Closing the Gap: Turning SIS/LMS Data into Action
Growing a Data-Rich Culture
Community of Practice

Closing the Gap: One system’s use of professional learning communities to improve student engaged learning.

Title: Professional Learning Communities
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Recommendations:

• Creating Professional Learning Communities (PLC) in schools to help teachers move instruction from a focus on ‘teaching’ to a focus on ‘learning’.
• Students are required to become active in their own assessments.

Across the United States, there is a sense of urgency to improve student learning so that all students are both college and career ready. Some citizens feel that our system of public education is obsolete (Wagner, 2008). As we strive to increase rigor, hold students to higher expectations, and to adopt more stringent curriculum standards through Common Core, the pressure on teachers and students to perform at higher levels is at times overwhelming. In order to teach all students the skills that are needed for their world of work, it is important for schools and systems to embrace the creation of Professional Learning Communities. Professional Learning Communities allow schools and school systems to reorganize and to focus on the real work of public education, engaging and encouraging all students.

What is a Professional Learning Community?

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) attempt to shift the focus of school reform from restructuring to re-culturing (Louis, 2006). The ongoing PLC process develops teacher leadership. Once the PLC team has been fully developed, then the teacher’s focus is on improving student achievement and student learning. By participating in school level teams, teachers improve their leadership capacity while they work on improving individual student learning. Research has been available since the late 1990’s on this concept.

There is no exact or universal definition of a PLC, but there are several explanations that can help an administrator more clearly understand the concept. Hord in 1997 defined PLC’s as an ongoing process through which teachers and administrators work collaboratively to seek and
share learning and then to act on this learning. The goal is always to become more effective in helping students learn. A school or system involved in the PLC process seeks to capitalize on the strengths and ability of the staff (Protheroe, 2008). The overall plan is to improve student achievement by creating a collaborative school culture that focuses on learning rather than teaching (Feger & Arruda, 2008). Sharing a focus on the needs of the student, staff members improve their practices and become more engaging educators. This plan allows teachers and administrators to share and analyze their practices to create ever more effective classroom or learning opportunities (Reichstetter, 2006). It is hard to define the PLC concept in a few sentences because it is not a program or an organized curriculum, but it is a way of working together so that everyone involved in a child’s educational experience is focused on improving that child’s and all children’s learning (Hord, 1997).

What We Need to Know:

Teachers and administrators will need to be diligent about

- Focusing on four strategic questions-
  - What do we want each student to learn?
  - How will we know if the student is learning it?
  - How will we respond when a student is experiencing difficulty with learning it?
  - How will we respond if the student already knows it? (Eaker and Keating, 2008)

School and system leaders must create opportunities for

- Fully embedded professional development
- Time to meet and plan for instruction
- Time to create and analyze common assessments
- Enrichment and intervention for all groups

Introduction:

The Lincoln County School system operates a pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade program in Tennessee. Our district is in a border county and we are serving many children whose parents' work in neighboring Huntsville, Alabama’s NASA facility. We are a historically agricultural community, where traditional educational programming has provided the citizens adequate experiences for generations. Future Farmers of America has been our most popular high school club, second only to football as an extra-curricular activity. Our students’ consistently score at or above state average on annual assessments, have historically met all Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals, and our system’s performance ranks in the top third of Tennessee’s school districts. We have approximately 4,300 students enrolled annually, and although our numbers hold stable, our population is far more transient today than in the past.
Our minority population is just under 11% and over 60% of our students come from homes classified as economically disadvantaged. Although our students have appeared to do very well on all formative assessment as a whole group, we are aware of problems in the performance of students in the economically disadvantaged sub-group. This sub-group’s performance is up to 20% lower in some schools than other non-sub group student’s performance. Once we realized this gap, we found it necessary to look creatively at ways to improve the sub-group that makes up the majority of our students’ performance while still challenging the other students in our buildings reach high goals. We then began the work of transforming our school communities into professional learning communities.

