 191.05$, $p < .001$		
Shared clarity language and vocabulary alignment		
I write daily learning intentions that focus on what students will learn (not just what they will do): 30.2% to 88.6% (Δ = +58.4%), $\chi^2(1) = 245.45$, $p < .001$	61% (11/18)	Interviewees described standardizing language (learning intentions, success criteria) and "cleaning up" prior phrasing to be student-accessible and skill-aligned.
I share and discuss success criteria with students early in the lesson: 24.7% to 81.2% (Δ = +56.5%), $\chi^2(1) = 238.10$, $p < .001$		
I present learning intentions in student-friendly language: 33.4% to 91.8% (Δ = +58.4%), $\chi^2(1) = 253.04$, $p < .001$		
I revisit learning intentions throughout the lesson to reinforce purpose: 22.0% to 76.2% (Δ = +54.2%), $\chi^2(1) = 229.04$, $p < .001$		
Variation in depth of enactment		
I use success criteria to guide feedback and student self-assessment: 22.6% to 75.6% (Δ = +53.0%), $\chi^2(1) = 226.04$, $p < .001$	67% (12/18)	Variation was described as differences in depth of inquiry (from "checkbox" meetings to "shared responsibility"), rather than the absence of routines.

Interviewees also described shifts in classroom discourse and feedback practices that extended clarity from planning into instruction. A majority referenced students increasingly articulating what they were learning (78%, 14/18), and over half referenced feedback becoming more criteria-based and specific (56%, 10/18), consistent with survey patterns showing

growth in routines that make success criteria usable during instruction. At the same time, half of interviewees referenced continued work helping students connect learning to purpose (50%, 9/18), suggesting that clearer targets and criteria strengthened alignment and monitoring while leaving room for ongoing attention to meaning-making.

Table 3

Instructional Planning and Classroom Practice Shifts

Survey-reported Changes in Practice: Percentage Selecting "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" (n = 487)	Interview Mentions (n = 18)	Key Interview Findings
Planning precision and task alignment to success criteria		
I determine the type of knowledge (declarative/procedural) required by the standard: 23.7% to 75.0% (Δ = +51.3%), $\chi^2(1) = 220.00$, $p < .001$ I identify the cognitive complexity required by the standard and plan accordingly: 33.0% to 85.5% (Δ = +52.5%), $\chi^2(1) = 221.20$, $p < .001$	89% (16/18)	Interviewees described a shift from activity-first planning to defining success first; one principal described selecting tasks that "exhibit that success criteria." "[C]hoose what students are doing that exhibits that success criteria," with the realization "there's an intentionality that comes from that."
Formative checks and instructional adjustment		
I align assessments directly to learning intentions and success criteria: 44.7% to 95.1% (Δ = +50.3%), $\chi^2(1) = 215.04$, $p < .001$ I embed formative checks for understanding throughout lessons: 46.0% to 91.1% (Δ = +45.1%), $\chi^2(1) = 191.05$, $p < .001$	89% (16/18)	Interviewees described planning for evidence, returning to results in team time, and adjusting instruction; coaches referenced "bring[ing] back that data" to decide next steps. "[We] bring back that data and say, 'Okay, where are these kids? Where are gaps? What do we do to move forward?'"
Student-facing clarity: articulation, feedback, self-monitoring		
I design multi-step progressions that logically build student understanding: 40.5% to 92.9% (Δ = +52.4%), $\chi^2(1) = 225.00$, $p < .001$ I share and discuss success criteria with students early in the lesson: 24.7% to 81.2% (Δ = +56.5%), $\chi^2(1) = 238.10$, $p < .001$ I use success criteria to guide feedback and student self-assessment: 22.6% to 75.6% (Δ = +53.0%), $\chi^2(1) = 226.04$, $p < .001$	78% (14/18)	Interviewees described students more often naming learning targets and using criteria language during feedback and revisions. Previously, "we would just teach and you would just hope… that they got it."
Boundary condition: relevance/purpose		
I revisit learning intentions throughout the lesson to reinforce purpose: 22.0% to 76.2% (Δ = +54.2%), $\chi^2(1) = 229.04$, $p < .001$	50% (9/18)	Some interviewees noted continued work helping students connect learning targets to purpose and relevance, even as clarity routines strengthened. "Every 10 to 15 minutes we're checking in…"

Evaluation Question 3: How Do Educator Descriptions of Impact Differ Based on Variation in Implementation Across Teams and Contexts?

