

# EVALUATION OF GEORGIA'S PERFORMANCE LEARNING CENTERS® FINAL REPORT: VOLUME I

## Leveraging Results/Research to Practice

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## Table of Contents

■ <b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
■ <b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Evaluation of Georgia's Performance Learning Centers® .....	2
1.2 Four Major PLC Evaluation Studies .....	4
District-Level Quasi-Experimental Study .....	4
PLC Survey .....	5
Case Studies .....	6
Future Directions in Program Evaluation.....	6
■ <b>2. How PLCs Perform: Implications for Practitioners.....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Program Effects.....	7
2.2 Fidelity to the Model .....	8
2.3 Service Coordination .....	10
2.4 Expansion and Replication .....	11
■ <b>3. Lessons Learned .....</b>	<b>12</b>
■ <b>4. Conclusions .....</b>	<b>14</b>

## Executive Summary

Established in 2002 by Communities In Schools (CIS) of Georgia, Performance Learning Centers® (PLC) are non-traditional learning environments for high school students who are not succeeding in traditional schools. Small academic settings, business like environments, and self-directed learning enable students to stay in school, excel academically, and graduate with a marketable skill. In the last five years, the CIS PLC model has spread to five additional states and the number of centers continues to grow.

In the summer of 2008, CIS of Georgia launched an evaluation of their Performance Learning Centers® to be conducted by ICF International. This report consists of an overview and summary of findings from four studies:

- A District Level Quasi-Experimental Study (Volume II)
- A Survey of PLC and CIS staff (Volume III)
- A Case Study based on two PLC sites (Volume IV)
- Future Directions in Program Evaluation (Volume V)

These studies document the district-level impact of the PLC Model, provide additional context for quantitative findings, identify key drivers of success, and document the “how” and “why” of the PLC Model. The technical reports of these studies are provided as separate volumes in the Evaluation of Georgia's Performance Learning Centers® Final Report. While each of the studies provides substantive information on the success, impact, and challenges of the PLC Model, together, these findings present evidence of what, where, and how PLCs work.

Major findings from these reports include:

- Quasi-experimental findings showed a strong effect of having a PLC in the school district on dropout rates and a very strong effect on graduation rates. As anticipated, graduation rates increased for PLC districts (+1.3% following one year of implementation, and +6.0% following two years) while dropout rates decreased (-1.3% and -0.2%, respectively).
- Survey data identified tutoring/academic assistance and life skills as key services in ensuring students stay in school and helping them excel academically.
- Case studies documented the effectiveness of the PLC model in promoting individual student success by providing facilitated self-paced instruction, individualized attention, and strong connections between the student, PLC, and the community. These areas were considered to increase on-time graduation and result in increased student aspirations focused on both continuing education and expanded career options.

- Future evaluation efforts should focus on district- and school-level variables that look beyond dropout and graduation findings. Given that much of the qualitative evidence from surveys and case studies indicates that PLCs are having positive effects on a number of other factors (e.g., academics, dedication to service, career choices) it is important to measure the full impact of the program. Moreover, attention in future evaluations should focus on replicating results on dropout and graduation across people, places, times, and settings. This will provide a stronger evidence base and will ultimately help CIS of Georgia improve the PLC program to be best extent possible.

## 1. Introduction

In a 2008 report of the National Governor's Association (NGA), the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) entitled *Accelerating the Agenda: Actions to Improve America's High Schools*, policymakers call for a transformation of America's high schools to produce a higher caliber of student able to increase the competitive edge of America in this knowledge driven economy. This call to action focused on several critical areas, including preparing America's high school students to be college and career ready through more rigorous high school curricular and experiences.

The action agenda also draws attention to the growing epidemic of high school dropout that further drains America's competitive edge, costing on average "\$320 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity."<sup>1</sup> The need for programs addressing issues concerning youth either at risk of dropping out of school or failing to graduate on time is a big challenge facing the public education system.

