Professional Learning Community Guide

New Jersey First through Third Grade
Implementation Guidelines

Dr. Shannon Riley-Ayers and Kaitlin Northey of The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) have developed the *Professional Learning Community Guide* to accompany the *First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines (Guidelines)* with funding provided by the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) Grant. The purpose of this guide is to provide direction to support teachers with the implementation of the *Guidelines*.

The Guidelines

First, second, and third grade are foundational years of teaching and learning. The *First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines* (*Guidelines;* New Jersey Department of Education, 2015) are a go-to resource for guidance on developmentally appropriate and academically rigorous teaching practices for these critical years.

This *Professional Learning Community Guide* is a framework to explore the *Guidelines*, reflect on current practices, and engage in extensive discussions with colleagues. Educators use Professional Learning Community (PLC) sessions to collaborate with colleagues and focus on their classroom environments, teaching practices, and the content children learn. This guide is designed to be used by school-based teams to closely examine the *Guidelines* and adjust teaching practices to increase student learning.

PLCs provide a space for members of a school community or district to come together to gain deeper knowledge and understanding about a topic as they work collaboratively to improve their school, teaching, and/or students learning opportunities. A PLC is comprised of members and a facilitator.

The **PLC facilitator** leads the PLC sessions. The facilitator communicates with members regarding the topic of the session, the preparation that is required for the session, and then uses the protocols within this *Professional Learning Community Guide* to structure each PLC session. The role of facilitator can rotate among members of the PLC or can be an individual recognized within the school (or district) as a leader or someone with expertise or training on the *Guidelines.* This person should be a good listener, good communicator, and someone with the skills to keep members engaged and on task.

Depending on how a PLC is organized, **PLC members** can be teachers and education personnel that are part of a grade-level teaching team within the same school or district or individuals from different grades within the same school or district. As PLCs are spaces where members (**usually 6–8**) come together to pursue a shared goal, PLC organizers should intentionally decide who will participate in the PLC.

The *Professional Learning Community Guide* offers suggestions teachers and other education personnel can use as they explore the *Guidelines* and make their practices, procedures, and policies more developmentally appropriate. This guide is just the beginning!

Organization

The *Professional Learning Community Guide* is not a script that must be strictly adhered to. PLCs can decide how they move through the sessions the *Guide* offers and some sessions can be repeated as PLC members examine various aspects of their teaching over time. Note that there is preparation for each PLC meeting. If a group has not completed the necessary reading of the *Guidelines* for the session it is best to take 5-10 minutes at the start of the session for participants to scan the content.

Table 1: Topics of Study

Topic of Study	Session
Introductory Session (Optional)	• Introduction to the *PLC Guidelines* and the *NJ 1st through 3rd Implementation Guidelines p. 5*
Young Children as Learners	• Session 1A: Developmentally Appropriate Practice *p. 7* • Session 1B: Being Responsive to Diverse Learners *p. 8* • Session 1C: Working with Families and the Community *p. 9*
Setting Up to Support Children's Learning	• Session 2A: Developmentally Appropriate Classrooms *p. 12*
Exploring Classroom Content	• Session 3A: Integrating Curriculum *p. 14* • Session 3B: Implementation Study *p. 15*
Teaching and Instructional Strategies	• Session 4A: Examining Integration Practices *p. 17* • Session 4B: Examining Student Work *p. 18*

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Introduction

The New Jersey Department of Education, in partnership with Rutgers University, The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) and the Graduate School of Education (GSE) have developed *First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines* (*Guidelines)* with funding provided by the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) Grant. The purpose of these guidelines is to outline best practices in the primary years of schooling and to assist educators with fusing practices that are both academically rigorous and developmentally appropriate.

Throughout the *Guidelines*, every effort is made to connect theory, practice, and standards by:

- Drawing on vignettes of classroom teachers that integrate curriculum and projects to help their students engage with the required content in greater depth;
- Providing examples of how teachers can adjust required curricula and programs to enrich and integrate content children are learning;
- Sharing examples of individualized instruction to meet the needs of all learners;
- Giving concrete strategies for how teachers can shape curricula to include inquiry, problem solving, and communication skills; and
- Highlighting opportunities and practices for teachers to create environments and learning experiences that encourage children to grow socially and emotionally, build self-regulation, and exercise effective approaches to learning, such as persistence and flexibility.

Introduction Protocol (*Optional*)

Time: Approximately 40 minutes

Resources: Copies of or access to *NJ First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines*

The purpose of this PLC is to establish expectations for PLC meetings and introduce members to the *New Jersey First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines* (2015).