Interview and survey evidence indicate that variation across teams was a consistent feature of districtwide implementation, even as overall perceptions of improvement were positive. Interviewees did not describe variation as a simple divide between "implementing" and "not implementing." Instead, they described differences in depth of enactment: how responsibility was distributed within meetings and how consistently clarity routines carried through into classroom use. Two-thirds of interviewees referenced variation in meeting dynamics or shared responsibility (67%, 12/18), over half described differences in the instructional use of success criteria (56%, 10/18), and half referenced differences in student engagement with learning goals and criteria (50%, 9/18). Survey paired-item results provide a parallel signal that classroom transfer routines, while substantially improved, trailed the most established planning routines (Table 4).

Variation was most visible in descriptions of meeting dynamics and the quality of collaborative inquiry. Some teams were described as completing expected elements with limited collective analysis of evidence, characterizing the work as more procedural than instructional. One coach described teams still in "initial learning," where the meeting functioned "more of a checkbox," suggesting uneven participation or limited instructional dialogue even when structures were present. In contrast, other teams were described as ones in which members "share that responsibility" for unpacking standards, interpreting evidence, and determining response. These contrasts locate variation in how reliably teams moved from evidence review to explicit response planning, rather than in whether structures existed.

Interviewees also described variation in classroom enactment through the role success criteria played during instruction. In some accounts, criteria were visible and referenced in planning but less consistently used to drive feedback, self-assessment, or peer discussion. In other accounts, students were described as using criteria language to discuss work quality and next steps, indicating that clarity practices were operating as student-facing learning tools rather than only teacher planning tools. Interviewees further described context-specific translation work, including content areas that required additional time to define what the approach "looks like" in their discipline (28%, 5/18), alongside contexts where routines became more consistent within schools over time through shared tools, coaching, and administrative expectations (33%, 6/18).

Evaluation Question 4: In What Ways Have Student Learning Outcomes Shifted, Including Any Relationship Between Implementation and Student Learning Outcomes?

Student outcome evidence in this evaluation draws on educator observations of student learning behaviors alongside district achievement indicators reviewed across the implementation period. Interviewees described student learning shifts primarily in student-facing clarity behaviors, including students' articulation of learning goals, criteria-anchored feedback interactions, and awareness of progress and next steps. Across interviews (n = 18), most interviewees referenced increased student articulation of what they were learning (78%, 14/18), over half referenced more criteria-anchored feedback interactions (56%, 10/18), and half referenced greater student awareness of progress and next steps (50%, 9/18). These patterns align with survey paired-item results showing substantial shifts in routines that make learning goals and success criteria usable for students during instruction (Table 5).

Survey evidence further supports these student-facing shifts at scale. In paired retrospective items, respondents reported substantial movement from before implementation to current practice in presenting learning intentions in student-friendly language, sharing and discussing success criteria early in lessons, using success criteria to guide feedback and student self-assessment, and involving students in reflecting on progress toward mastery. At the global level, 78% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that student learning and engagement improved (n = 487). Interview accounts provide additional specificity, describing changes in how students talk about learning, interpret feedback, and monitor their own progress.

In addition to these reported changes in student learning behaviors, district-level achievement indicators provide a descriptive outcome context aligned with the implementation period. Interviewees frequently referenced improvements in state assessment performance, particularly in relation to grade-level outcomes in English language arts and mathematics and end-of-course (EOC) assessments at the high school level. To synthesize these patterns, Figure 1 presents a consolidated dashboard of multi-year achievement trends and current system performance indicators.

