

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

PLEASANT HOPE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Prepared for the Board of Education

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OVERVIEW

The Professional Learning Community concept is a process for school improvement that is student-focused. The idea is to create a culture that enables teachers to work together to give students the instruction they need to be successful. When properly implemented, school becomes a place where students are challenged and supported by teachers who present clear, relevant learning goals in creative and meaningful ways. Teachers who value students thrive in this environment. They learn from each other and work together to find ways to encourage inquisitiveness and excellence.

INTRODUCTION TO PLC'S

Two years ago, Mrs. McIntyre and several middle school teachers attended introductory training sessions for PLCs. This group brought back a general overview of PLC ideas and concepts to our faculty, and the faculty decided that this was a concept that we wanted to implement in the middle school.

YEAR ONE TRAINING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Last year, we enrolled four teachers in the first year of a three-year training program. These teachers and Mrs. McIntyre attended monthly training sessions, and then sifted, prioritized, and personalized the information based on our building's needs and the time available for training and presented the information to our faculty and staff on early release days. We asked the staff, parents and students about what a perfect middle school would look like and we collected, sorted and summarized those thoughts into a vision statement for our middle school.

We began to look at the student data we had available to see where our students needed help. We analyzed MAP data, STAR reading test results, grades and samples of student work. We began to try to set goals for improving our teaching; however, we quickly realized that it was difficult to identify areas that needed to change because we had no status quo – no formal written curriculum. This realization coincided with a PLC training presentation on curriculum development and assessing student learning. As a faculty, we decided to begin documenting our teaching. We collected notes, resources, and student work and used this collection of information to create the first drafts of our calendar-based curriculum maps which were completed in May of 2009.

YEAR TWO TRAINING AND IMPLEMENTATION

This year is full of exciting challenges. We have converted to the new Internet-based SIS system and we are learning how to use this tool to communicate with parents and manage records of student learning. The added convenience of being able to access student records from anywhere is a great help to our staff as we plan instruction and provide students with more timely performance feedback.

We are testing a pilot program for individualized student support in our eighth grade during study hall. Students have been assigned teachers and resources to meet needs that would not ordinarily be met in regular eighth grade classrooms. We are continuing to work to develop a full pyramid response to intervention model that will work in our middle school. This tiered approach to helping students is based on the following idea. If our classroom instruction is effective, eighty-five percent of our students will be able to master the material presented in the classroom, another ten percent will need some additional, outside support to be successful, and the remaining five percent will need extensive, persistent support. We have been creatively seeking ways to find time for our teacher teams to meet to strategize on behalf of our struggling learners. Planning time is a limitation in this area. Another area of frustration is the inability of students to stay after school for additional instruction because of transportation issues. We continue to analyze student data and improve instruction and support in areas of concern in spite of limited resources, and we have already accomplished more than we originally thought possible.

We are currently in the process of writing curriculum for every class taught in the middle school. Our finalized calendar-based curriculum maps will be posted on the middle school web page over the Christmas break. Currently, most teachers have completed the narratives for the first quarter of instruction and will have completed narratives for the first semester by the end of our workday on January 4, 2010. Our plan is to have completed all curriculum writing by May 5, 2010. This is an extremely ambitious undertaking that our teachers have graciously shouldered with professionalism and a spirit of cooperation.

YEAR THREE TRAINING AND IMPLEMENTATION – LOOKING AHEAD

As we look ahead to our third year of PLC training we anticipate that we will continue to enjoy the benefits of our hard work, as we see students become more confident and successful. We expect to continue to improve our instruction methods and our use of student data as a tool for making educational decisions.

We also anticipate difficult decisions and to be frustrated by the limitations of our resources. Important pivotal questions will be:

1. What will we do with students who have not learned important concepts?
2. What will we do with students who have already mastered the material?

Collaboration is an integral part of the PLC process. Due to the fact that 30% of our faculty is shared with either the elementary or the high school, not all grade level teams have common planning periods in which to meet. Scheduling students in instructionally appropriate sized classes is also difficult due to shared staff percentages.

The addition of an at-risk teacher at the middle school would be helpful to a number of students that need remediation in basic skills. Studies indicate that it takes 80 minutes of extra instruction daily to remediate a student who is one year behind. We would like to be able to offer students assistance during the school day. Our alternative option for students who have fallen behind is often limited to retention. Currently, middle school

students are unable to benefit from the alternative classroom located at the high school because the instructor teaches classes outside of the alternative classroom and transportation is an issue for our students. If we had an on-site, at-risk teacher, students would be able to get necessary instruction and assistance and then return to regular classes.

IN CONCLUSION

Professional Learning Community concepts have helped our faculty see that our school has the potential to be the school we all want in Pleasant Hope; a school that meets the needs of students; a school that values teachers and their work; a school that is family-friendly; a school that honors the dreams the community has for its young people. We have a sharp, energetic, committed group of professional teachers in our building and a principal who leads by example, tempering idealism with reality. We are excited about our progress, and we look forward to the future with anticipation.