Guiding Question(s): What are the *First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines*?

1. **Introduction** (1–2 minutes)
   a. Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goal and schedule

2. **Determining Expectations** (8 minutes)
   a. Facilitator and PLC members generate and agree upon rules and expectations for their PLC meetings.
      i. Examples: We are professional and respectful, we listen to each other's ideas and philosophies, we will come prepared to each PLC meeting.

3. **Getting to Know the Guidelines** (20 minutes)
   a. Participants browse the *Guidelines*, taking note of anything of interest to them.
   b. Describing the *Guidelines*
      i. Discuss: "What did you see?" (If an answer is an opinion or judgement the facilitator should ask member for evidence.) Discussion should leave members with key ideas of the text.
   c. Asking Questions About the *Guidelines*
      i. Discuss: "What questions do you have about the content in the *Guidelines*?" Facilitator writes down members' questions.
   d. Discussing Implications for Our Work
      i. Discuss: "How do you think the study of these *Guidelines* may influence your work?" "How do you think the study of these *Guidelines* may influence student learning outcomes?"

4. **Reflecting** (8–10 minutes)
   a. The group reflects on how well the rules/expectations created worked and make any adjustments for the next PLC meeting.

Adapted from: D. Baron's "*The Making Meaning Protocol: Adapted for Use with a Text,*" School Reform Initiative. *Retrieved from:* http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/making_meaning.pdf

Young Children as Learners

This section of the Guidelines presents the kinds of learning and development in which children experience in first, second, and third grade while also focusing on children's cultural and educational diversities. Utilizing a strengths-based approach, guidance is provided on how to enact developmentally appropriate practices that capitalize on the strengths that children and their families and communities bring to the school.

Session 1A Protocol: Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Preparation: Read pp. 3–7 in the *NJ First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines.*

Time: Approximately 35 minutes

The purpose of this PLC is to define developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and identify what changes can be made to increase DAP in their settings.

Guiding Question(s): What do developmentally appropriate practices look like across grade levels?

1. **Introduction** (1–2 minutes)
   a. Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, reviews expectations, and schedule. (If PLC is large, facilitator can break members into grade level groups).

2. **Review of Content** (10 minutes)
   a. Define the 3 core concepts of developmentally appropriate practice (*age appropriate*, *individually appropriate*, and *culturally appropriate*).
   b. Discuss the similarities and differences of these concepts across grade levels. Examine why these variations may occur.

3. **Applying Concepts to Practice** (10–15 minutes)
   a. Members share if developmentally appropriate practice (with attention to 1, 2, or all 3 of the core concepts) is present in their classroom environments, teaching practices, and classroom/school practices and policies.
   b. Group members pose how practices, policies and environments could be improved to be developmentally appropriate.

4. **Summing Up** (8 minutes)
   a. Members each share 1-3 changes that they will focus on for developmentally appropriate practice in their classroom.

5. **For Next Time** (1–2 minutes)
   a. Facilitator tells members the reading and preparation needed for the next PLC meeting.

Session 1B Protocol: Being Responsive to Diverse Learners

Preparation: Read pp. 7–13 in the *NJ First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines.*

Time: Approximately 40 minutes

The purpose of this PLC is to identify strategies to be responsive to the needs of diverse learners.

Guiding Question(s): How can we be more responsive to students' diverse needs?

1. **Introduction** (1–2 minutes)
   a. Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, reviews expectations, and schedule.

2. **Review of Content** (6 minutes)
   a. Recall best practices for being academically responsive, culturally responsive, and linguistically responsive to students' needs.
   b. Think of one child in your class whose needs are currently presenting a challenge and write down a *brief* description of the child/situation.

3. **Applying Concepts to Practice** (20 minutes)
   a. One member (volunteer) reads their description. Two members of the group each ask a *clarifying* question and the volunteer answers.
   b. Three members of the group each ask a *probing* question (that gently challenges the volunteer's assumptions, helps the volunteer think more deeply or reconsider their initial perspective). The volunteer writes these down, but does not answer the questions.
   c. The volunteer tells the group which question was the most thought provoking or challenging.
   d. The volunteer reflects on this one question through a think aloud for 2-3 minutes.
   e. Repeat with as many members presenting as time allows.

4. **Summing Up** (10 minutes)
   a. Members reflect on the process and discuss any ideas they have had about better meeting diverse students' needs.

5. **For Next Time** (1–2 minutes)
   a. Facilitator tells members the reading and preparation needed for the next PLC meeting.