Table 4

Variation in Enactment Across Teams and Contexts

Survey-reported Changes in Practice: Percentage Selecting "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" (n = 487)	Interview Mentions (n = 18)	Key Interview Findings
Depth of collaborative planning and shared responsibility		
I use learning progressions to plan across multiple lessons: 35.2% to 87.7% (Δ = +52.5%), $\chi^2(1) = 222.04$, $p < .001$ I connect learning progressions to prior knowledge and future learnings: 44.9% to 93.6% (Δ = +48.7%), $\chi^2(1) = 209.00$, $p < .001$	67% (12/18)	Interviewees contrasted procedural meetings ("checkbox") with inquiry-driven meetings where members "share that responsibility" for evidence interpretation and response.
Instructional use of success criteria beyond posting		
I integrate language expectations into instruction and success criteria: 28.7% to 82.6% (Δ = +53.9%), $\chi^2(1) = 235.00$, $p < .001$ I use success criteria to guide feedback and student self-assessment: 22.6% to 75.6% (Δ = +53.0%), $\chi^2(1) = 226.04$, $p < .001$	56% (10/18)	Variation centered on whether success criteria operated as an active reference point for feedback, self-assessment, and peer discussion versus a planning artifact.
Student engagement with goals, criteria, and next steps		
I present learning intentions in student-friendly language: 33.4% to 91.8% (Δ = +58.4%), $\chi^2(1) = 253.04$, $p < .001$	50% (9/18)	Interviewees described differences in how consistently students articulated learning and used criteria to judge quality and identify next steps.
Content-area translation and adaptation		
No survey items	28% (5/18)	Interviewees described subject-specific translation work (e.g., social studies taking longer to define what the approach "looks like" and the practice of engaging in vertical alignment).
Contexts of relative consistency within schools		
No survey items	33% (6/18)	Some interviewees described strengthening coherence over time through shared tools, coaching, and administrative expectations.

Table 5

Student Learning Outcomes Referenced in Interviews (n = 18) and Aligned Survey Indicator (n = 487)

Survey-reported Changes in Practice: Percentage Selecting "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" (n = 487)	Interview Mentions (n = 18)	Key Interview Findings
Student articulation of learning goals		
I define mastery for priority standards using clear criteria: 39.3% to 93.4% (Δ = +54.1%), $\chi^2(1) = 231.10$, $p < .001$ I create clear, observable criteria for success aligned to standards: 32.1% to 91.2% (Δ = +59.1%), $\chi^2(1) = 252.00$, $p < .001$	78% (14/18)	Interviewees described students naming what they were learning more frequently when learning intentions and success criteria were consistently used and revisited: "[A]lways start with looking at the standard, unpacking the standard… what are the nouns, what are the verbs, what's our outcome looking like."
Criteria-anchored feedback interactions		
I share and discuss success criteria with students early in the lesson: 24.7% to 81.2% (Δ = +56.5%), $\chi^2(1) = 238.10$, $p < .001$ I integrate language expectations into instruction and success criteria: 28.7% to 82.6% (Δ = +53.9%), $\chi^2(1) = 235.00$, $p < .001$	56% (10/18)	Interviewees described feedback shifting from generic affirmation toward success-criteria language and clearer expectations for improvement.
Progress monitoring and next steps		
I use success criteria to guide feedback and student self-assessment: 22.6% to 75.6% (Δ = +53.0%), $\chi^2(1) = 226.04$, $p < .001$	50% (9/18)	Interviewees described students becoming more aware of what success looks like and what remains incomplete. They now "reflect back… to kind of rate themselves."
Achievement indicators referenced by interviewees		
No survey items	67% (12/18)	Interviewees referenced gains in tested areas (see Figure 1).