We did not want more of the same. We wanted to re-visit our entire organization and re-organize with the students’ performance as a top priority. We began by training our central office staff and our principals in the 2011-2012 school year using Eaker and Keating’s book, Every School, Every Team, Every Classroom: District Leadership for Growing Professional Learning Communities at Work (2008). This book study allowed both our district leadership and our school level administrators to learn how to improve student engaged learning, how to establish communities or teams in schools that are data driven and student centered, how to write and use formative assessments, and how to arrange time during the school day to help teachers teach and students learn. Once our administrative team realized that creating learning communities required a culture shift, we were ready to introduce the concept and hand off the work to our teachers and staff at each school.

We focused on the idea that all students can learn. We created grade level teams, academic discipline teams, and transition teams to look at scheduling, curriculum, assessment, and response to intervention and to plan for the current school year. Most teachers were given time to plan together, and to work on course outlines, pacing guides, and formative assessments for their subject or grade level. This work was reinforced by a commercial formative assessment aligned with our state assessment.

Each team meets, looks at student work performed over a specific time period, analyzes the students’ performance, recommends intervention and enrichment, and creates common assessments. Students are included in both the planning and the monitoring whenever possible. Most schools have embraced a ‘data wall’ concept. Although these walls may look different at each school and each grade level, the intended outcome is to help students see where they are growing and how far they still have to grow. Students in middle school and high school are the most excited about these data walls and are the most motivated by the walls. For example, a principal heard a ninth grader say, “I am not proficient yet, but I am very close. I think that if I keep doing what we are doing in class and in our intervention time, I can get there by the end of the year” (Sarah Wallace, Principal, Lincoln County Ninth Grade Academy, November 2012).
The students are given small goals and the walls are ever changing, allowing students to see their growth from below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced over time. Teams look at skills that have been deemed ‘essential’ by the teachers and work with students on those goals in the classroom and during intervention and enrichment times. We are able to fully utilize PLC’s and RTI’s in all grades kindergarten through the student’s senior year in high school.

The Goal:

To develop a plan to fully implement Professional Learning Communities in our school system and to use that model to close gaps, improve student engaged learning, and to create college and career ready students upon graduation from our system’s high school.

The Approach:

1. Provide formal and informal opportunities for involvement in the PLC/Student engaged learning process
2. Help teachers help students to see their own scores as thermometers or measuring sticks...to reach their own college and career ready goals
3. Create a system and school culture where all resources are used to help teachers teach and to help students be fully engaged in the learning process
4. Help staff understand that they are responsible for student learning, not for just presenting information
5. Share successes and challenges with other school systems

The Results:

Re-thinking, restructuring, and redefining what teaching ‘looks like’ have been challenging tasks. We can see that real growth is happening in our students’ learning. Our assessments (formative and summative) for spring 2012 were much improved. Our gaps are decreasing and our student attendance has improved. The most difficult part at the central office level has been in collaborative planning around student engaged learning. It is one thing to have a state or federal mandate and have to report that mandate to a school leader, but to have to work with that leader collaboratively to ensure that student learning takes place within the confines of the mandate takes time and patience. It is really much easier to report, tell, present, and direct than to share, create, experiment, and collaborate. The biggest challenge for us is in becoming a fully collaborative community instead of isolated shops. Also, it has been a struggle to help all schools work collaboratively instead of being in competition with each other. That culture shift is still a work-in-progress and will be reported out over the next few years.

Student Data Walls:
One of the highlights of our spring semester has been seeing the student data walls used by both teachers and students in grades three through nine. These walls are placed in prominent positions throughout our schools and students have been assigned anonymous identification numbers so the students can see their progress over time in quintile groups. These data walls have been tremendously successful and have allowed both students and teachers to discuss student achievement in a whole new, student specific way.

**Educational Value Points:**

Schools and systems must provide students with a collaborative school culture, a caring environment, a viable curriculum, effective learning strategies, and frequent recognition of each students learning, additional time, support, and enrichment, and frequent recognition and celebration of improved student learning (Dufour, Dufour, & Karhanek 2010).

- Professional Learning Communities help create leaning opportunities for all students and reduce performance gaps
- Using formative and summative assessments and engaging students in the analysis of their own assessment results improves student performance
- Once a leader has experienced this process, it is impossible to go back to the ‘sage on the stage’ leadership and teaching method
- Seeing students engaged in the learning process is a fun way to spend each day!

**References:**