   Adapted from: J. Dowd & J. D'Anieri's *"Probing Questions Exercise,"* National School Reform Faculty. *Retrieved from:* https://www.nsrfharmony.org/system/files/protocols/probing_questions.pdf.

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Session 1C Protocol: Working with Families and the Community

Preparation: Read pp. 13–16 in the *NJ First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines.*

Resources: Copies of "Session 1C Handout: Funds of Knowledge"

Time: Approximately 35 minutes

The purpose of this PLC is to identify the funds of knowledge we have and reflect on how we include families and community members in the teaching and learning in our classrooms.

Guiding Question(s): What funds of knowledge do we bring to our teaching practice and interactions with children?

1. **Introduction** (1–2 minutes)
    a. Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, reviews expectations, and schedule.

2. **Identifying Our Funds of Knowledge** (10–15 minutes)
    a. Facilitator asks members to complete the funds of knowledge handout individually.
    b. Members then briefly share and discuss their answers with a partner.

3. **Applying Concepts to Practice** (10–12 minutes)
    a. The group discusses:
        i. "What did you learn from this exercise?"
        ii. "How do you gather funds of knowledge from your students?"
        iii. "How do you currently include families and the community in your teaching/classroom?"
        iv. "How can you apply the funds of knowledge of your students and their families in your teaching?"

4. **Reflecting** (5 minutes)
    a. Members share an action they plan to take to increase the presence of children's families or community in their classrooms.

5. **For Next Time** (1–2 minutes)
    a. Facilitator tells members the reading and preparation needed for the next PLC meeting.

Session 1C Handout: Funds of Knowledge

Identify your funds of knowledge (consider either your family as you were growing up or your family life now).

Table 2: Funds of Knowledge and Examples

Fund of Knowledge	*Examples*
Home Language	*(e.g., Arabic, Spanish, Italian)*
Family Values & Traditions	*(e.g., religious beliefs, work ethic, celebrations)*
Family Outings	*(e.g., shopping, beach, library)*
Educational Activities	*(e.g., going to the museum, walking the neighborhood)*
Family Occupations	*(e.g., painter, police officer, engineer)*
Scientific Knowledge	*(e.g., recycling, health, math)*
Caregiving	*(e.g., bed time, before or after school care)*

Adapted from: Bank Street College's *"Exploring Cultural Concepts: Funds of Knowledge." Retrieved from:* https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/cultural-linguistic/docs/spring2spring-funds-of-knowledge.pdf

Setting up to Support Children's Learning

This section focuses on the physical setup of the classroom and strategies for classroom management, relating both topics to the social and emotional development of young learners. Classrooms engaged in developmentally appropriate practices are age and culturally appropriate environments where children feel comfortable and valued. Teachers design the environment to include a variety of work spaces (independent, small group, and whole group) and consider children's age, needs, and preferences when determining seating arrangements and group work opportunities. The classroom schedule offers children a predictable yet flexible routine that allows teachers to be responsive to children's needs and learning interests. Teachers create inviting learning opportunities to help children develop positive approaches to learning, such as engagement and persistence, and make connections across content areas. Teachers help children develop emotional literacy in a safe environment and try to prevent or minimize inappropriate behavior (and maximize learning time) by teaching and reinforcing positive behaviors.

Session 2A Protocol: Developmentally Appropriate Classrooms

Preparation: Read pp. 17–25 in the *NJ First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines.*
 Time: Approximately 35 minutes

The purpose of this PLC is to identify how members can make their physical classroom environments, schedule, and/or strategies for classroom management developmentally appropriate.

Facilitator and/or members decide to use this protocol to focus on 1, 2, or all 3 areas:
- Physical classroom environment
- Classroom schedule
- Classroom management strategies. This protocol can be used multiple times for each area individually.

Guiding Question(s): How can I make my classroom and teaching developmentally appropriate?

1. **Introduction** (1–2 minutes)
    a. Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, reviews expectations, and schedule.

2. **Examining Current Practices** (30 minutes)
    a. One member (volunteer) describes his or her current practice for the focus topic (physical classroom environment, schedule, or management strategies).
    b. Members ask *clarifying* questions to learn more about the context. The volunteer's responses should be brief.
    c. Three members ask *why* questions (Why is … important to you? Why do children have to…? Etc.) and the volunteer responds to each one.
    d. The group then discusses what the presenter has shared—not solving the problem for the volunteer, but helping the volunteer understand what assumptions and beliefs may be at work behind the scenes—allowing the volunteer (who is silent and reflective during this time) to see other perspectives.
    e. Volunteer briefly (no more than 2 minutes) responds and group is silent.
    f. Process repeats with other members.