As policymakers and educators seek ways to move America's high schools toward the development of more college and career ready students, one program, Georgia Performance Learning Centers, is demonstrating positive outcomes for students at risk of failing to graduate from high school on time. The evaluation of this program is the focus of this report. Findings from the evaluation indicate that the unique PLC approach to preparing students to complete high school and for continued success after high school—both academically and professionally—is working.

### What are Performance Learning Centers®?

Established by Communities In Schools (CIS) of Georgia, the Performance Learning Centers® (PLC) embody the core ideals of CIS. At the very heart of the PLC model are several of the five CIS basics<sup>2</sup>. For example, each student has a mentor, or a one-on-one relationship with an adult; a businesslike atmosphere and career focus provide students with a future orientation and marketable skills to use after graduation; and service learning components give students an opportunity to give back to their communities. Each of these elements is embedded within the surrounding community, truly exemplifying CIS's goal of bringing communities into schools.

In the last five years, the CIS PLC model has expanded to four states and the number of centers continues to grow. At a PLC, students who do not thrive socially and

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<sup>1</sup> NGA, NCSL, CCSSO, and NASBE (2008). *Accelerating the Agenda: Actions to Improve America's High Schools*. [www.nga.org](http://www.nga.org).

<sup>2</sup> The CIS Five Basics are: (1) **A Personal Relationship with a Caring Adult** (e.g., mentors, tutors, parental involvement programs); (2) **A Safe Place** (e.g., after school and extended hours programs); (3) **A Healthy Start** (e.g., mental health counseling, family strengthening initiatives, drug and alcohol education, physical and dental exams, eye care and immunizations, help for teen parents); (4) **A Marketable Skill** (e.g., technology training for the future, career counseling and employment skills, college preparation and scholarship opportunities) and (5) **A Chance to Give Back** (e.g., community service opportunities, Junior ROTC). See [www.cisnet.org](http://www.cisnet.org) for more details.

academically in a traditional high school setting have the opportunity to take control of their lives, working at their own pace to graduate with a regular high school diploma. They are selected into the program after receiving a PLC referral and obtaining the approval of the PLC student selection committee. Through mentoring, coaching, and monitoring individual student programs, PLC Learning Facilitators help students complete online coursework in language arts, math, science, and social studies. In addition, online learning is supplemented with leadership building and community service learning. Each PLC student progresses through an individualized development plan (IDP) and when possible is linked to a mentoring relationship with a caring adult in the community.

Through a community-oriented, real-world focus, PLCs provide students the opportunity to participate in dual enrollment programs with local colleges and technical institutes and explore career options with the help of community partners through job shadowing, local internships, and career fair events. The combination of high expectations and strong support that are the foundation of the PLC model make it possible for at-risk students to get back on track, tap into their hidden abilities and assets, and focus their efforts on college and/or careers beyond the high school experience.

In order to examine and provide evidence to support program improvement and further expansion of the GA PLC model, an evaluation was conducted by ICF International. The findings of the evaluation are described below.

## 1.1 Evaluation of Georgia's Performance Learning Centers®

Understanding the value added of the PLC model to both the CIS Model and the school districts in which these programs are being implemented required a mixed-method evaluation approach. The ICF team conducted an evaluation using both quantitative and qualitative studies to address the key evaluation questions (listed on the right).

The quantitative studies include a district-level quasi-experimental study and a survey of PLC stakeholders. These studies focused on providing CIS of Georgia with rigorous evaluation results to determine whether PLCs have an impact on district-level graduation rates. The qualitative studies include two case studies based on site visits to two PLC programs. These studies focused on deepening our understanding of how PLCs operate and how they affect student outcomes. These case studies were geared toward ensuring that information is generated that can assist in improving PLC operations. Combined, these