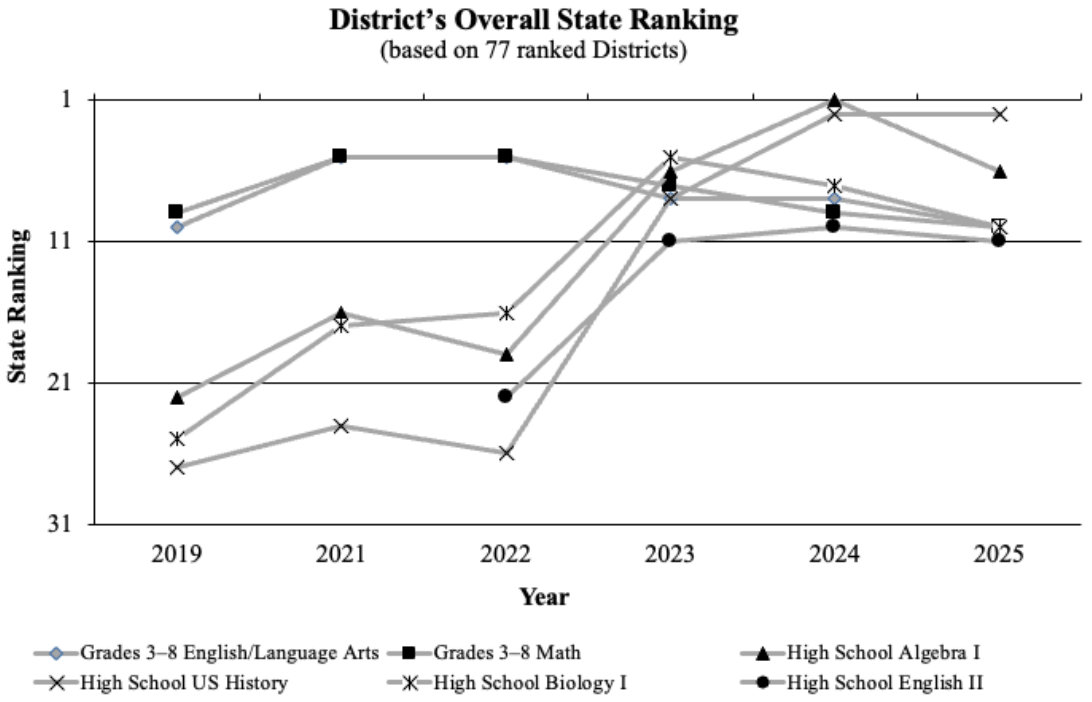
Achievement trends reflect patterns that align with the phased implementation of TLTs and associated teacher clarity practices across grade spans. At the elementary and middle school levels (Grades 3–8), achievement rankings improved during the initial years of more consistent implementation, including the COVID and immediate post-COVID period, reaching top-five rankings in both English language arts and mathematics. Despite subsequent increases in student enrollment—approximately 2,000 additional students, primarily in Grades 3–8—these outcomes have remained within the top 10 in the state, indicating sustained performance under changing system conditions.

At the high school level, achievement trends reflect a later but pronounced improvement pattern. Prior to more consistent implementation of TLT-aligned practices, high school end-of-course outcomes were comparatively lower. Following expanded implementation beginning around 2022, student outcomes improved substantially across all four EOC subject areas. These gains include notable increases in algebra I and U.S. history performance, alongside broader improvements across English II and biology. These changes correspond to the 2022–2024 period, when implementation became more consistent at the high school level.

Together, these trends indicate that student outcomes became more aligned across grade spans as implementation became more coherent system-wide. Early strength at the elementary and middle school levels was followed by later convergence at the high school level, resulting in system-wide performance within the top 10 across major subject areas. The dashboard (Figure 1) further indicates that current performance across subjects exceeds expectations relative to comparable districts with similar poverty levels, reinforcing the overall pattern of improvement.