3. **Debrief** (3 minutes)
    a. The group and facilitator debrief the experience.

4. **For Next Time** (1–2 minutes)
    a. Facilitator tells members the reading and preparation needed for the next PLC meeting.

Adapted from: *"The 5 Whys for Inquiry,"* National School Reform Faculty. *Retrieved from:* https://www.nsrfharmony.org/system/files/protocols/5_whys_0.pdf*.*

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Exploring Classroom Content

Traditional classroom schedules organize children's and teachers' time by content area; however, this compartmentalized approach does not reflect how children naturally learn about their world—through exploration, inquiry, and discovery. This section of the *NJ First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines* encourages teachers to look for opportunities to integrate subject areas and use inquiry approaches, such as project based learning, in their teaching to allow children to make connections between what they are learning and the world around them. To be useful for educators looking to improve their practice, this section of the *Guidelines* is organized by subject area and describes what research has identified as the best practices for teaching children in first, second, and third grade. By adopting these practices, teachers make their lessons more engaging and developmentally appropriate.

Session 3A Protocol: Integrating Curriculum

Preparation: Read pages 25–39 in the *NJ First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines.*
Time: Approximately 40 minutes

The purpose of this PLC is to examine existing curriculum and identify opportunities and create a plan that integrates different content areas.

Guiding Question(s): How can I integrate my existing curriculum to deepen students' learning?

1. **Introduction** (1–2 minutes)
   a. Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, guidelines, and schedule.

2. **Identifying Opportunities to Integrate** (6–8 minutes)
   a. Individually (or with grade-level partners), members identify concepts, skills, and standards they will be teaching in each subject area before the PLC meets again.
   b. Members will look for areas of intersection (spaces where concepts taught in one subject are applicable or able to be reinforced in another subject) or members will choose subject(s) they will intentionally integrate.

3. **Planning for Integration** (10 minutes)
   a. Members write out their answers to these questions (Individually or with partners):
       i. How can you make this change a reality? What steps do you need to take?
       ii. When will you take these steps? How will you hold yourself accountable?
       iii. What resources do you need and how will you get them/gather them?

4. **Identifying Evidence** (6–8 minutes)
   a. Members discuss (whole group) and write notes:
       i. What do you think will happen because of your integration efforts?
       ii. What evidence will you gather to help you see students' progress *and* your own growth?

5. **Sharing Action Plans** (10 minutes)
   a. Group discusses any implementation concerns.

6. **For Next Time** (1–2 minutes)
   a. Facilitator tells members to bring their action plans and evidence to the next session.

Adapted from: D. Bambino's *"Individual Monthly Action Plan (IMAP),"* School Reform Initiative. *Retrieved from:* http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/imap.pdf

Session 3B Protocol: Implementation Study

Preparation: Read pages 39–55 in the *Guidelines*, bring Integration Action Plan (generated in Session 3A), bring evidence of students' learning and teacher's progress.
Time: Approximately 40 minutes

The purpose of this PLC is to examine the implementation of members' action plans for integration and identify how to continue efforts.
Guiding Question(s): How did members implement their action plans? How can we continue to improve integration efforts?

1. **Introduction** (1–2 minutes)
    a. Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, guidelines, and schedule.

2. **Sharing Actions Taken** (6 minutes)
    a. With grade-level partners (or small groups), members each identify what they did and what they are working on from their integration action plan.

3. **Examining Evidence and Now What?** (20 minutes)
    a. One member (volunteer) quickly introduces the evidence they brought.
    b. Members examine evidence and ask clarifying questions.
    c. Members discuss how this evidence (and volunteer's efforts) reflect developmentally appropriate practice, integration of subject areas, student exploration, and opportunities for student collaboration.
    d. Members and volunteer discuss ideas for moving forward.
        i. What steps can be taken to increase developmentally appropriate practices, integration of subject areas, and opportunities for students' hands-on exploration and collaboration?
        ii. What supports does the volunteer need?
    e. [Repeat for partner/other group members]

4. **Reflecting** (8–10 minutes)
    a. Partners/Groups share how they will be continuing this work and support needed.

5. **For Next Time** (1–2 minutes)
    a. Facilitator tells members what they need to read and do to prepare for the next session.