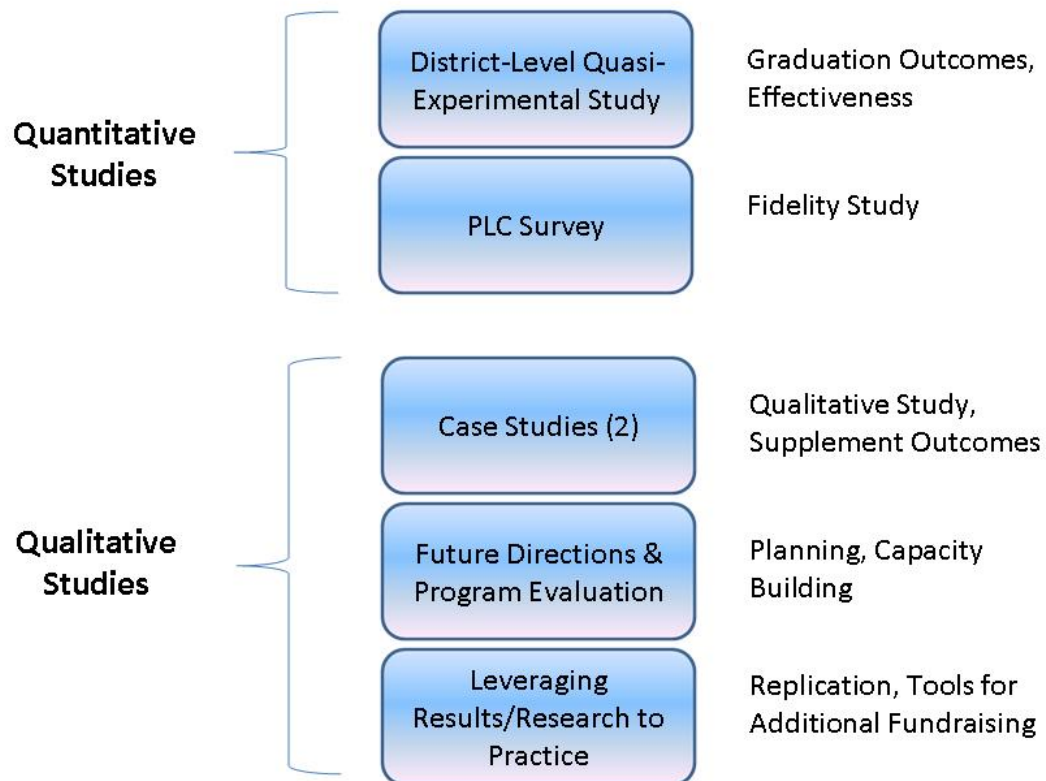
### Primary Evaluation Questions Developed by ICF for the PLC Evaluation:

- What effect are PLCs having on district-level graduation rates?
- How closely are PLCs maintaining fidelity to the model?
  - What are the most common diversions from the PLC model?
  - Why do some PLCs diverge from the model?
- What is the value-added of having a service coordinator within the PLC?
- What PLC program components need additional support?
- How can PLCs improve their functioning and outcomes?
- How can PLCs expand their evidence base in the future? What ongoing data needs to be collected?
- What resources are needed for replication of PLCs? How can CIS of Georgia find and leverage those resources?

studies demonstrate not only the impact of the PLC model but also the conditions that promote this impact.

An overarching goal of the evaluation design is to increase the evaluation capacity in CIS of Georgia, and provide recommendations for leveraging evaluation results. The design is intended to develop a thorough understanding of the processes that make the PLCs work as well as provide a rigorous study that contributes to the knowledge base for sound educational practice. A conceptual framework is presented in Exhibit 1.

### Exhibit 1: Conceptual Framework of the PLC Evaluation



## 1.2 Four Major PLC Evaluation Studies

This report presents data from multiple evaluation studies in a format that provides PLC and CIS staff information on how to improve PLC operations and other efforts. Exhibit 2 presents key evaluation questions as well as the primary and secondary studies that address each. A brief description of each of the studies is provided below.