Figure 1

Student Achievement Trends and District Performance Dashboard



District's 2024 State Ranking for Like Poverty Group

Subject	State Ranking for Like Poverty Group	+/- Difference from Expected Outcome
Grades 3–8 English/Language Arts	2	+9.34%
Grades 3–8 Math	3	+10.63
High School Algebra I	1	+24.23
High School US History	1	+17.36
High School Biology I	3	+11.90
High School English II	2	+11.69

Contextual Factors:

- An additional 2,000+ students entered district between 2022–2025.
- COVID disruption impacted 2020–2022.
- Grade 3-8 implementation strengthened in 2021.
- The High School implementation expanded from 2022 to 2024.

Consistent with the overall design of this evaluation, these findings reflect aligned patterns rather than causal effects. Achievement trends occurred within a complex system characterized by multiple concurrent initiatives, including curriculum changes, targeted supports, and evolving professional learning priorities. Interviewees themselves emphasized this complexity, describing improvement as the result of coordinated efforts rather than any single intervention. Within that

context, TLTs—aligned with the PLC+ framework—are best understood as the implementation architecture that organized instructional work, supported consistent use of evidence, and enabled practices to be enacted and refined across schools over time.

Evaluation Question 5: What Supports or Adaptations Sustained or Expanded the Initiative Across Sites?

Interviewees described sustainability less as maintaining enthusiasm and more as maintaining structure. Four sustaining conditions surfaced consistently across interviews (n = 18): protected collaborative time, coaching support, leadership alignment around expectations, and pacing that allowed teams to refine routines over time. Protected TLT time was referenced in 89% of interviews (16/18), coaching support in 83% (15/18), leadership alignment in 72% (13/18), and gradual pacing or iterative refinement in 67% (12/18). Interviewees typically described these conditions as reinforcing: time enabled the work to occur predictably, coaching strengthened the quality of enactment, leadership stabilized expectations across years, and pacing created space for routines to deepen rather than reset.

Protected time was described as the practical prerequisite. Interviewees described collaborative time as intentionally guarded so planning and evidence review remained non-negotiable; one coach noted that without protected time, "It wouldn't work." Interviewees also described coaching as both a sustaining force and an adaptation mechanism, with coaches portrayed as facilitators and calibrators who supported success criteria quality, more consistent interpretation of student evidence, and clearer response planning tied to identified learning needs. These descriptions position coaching not as an add-on support but as part of the routine system that helps teams translate expectations into workable practice.

Leadership alignment and consistent messaging were also described as sustaining conditions. Interviewees described expectations as coherent over time while instructional emphasis deepened and expanded within a stable implementation architecture, with leaders reinforcing the work through walkthroughs, artifact review, and meeting participation. Pacing and iterative refinement were described as necessary for durable implementation, particularly early on as language was standardized and expectations for formative evidence were clarified; teams revisited language, adjusted protocols, and refined assessment and response practices over time. Table 6 summarizes these sustaining conditions and adaptations by aligning interview frequencies with the corresponding survey indicator of sustaining supports.

Table 6

Sustaining Conditions and Adaptations Referenced in Interviews (n = 18)

Area Investigated	Interview Mentions (n = 18)	Key Findings
Protected collaborative time	89% (16/18)	Interviewees described protected time as non-negotiable. One coach stated that without it, "it wouldn't work." " [I]f we didn't protect that time, it wouldn't work."
Coaching support as sustaining and calibrating mechanism	83% (15/18)	Interviewees portrayed coaches as facilitators and calibrators who strengthened success criteria, evidence interpretation, and response planning.
Leadership alignment and consistent messaging	72% (13/18)	Interviewees described coherent expectations over time supported by walkthroughs, artifact review, and meeting participation.
Pacing and iterative refinement	67% (12/18)	Interviewees described gradual uptake and repeated cycles to refine language, protocols, and evidence expectations. It "guided us to make [the initiative] successful, instead of just saying… 'here's a new thing.'"

DISCUSSION

This district case study examined how TLTs, aligned locally to PLC+, functioned as the collaborative implementation vehicle through which an early instructional focus on teacher clarity was introduced, normalized, and refined across schools.