Adapted from: G. Thompson-Grove's *"What? So What? Now What?,"* National School Reform Faculty. *Retrieved from:* https://www.nsrfharmony.org/system/files/protocols/what_so_what_0.pdf

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Teaching and Instructional Strategies

To bring content to life and to reach all students, teachers employ a repertoire of teaching techniques or instructional strategies, including questioning, modeling, co-constructing, and reflecting. This section provides an in-depth look at units of study that use the project based approach to teaching and learning. Areas that are addressed in this section using these approaches are data-driven instruction, scaffolding learning and differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

Session 4A Protocol: Examining Integration Practices

Preparation: Read pp. 56–76 in the *NJ First through Third Grade Implementation Guidelines.*

Time: Approximately 45 minutes

The purpose of this PLC is to examine vignettes and videos for evidence of teaching in a way that integrates content, provides opportunities for active experiences applying skills and content knowledge, and allows for self-directed learning.

Guiding Question(s): What evidence do you see for integration of content, active experiences applying skills, and self-directed learning? What can you apply to your classroom that would provide these types of experiences for your students?

1. **Introduction** (1–2 minutes)
    a. Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, reviews expectations, and schedule.

2. **Identifying Quality Teaching Practices in Units and Projects** (10 minutes)
    a. Discuss the quality teaching practices in the vignettes in the *Guidelines* (units and projects) and the NJ Student Learning Standards that they address.

3. **Identifying Concepts to Practice** (15 minutes)
    Watch the video "Project Based Learning," with attention to how various content areas were integrated.
    a. **Reflecting** (15 minutes)
    b. Each member writes down a success they saw in the video (e.g., students actively engaged in identifying the soil, students keep a science journal). (2–3 minutes)
    c. A member presents the successful teaching practice they noted from the video.
    d. The group asks questions to help the presenter uncover why this is successful. The presenter answers the questions with minimal back and forth discussion.
    Examples:
        i. Why do you think...?
        ii. What was different about...?
        iii. How do you or can you apply this to…?
    e. Repeat this with as many members as possible.

4. **For Next Time** (1–2 minutes)
    a. Facilitator tells members the reading and preparation needed for the next PLC meeting.

Adapted from Joseph McDonald and David Allen's "Success Analysis Protocol With Reflective Questions," National School Reform Faculty. Retrieved from: https://www.nsrfharmony.org/system/files/protocols/success_analysis_reflective_0.pdf

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Session 4B Protocol: Examining Student Work

Preparation: Teachers engage their students in a way that integrates content, provides opportunities for active experiences applying skills and content knowledge, and allows for self-directed learning. Then, teachers collect student work samples as evidence to share with group members.

Time: Approximately 45 minutes

The purpose of this PLC is to examine student work samples to identify evidence of high-quality teaching practices and adjust accordingly to plan next steps.

Guiding Question(s): What evidence is present that demonstrates learning that integrates content, provides opportunities for active experiences applying skills and content knowledge, and allows for self-directed learning?   What can be done next to extend the learning?

1. **Introduction** (1–2 minutes)
   a. Facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, guidelines, and schedule.

2. **Presentation** (5–7 minutes) The presenter shares the student work and the context (Members are silent; no questions are taken during this time):
   a. Brief and general information about the students and/or the class.
   b. The activity/lesson/assignment/prompt that generated the student work.
   c. Student learning goals or standards that inform the work.
   d. Samples of student work (photocopies of work, video clips, etc.) with student names removed.

3. **Clarifying Questions** (3–5 minutes)
   a. Members have an opportunity to ask "clarifying" questions to obtain information that may have been omitted in the presentation that they feel would help them to understand the context for the student work. Clarifying questions are matters of "fact."
   b. The facilitator should limit the questions to those that are "clarifying," judging which questions more properly belong in the warm/cool feedback section.

4. **Examination of Student Work Sample**s (10 minutes)
   a. Members look closely at the work, taking note of evidence of progress towards the NJ Student Learning Standards and quality teaching practices.
   b. Presenter is silent; members do this work silently.

5. **Warm and Cool Feedback** (15 minutes)

   a. Members share feedback with each other while the presenter is silent. The feedback generally begins with a few minutes of warm feedback, moves on to a few minutes of cool feedback (sometimes phrased in the form of reflective questions), and then moves back and forth between warm and cool feedback.

6. **Reflection** (5 minutes)

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a. Presenter speaks to those comments/questions he or she chooses while members are silent.
b. This is not a time to defend oneself, but is instead a time for the presenter to reflect aloud on those ideas or questions that seemed particularly interesting.

Adapted from Joseph McDonald and David Allen's "Tuning Protocol," National School Reform Faculty. Retrieved from: https://www.nsrfharmony.org/system/files/protocols/tuning_0.pdf