Exhibit 2: Evaluation Questions				
	Quasi- Experimental Study	PLC Survey	Case Studies	Future Directions
What effect are the PLCs having on district level graduation rates?	⊕			
How closely are the PLCs maintaining fidelity to the model?		⊕	+	
What are the most common diversions from the PLC model?		⊕	+	
Why do some PLCs diverge from the model?		⊕	+	
What is the value-added of having a service coordinator within the PLC?		+	⊕	
What PLC program components need additional support?		+	⊕	
How can PLCs improve their functioning and outcomes?		+	⊕	
How can PLCs expand their evidence base in the future? What ongoing data needs to be collected?			+	⊕
What resources are needed for replication of PLCs? How can CIS of Georgia find and leverage those resources?		+	⊕	+

⊕: Primary study that addresses this research question.

+ : Secondary study that addresses this research question.

### District-Level Quasi-Experimental Study

The district-level quasi-experimental study compares school districts that contain PLCs to those that do not, and focuses on whether the PLCs are improving graduation rates in the district. Because a PLC may serve students from a number of different high schools, a district-level study is the most reasonable evaluation approach. The quasi-experimental study uses propensity score matching, which is highly rigorous and well-respected in the field of education research. This method allows evaluation staff to match districts that contain PLCs on a large number of characteristics with those districts that do not have PLCs. A more detailed description of propensity score matching techniques is included in the methodology section in Volume 2: Findings from the Quasi-Experimental Study.



Districts were matched on eight district-level baseline variables:

- Dropout rates for each district
- Percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch
- Total number of students enrolled in the district
- The number of schools in each district
- Racial composition
- Percentage of students with special needs
- Percentage of students with limited English proficiency
- Locality<sup>3</sup>

After precise matches were made between districts with PLCs and districts without PLCs, graduation rates and dropout rates from the Georgia Department of Education were compared between the “treatment” and “comparison” districts over time, from the year prior to PLC implementation to two years after implementation. By gaining a view of PLC performance over time, it could be determined not only if PLCs are having an impact on graduation rates, but also how long it takes for outcomes to be achieved. Primary data sources for this study included the Georgia Department of Education website, the CIS National Evaluation, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD), and the U.S. Census.

## PLC Survey

The ICF team administered an online survey to all PLCs in Georgia in order to fill any gaps in data provided by CIS of Georgia. Survey participants included PLC Academic Coordinators and local CIS Executive Directors. Survey items addressed the following topics:

- Fidelity to the PLC model
- Value added of service coordination
- Services
- Networking/relationships
- Student outcomes
- Cost of administering a PLC
- Potential challenges

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<sup>3</sup> District locality was determined using the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data. School-level locality codes were aggregated to a district level to form the following three categories: percentage of urban, suburban, and rural schools. Schools in large and mid-sized cities were classified as urban, schools located in the urban fringe of a large or mid-size city or in a large town were defined as suburban, and schools in small towns and rural areas were categorized as rural.

Data gathered from the survey supplemented findings from the quasi-experimental study.

## Case Studies

An integral part of the evaluation of the Performance Learning Center model is the inclusion of two case studies. The purpose of the case studies is to identify the key drivers of success (processes/best practices) in PLCs and the levels at which these key drivers are implemented and sustained. CIS of Georgia identified two PLCs (Bulloch and Coweta counties) for case studies. Structured interviews were conducted with administrators; interviews/focus groups were conducted with teachers, parents, volunteers, and students; and classroom observations were undertaken. The site visits provide systematic information regarding:

- Implementation fidelity to the PLC model
- Value-added of having a service coordinator within each PLC
- Challenges of implementation
- Parental involvement and its impact on PLCs
- Resources required and cost of implementation of PLCs

## Future Directions in Program Evaluation

A final component of the evaluation is recommendations for future directions for continued evaluation of the PLCs. Specifically, we have explored the possibility of CIS of Georgia implementing a randomized control trial in a single PLC site. This resulting study provides CIS of Georgia with a power analysis, which includes a determination of how many subjects are needed to achieve a minimum detectable effect size and with plans and materials for conducting the experimental study. By providing the needed support to plan, implement, and complete an experimental study, CIS of Georgia will have a highly cost-effective strategy to conduct research at the highest level. Under this component, the ICF team also assessed evaluation results from the district-level quasi-experimental study, the PLC survey, and the case studies to help CIS of Georgia plan/implement future evaluation efforts.