The findings document both implementation and impact. At the implementation level, interview and survey evidence converged on consistent routines centered on standards unpacking, shared language for learning intentions and success criteria, and recurring cycles of formative evidence review tied to instructional response (Table 2). At the impact level, educators described shifts in planning and classroom practice (Table 3), identified changes in student learning behaviors—including increased articulation of learning goals and more criteria-anchored feedback interactions (Table 5), and referenced improved student outcome patterns during the same period (Figure 1). In sum, the case illustrates how a disciplined collaborative structure can translate professional learning into predictable doing, a core requirement for durable improvement (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2016; Marshall, 2023). More specifically, the findings suggest that what enabled this translation was not the presence of collaborative time alone, but the design and protection of an implementation architecture that made key instructional routines visible, expected, and improvable across schools. These findings are interpreted as aligned patterns rather than causal effects, reflecting the role of implementation architecture in organizing multiple concurrent improvement efforts.

A notable feature of the interview evidence was the disciplined way leaders and educators interpreted improvement trends. Interviewees did not default to single-initiative explanations. Instead, multiple interview participants explicitly described achievement gains and instructional shifts as occurring within a broader set of aligned efforts, including curriculum work, targeted supports, and other improvement strands active during the same period (Table 5, Figure 1). This stance strengthens the credibility of the case and sharpens its practical value for leaders. PLC+ (TLT) is best understood here not as "the" intervention credited for all growth, but as the stable improvement vehicle that organized adult learning and evidence-based response so that multiple priorities could be implemented coherently, monitored consistently, and refined over time (Tables 2-3, Figure 1). This distinction is central: the observed patterns of improvement are less attributable to any single instructional focus and more to the presence of an implementation architecture capable of carrying, integrating, and sustaining multiple priorities within a coherent system of work.

Lesson 1: Treat collaborative time as implementation architecture, not a meeting

One of the clearest lessons for system improvement is that collaboration becomes instructional improvement only when it is designed as an improvement cycle with a clear evidence-to-response turn. Across roles, interviewees described TLTs as effective when teams reliably moved from clarified learning expectations to shared analysis of evidence and then to explicit instructional response (Table 2). That pattern maps directly to the PLC+ investigation-cycle intent: teams clarify where they are going, determine where they are now, decide how to move learning forward, and learn from the results of those decisions (Fisher & Frey, 2025). Where those steps were enacted with discipline, collaboration functioned less as coordination and more as instructional decision-making (Tables 2–3). Where those steps were enacted procedurally, collaboration risked becoming compliance work.

For leaders, this shifts what is monitored. The key question is not whether teams meet, but whether team time produces the decisions that make instruction more coherent and responsive. In practical terms, the most consequential "look-for" in this case was whether meetings consistently yielded a response plan that matched the evidence, not simply a completed agenda. This is where the vehicle earns its value.

Lesson 2: Start with an instructional anchor that improves the quality of team decisions

Teacher clarity served as an effective early anchor because it strengthened the decision points inside the PLC+ cycle where teams often drift without shared definitions (Tables 2–3). In both interviews and survey results, educators described and reported large shifts in standards-based planning, student-friendly learning intentions, observable success criteria, embedded formative checks, and evidence-based adjustment. Interviews then explained how those changes altered the logic of planning: the sequence moved from activities-first toward standards and success criteria driving task selection and instructional response. This shift matters for leaders because it is not a surface adoption of vocabulary. It is a change in how planning decisions are justified and how evidence is interpreted.

The student-facing dimension of clarity also emerged as meaningful. Interviewees described increased student articulation of learning goals and more criteria-anchored feedback interactions (Table 5). Paired survey items likewise showed substantial movement in practices that make learning targets usable to students, including presenting learning intentions in student-friendly language, using success criteria for feedback and self-assessment, and involving students in reflecting on progress toward mastery. These student-facing routines are a practical indicator that clarity was enacted in instruction, not only written in plans.