## 2. How PLCs Perform: Implications for Practitioners

This section of the report directly addresses the evaluation research questions, using them to assess the performance of PLCs on impacting schools, the community, and individual students. Based on the synthesis of all four studies conducted as part of the Georgia PLC evaluation, these findings are intended to assist internal CIS staff and inform a broad audience of stakeholders and practitioners in the field as they explore the feasibility of the PLC model.

## 2.1 Program Effects

- **What effect are the PLCs having on district level graduation rates?**

Detailed evidence surrounding this question is found in Volume II (Findings from the Quasi-Experimental Study).

### What We Know

Findings from the quasi-experimental study of Georgia's PLCs demonstrate that the presence of PLCs' are associated with positive changes and meaningful effects on graduation and dropout rates at the district level. Exhibit 1 provides calculated net change scores<sup>4</sup> and effect sizes<sup>5</sup> for graduation and dropout rates one and two years after implementation.

<b>Exhibit 3: Net Change and Effect Size</b>				
	<b>Baseline – Post 1</b>		<b>Baseline – Post 2</b>	
	<b>Net change (n=14)</b>	<b>Effect Size (n=14)</b>	<b>Net change (n=14)</b>	<b>Effect Size (n=14)</b>
Graduation Rate	+1.3%	0.196	+6.0%	0.843
Dropout Rate	-1.3%	0.409	-0.2%	0.085

PLC districts' graduation rates steadily increased from baseline (i.e., the year prior to implementation) to one year after implementation (post 1) and to two years after implementation (post 2), in comparison to non-PLC districts. While PLCs appeared to have an immediate effect on district-level graduation rates, a larger effect was found two years after initial implementation. This finding is consistent with the way in which PLCs operate; PLCs can only accept a fixed amount of students who usually take one to two years to graduate, furthermore establishing the full complement of PLC services (i.e., partners, mentors, internships, etc.) usually takes a year as well.

As Exhibit 3 indicates, positive net changes for district-level dropout rates were found. In other words, dropout rates decreased for PLC districts in comparison to non-PLC districts. PLCs appeared to have a strong immediate effect on district-level dropout rates that declined slightly after two years of implementation. This can be attributed to the small size of PLCs that accept a fixed number of at-risk students. Therefore, it is expected that PLCs will have its largest impact on dropout during the first year of implementation.

<sup>4</sup> Net change is calculated by subtracting the difference in matched PLC districts' post and baseline percentage point scores from the difference in matched non-PLCs' post and baseline percentage point scores.

<sup>5</sup> The effect sizes reported indicate the magnitude of the difference in net changes between PLC and non-PLC districts for each outcome variable. Researchers use effect sizes to determine whether a change is *meaningful*; for reference, the What Works Clearinghouse classifies effect sizes of .25 or above as "substantively important".

Taken together, these two findings help to provide a better understanding of how the PLC model is affecting student outcomes. As PLCs strive to maintain a small student-teacher ratio, thereby limiting the number of students they can accept, their largest impact has been on dropout rates during their first year of implementation. As students may be enrolled up to three years, the number of at-risk students that a PLC can accept is further reduced in subsequent years. Because it may take students more than one year to graduate, outcomes on graduation take longer to achieve.

In addition while not statistically significant, these findings are overwhelmingly positive given that PLCs typically enroll 75-80 students at time, making it difficult to find differences at the district level. However, results from our district-level quasi-experimental design not only found positive changes but also found moderate effects on district dropout rates and strong effects on district graduation rates.

## What Remains to be Examined

While the primary focus of the quasi-experimental design was to determine the effect of PLCs on district-level graduation rates, future research should focus on other district-level variables, such as behavioral measures, student attendance, academics, and state test scores. Also of interest is the direct impact PLCs are having on student/school level factors. As this study focused on district-level outcomes, individual school and student factors (i.e., student motivation, interest, grades, etc.) were left relatively unexamined. Moreover, with the positive findings found in the district level study, student/school level impacts should be noticeably larger.

### 2.2 Fidelity to the Model

- *How closely are the PLCs maintaining fidelity to the model?*
- *What are the most common diversions from the PLC model?*
- *Why do some PLCs diverge from the model?*

Detailed evidence surrounding these questions is found in Volume III (Findings from the Performance Learning Centers® Survey) and Volume IV (Findings from the Case Studies).

## What We Know

Four major components to the PLC model make it different from the traditional high school:

- **School environment.** The school environment of a PLC differs significantly from a traditional school model. All aspects of the PLC model are designed to emphasize and create a business-like atmosphere, high expectations, and new roles for staff, teachers, and students.
- **Learning environment.** The learning environment of a PLC is characterized by high expectations underpinned by strong teacher support, individualized

assistance for students, flexible scheduling, concept mastery learning, enrichment activities, and community integration.

- **Parent and community engagement.** In a PLC, community and parent engagement help to ensure student success. Community involvement is typically organized by a Services Coordinator and can include tutoring, mentoring, enrichment activities, job shadowing/internships, and other service learning opportunities.
- **Social needs of students.** In addition to the academic needs, another important aspect of the PLC model involves serving the social and personal needs of students. Students enrolled in a PLC may be dealing with pregnancy, alcohol/drug abuse, poverty, and a variety of other challenges.

These along with the student's "Road Map to Success",<sup>6</sup> make up the PLC model.

Findings from the case studies and the PLC survey indicate that PLC sites are implementing the program model with fidelity, using a non-traditional school and learning environment, flexible scheduling, and small size that result in on-time graduation and degree completion for PLC students. Some diversions from the PLC model were found. For example, some PLCs did not require students and parents to complete contractual agreements specifying student and parent obligations prior to enrollment; not all PLCs had a Services Coordinator; and some PLCs were encountering difficulty in providing each student with a mentor.

Survey data indicated that PLCs were predominantly affiliated with more than one high school, located in a building separate from the school campuses they served, and enrolled approximately 71 to 80 students, with an approximate teacher to student ratio of 1 to 15. Typically, PLCs offered three sessions per day (of which a student must attend two), operated five days a week, and enrolled the majority of students from nine months to two years.

Site visits substantiated the PLC model's claim to provide a non-traditional school learning environments. This is most evident in the use of Learning Facilitators (i.e., the classroom teacher) who manage classroom instruction by providing individualized support to students working on self-directed computer-based lessons, individual projects, and when appropriate, group projects. Because the majority of student tasks are self-directed, Learning Facilitators must be able to seamlessly flow from one content topic to another, as well as multiple chapters within a topic. For example, in a given class period, Learning Facilitators may provide academic support to a student working on a core course algebra chapter, another student working on an elective economics chapter, and another student preparing for an end-of-course exam.

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<sup>6</sup> The student "Road Map to Success" is intended to outline a student's progression through a PLC. The process begins with a student's referral, continues through graduation, and culminates in ensuring a career or college for each student. Stops on the way to success include student referral, interview/intake process, mentoring, capstone project, and college readiness.

Interviews with students, parents, community partners, and staff confirm the importance of the service learning aspect of the PLC, something that the majority of public high schools lack. Parents and community members are encouraged to participate in school activities and are provided with numerous ways in which to help, including mentoring students; participating in an advisory panel; providing support, materials or services; and assisting with service projects or other school activities. Students and parents reiterated several times that the PLC is like a family, in that the teachers and staff care about each student. This caring extends not just to student grades but also what they are going through emotionally, personally, and socially.