For leaders, the transfer point is broader than teacher clarity as a content choice. The leadership principle is to begin with an anchor practice that improves the quality of collaborative inquiry by making learning expectations explicit and evidence interpretable. Clarity is powerful in that role because it creates shared definitions of success. Once shared definitions exist, teams can analyze evidence and respond with greater precision (Hattie, 2023; Fisher et al., 2018).

Lesson 3: Variation is predictable at scale; manage it by calibrating depth, not compliance

Variation across teams was not described as a simple divide between implementing and not implementing. Instead, interviewees described differences in depth of enactment (Table 4). Some teams were described as procedural, moving through required elements with limited collective analysis. Other teams were described as engaging in shared responsibility for unpacking standards, interpreting evidence, and determining response. Variation also surfaced in classroom transfer. Success criteria could exist as a posted statement or function as an active reference point for feedback, self-assessment, and peer discussion. Student engagement with learning goals and criteria also varied in consistency.

Survey results supported this depth-and-transfer pattern. Planning routines reached higher levels of reported current practice than routines requiring sustained classroom enactment. For example, standards unpacking was reported at higher current practice levels than revisiting learning intentions throughout lessons or using success criteria as an ongoing learning tool. This does not signal failure. It signals where leadership calibration and coaching support matter most: not at the level of whether artifacts exist, but at the level of whether routines are being used to shape instructional moves and student learning behaviors.

For leaders, the implication is practical. The work of scale requires a small set of calibration targets. Leaders can distinguish "routine presence" from "routine impact" by monitoring whether teams use evidence against shared criteria and whether teams reliably produce response actions that match identified needs. In this case, variation was most informative when it was treated as guidance for where to invest coaching and where to strengthen shared expectations for what quality looks like (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2016).

Lesson 4: Sustainability is a design issue built from time, coaching, and coherence

Sustained implementation in this case was described less as maintaining enthusiasm and more as maintaining structure (Table 6). Interviewees consistently referenced protected time, coaching facilitation, leadership alignment, and pacing that allowed refinement rather than constant replacement. These conditions functioned as a reinforcing system. Protected time made the work nonnegotiable. Coaching strengthened practice quality and translated expectations into workable routines. Leadership coherence stabilized the initiative architecture over time. Pacing created room for iterative improvement and shared calibration, particularly as vocabulary and evidence expectations became more precise.

This multi-year stability is part of what makes the case useful for other leaders. The district's professional learning emphasis deepened and expanded over time, but the collaborative vehicle remained stable (Table 1). In a field where initiative churn is common, the case demonstrates that coherence can be built by protecting one improvement architecture and using it to carry evolving priorities. That design choice supports collective efficacy as a product of coherent work: shared language, shared evidence routines, and shared response expectations enacted within protected cycles of inquiry and improvement (Marshall, 2023). This emphasis on protecting the vehicle and preventing drift aligns with crisis-oriented initiative work that highlights predictable failure modes when coherence erodes or initiatives compete for attention (Fixsen et al., 2005; Marshall, 2024).

Implications for district and school leaders

For leaders seeking practical guidance, the implications are less about adopting one specific program and more about building a coherent improvement system in which priorities are aligned intentionally, embedded in existing routines, and supported by the people responsible for implementation. PLC+ functions as a content-agnostic improvement vehicle, but impact depends on whether the vehicle reliably converts evidence into instructional response. Leaders benefit from monitoring a small number of high-leverage routines that signal depth of enactment, classroom transfer, and student-facing clarity. To support practical transfer, we summarize the most observable, high-leverage implementation indicators as *leader look-fors*, consistent with evaluation work focused on usable lessons learned (Marshall et al., 2019).

Table 7 provides a concise set of leader look-fors aligned to the implementation patterns and mechanisms documented in this case, supporting practical monitoring with specificity while keeping expectations focused on a manageable set of

routines. Because Tables 2–5 and Figure 1 organize findings by the area investigated, with aligned survey shifts and interview frequencies, the leader look-fors translate those same areas into observable indicators.