### What Remains to be Examined

While the current study documents the fidelity with which the various PLCs implement the model, to date there has been no study on whether the level of implementation impacts the effectiveness of each PLC. An area of further study should focus on the effects that PLCs which fully implement the model have compared to those that partially implement the model.

#### 2.3 Service Coordination

- *What is the value-added of having a services coordinator within the PLC?*

Detailed evidence surrounding this question is found in Volume III (Findings from the Performance Learning Centers® Survey) and Volume IV (Findings from the Case Studies).

### What We Know

PLC survey data indicated that Services Coordinators are responsible for wide variety of activities that support PLC model implementation. For example, the majority of PLC Services Coordinators are primarily responsible for community and parent engagement activities, meeting student non-academic and social needs, and ensuring students are successful while at the PLC and upon graduation. Other activities identified as falling under their domain include coordinating volunteer activities, student advocacy, coordinating non-academic services, creating motivational incentives, home visits, service learning opportunities, and developing promotional activities. In addition, the Services Coordinator is responsible for linking the PLC to the community through outreach, service projects, and volunteer activities, which includes the mentoring program. For all of these activities, parents and community partners repeatedly mention that their key point of contact with the PLC is the Services Coordinator. This position supports and coordinates all activities that directly address each of the major components in the PLC model.

The value of the Services Coordinator was repeatedly emphasized across staff, community partners, parents, and students. The services coordinator position was most often noted in the PLC survey as a key driver of success and one of the crucial distinctions between the PLC model and a traditional high school setting.

## What Remains to be Examined

The value of service coordination is documented in both survey and case study data. However, 29% of PLCs surveyed do not currently have an active Services Coordinator. This is predominantly due to a lack of funds to support the position. Future research should focus on how the lack of a Services Coordinator effects PLC operations, as well as alternative methods in which the position could be funded.

### 2.4 Expansion and Replication

- *What PLC program components need additional support?*
- *How can PLCs improve their functioning and outcomes?*
- *How can PLCs expand their evidence base in the future? What ongoing data needs to be collected?*
- *What resources are needed for replication of PLCs? How can CIS of Georgia find and leverage those resources?*

Detailed evidence surrounding these questions is found in Volume III (Findings from the Performance Learning Centers® Survey), Volume IV (Findings from the Case Studies), and Volume V (Future Directions in Program Evaluation).

## What We Know

As expected, the most frequent support requested was additional funding. Requests included funding for the Services Coordinator position, service projects, incentives, and expansion. In addition, parents and students requested that additional electives be provided. Students also requested more traditional social opportunities typically offered in high schools (i.e., sports, social clubs, proms, etc.)

PLC staff requested additional onsite guidance towards implementing the model, in classroom coaching, on engaging students, conducting service projects, and other enrichment activities. Staff suggest the inclusion of a Vice-Principal into the PLC model, whose primary responsibilities would be to ensure adherence to the PLC model and disciplinary enforcement. Assistance was also requested to help track students after graduation. This could include developing a database system to track students, collaborating with local colleges and vocational schools, or providing additional funds geared toward student follow-up.

## What Remains to be Examined

With the expansion of the PLC model to different states, there will be ever-greater opportunities to gain sufficient samples for well-powered studies. The replication of PLCs also allows CIS of Georgia to focus on the external validity of our current findings. If it is proven that results can hold across students, places, times, and settings, these evaluation results will be particularly valuable.



### 3. Lessons Learned

For policymakers and educational practitioners, the evaluation of the PLC model provides useful lessons learned. If America's high schools are to begin to address the call for action represented in the NGA report mentioned earlier, policymakers and practitioners need innovative solutions to shortcomings of the current educational system. The Georgia PLC model specifically addresses several key issues outlined in the NGA report. The lessons learned from the evaluation of this model suggest that for the at-risk student, a small, individualized, and structured environment can have positive results. A summary of lessons learned is provided below.

- **PLC's Demonstrate Effective Processes that Prepare At-Risk Students for Life Success**

PLCs employ a rigorous application and selection process that helps students and their parents understand how the program operates and the degree of commitment necessary to successfully navigate the PLC program. The interview portion of the selection process provides an opportunity for students to identify their strengths and set goals for on-time graduation. This initial intake process begins the process to develop the skills for PLC students to become college and career ready. More importantly, however, the selection process sets the tone for helping students graduate from high school on-time, placing the responsibility for that success solidly in the hands of the PLC student.

Once enrolled in the PLC, students create a "roadmap to success" that allows them, early on in the PLC process, to begin to plot a group of strategies to achieve academic and career goals. This goal-setting process serves as the guide for interaction between the student, the Learning Facilitator (who serves as the student's advisor) and the Services Coordinator (who assists the student in finding community-based learning opportunities).

Student progress is closely monitored by PLC Learning Facilitators. For at-risk students, daily check-ins, pacing guides, and an environment that provides individual motivation is crucial for keeping them on track. This process contributes to the development of individual management skills that serve the student throughout life.

- **The PLC Learning Environment Provides a Non-traditional Setting that Promotes Active Learning**

PLCs are non-traditional small-school settings. Students progress at their own pace rather than having to keep up with an entire class. By placing the responsibility for progressing and completing courses squarely in the hands of the student, PLCs help students become independent learners able to explore a subject as fully as they need for individual success. The result is a highly motivated and goal-oriented group of PLC students.



PLCs are active learning environments. Learning facilitators move from student to student. Students assist one another. Multiple activities take place simultaneously. These types of activities create an energetic atmosphere where students are free to move around the classroom and interact with learning facilitators and fellow students without constraints. However, with this activity and energy, there is an order and focus to the classroom that is comparable to a business office rather than a traditional high school classroom.

PLCs focus on professionalism. Professionalism extends not only to PLC staff but also to PLC students. More than dress-code and attendance requirements, the tone of the learning environment is one of “getting down to business”.

PLC Learning Facilitators coach mentor, and monitor students. The importance of this role for student success is demonstrated in the PLC evaluation. Facilitating learning for at-risk students is at the heart of the success of this program.

- **The Community and Service Component of the PLC Model Provides Opportunities to be Involved in Meaningful and Tangible Activities and Provides Exposure to a Variety of Career Options**

For PLC students, learning takes place across a wide variety of settings that prepare students for life. Service learning opportunities that explore the world of work provide students an understanding of how to build social capital through community-driven initiatives. The community and service learning component also promote team building and teamwork. Through these components, PLC students are able to develop leadership skills and discover talents that can go untapped in a traditional learning environment. PLC students are also exposed to a variety of community businesses and non-profit organizations that provide real-life experiences with possible career options.

- **The PLC Model is Cost Effective**

A comparison of per pupil cost of the PLC model (\$6,791.50 per student) to the cost of students in a traditional high school demonstrates that PLCs operate at the same or similar levels of expenditure. In some cases, PLC per pupil costs are slightly less than costs for a traditional high school student. All Georgia PLCs are supported through funding from the local school district. Other funding for materials to support the PLCs are generated by fundraising activities conducted by the local CIS program.

## 4. Conclusions

Georgia PLCs' targeted efforts appear to be having large district effects on student graduation rates and dropout rates—a finding which is surprising given that PLCs only enroll approximately 75 to 80 students within a district. Apparent reasons for this outcome appear to be centered in the PLC's non-traditional, self-directed, student-centered learning environment. At the PLCs, teachers are Learning Facilitators rather than lecturers in the classroom. A focus on a student's personal and social needs is provided primarily by a Services Coordinator. Continued assessment and documentation of the PLC experience can further identify the extent to which the PLC model affects students, parents, and the communities in which these programs operate.