Table 7

Leader Look-fors for High-Quality PLC+ (TLT) Enactment

Leader look-for	What you should see/hear	Where to look	Why it matters
Standards unpacking leads to precise learning	Teams can name the standard's intent (skills/knowledge), not just the topic; language is consistent across teachers.	TLT agendas, planning documents, team discussion	Prevents activity-first planning and anchors coherence.
Success criteria are specific and usable	Criteria describe what quality looks like; teachers and students can reference them; not vague ("do your best").	Lesson plans, posted criteria, teacher questioning, student work	Makes mastery visible and enables consistent evidence interpretation.
Common evidence is brought and actually analyzed	Teams review student work/results together and identify patterns (strengths, misconceptions, gaps).	Meeting artifacts, samples of student work, team notes	Moves collaboration from coordination to instructional improvement.
Evidence leads to a concrete response plan	Teams can answer: "What will we do differently next week?" including who needs what and how.	TLT outputs, intervention/enrichment plans, regrouping decisions	This is the turn where PLC+ becomes impact, not discussion.
Students can articulate the learning target	Students can explain what they are learning and how they'll know they're successful.	Classroom walkthroughs, student talk, exit tickets	Signals that clarity is student-facing, not just a planning tool.
Feedback is anchored in criteria	Feedback references criteria ("You met X; next is Y") rather than generic praise.	Teacher feedback, conferencing notes, student revisions	Strengthens learning behaviors tied to mastery and improvement.
Coaching and leadership calibrate quality	Coaches/leaders press for specificity ("What does success look like?" "What did you do for each group?").	Team meetings, walkthrough debriefs, coaching cycles	Reduces procedural compliance and increases depth of inquiry.

LIMITATIONS

This program evaluation is presented as a single-district case study. Survey findings reflect educator self-report; item-level valid *n* varies across questions, so reported percentages reflect respondents to each item rather than a uniform denominator. Interview findings add depth on routines and mechanisms but represent participant perspectives rather than direct observation and do not include systematic classroom observations, artifact audits, or student interviews. Student outcome evidence is descriptive and interpreted as aligned patterns across implementation evidence, educator accounts, and outcome indicators rather than causal impact. As a single case, the intent is analytic generalization, offering a detailed implementation account that may inform similar improvement efforts in other contexts. At the same time, the strength of the case lies in its detailed documentation of implementation architecture in practice, offering analytic insight into how improvement systems can be designed and sustained in real-world district contexts.

CONCLUSION

District improvement is more likely to be sustained when priorities are aligned to local strengths and needs and embedded within an implementation architecture that makes instructional practice routine. This case study examined Spartanburg

School District Two's TLTs, aligned to PLC+, as the collaborative vehicle that carried an early focus on teacher clarity into daily practice across schools. This distinction is central: impact is less attributable to any single instructional focus and more to the presence of an implementation architecture capable of carrying, integrating, and sustaining multiple priorities within a coherent system of work. Findings document consistent routines for standards unpacking, learning intentions and success criteria, and evidence-based instructional response, alongside reported shifts in planning, classroom practice, and student learning behaviors, with improving outcome patterns during the same period. The case illustrates how coherent systems of work, protected inquiry cycles, coaching and calibration, and stable expectations can connect professional learning to predictable doing.

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JAMES MARSHALL, PhD, is Professor and Senior Director of the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at San Diego State University in the United States. His major research interests lie in the area of optimizing human and organizational performance through the design and leadership of learning programs that yield predictable results. Email: marshall@sdsu.edu

ANGELA HINTON, EdD, serves as Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services in Spartanburg School District Two in Chesnee, South Carolina. Her educational interests include collective leadership and system efficacy, teacher clarity, Visible Learning implementation, and system improvement processes. Email: angela.hinton@spart2.org

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