

## **PLC SHARING FAIRS – 2007-08**

September 27

“I’M ON A TEAM AGAIN. . . .

and I have teammates.” These words were spoken by a Park Middle School teacher as she described what it meant to her to be part of a Professional Learning Community. After an hour or more of presentations by four schools at the district’s first PLC Sharing Fair, there was a time for general conversation, reflection, questions and answers, and just that richness that comes from recognizing we’re part of something big, something good, something that’s stretching us in new ways, with the potential to take us, and our students, to levels we’re previously not known.

It was a powerful afternoon, listening to the PLC stories from Park, Hill, Holmes, and Beattie. Each had a different story to tell, or, more accurately, a variation of a theme. That theme is that teachers learn from one another in a PLC, and the learning of teachers translates into greater achievement for students. We heard examples of identifying essential outcomes, finding, or preparing, formative assessments for those outcomes, watching and learning from one another teaching strategies that work, frequent monitoring of students through common formative assessments, planning for re-teaching and intervention where needed, planning for enrichment where needed, and celebrations of success. Underlying it all was affirmation of the power of collaboration and appreciation for the time to make it happen. We heard, in summary, descriptions of PLCs that are hard at work, making a difference.

October 31

WHAT STARTED AS A CHALLENGE. . . .

With these words, a teacher at Norwood Park described the work that she and her colleagues are doing as members of a professional learning community. The full statement is, “What started as a challenge is now a success.” What a great description of the learning of teachers, which translates into student learning, through the teachers’ efforts in a PLC.

This conversation occurred at the second district PLC Sharing Fair, held last Wednesday—yes, Halloween. There were treats, along with some tricks of the trade, as teachers and principals from Norwood Park, Maxey, Prescott, Culler, and Irving shared their challenges, successes, learning, and next steps with each other and with those of us who gathered with them. Particularly encouraging were the descriptions of processes that are becoming a part of the school culture, “the way we do things,” according to a Maxey teacher.

There were specific practices described, including establishing group norms, agreement on essential outcomes, development of SMART goals, analysis of data, and determination of interventions. A Prescott teacher noted that the time built into the calendar this year is an added bonus, as time is set aside specifically for PLCs to meet. She also described the efforts of Prescott teachers to use more formative assessments, so they don't have to wait for the theme tests to know if students are making progress in fluency and vocabulary.

A Culler teacher described with precision the three years of data that the English PLC used to determine where interventions were most likely to be needed for students to learn the elements of fiction, one of the district and state standards. She also described the system that was in place to monitor students' achievement of this standard, and the interventions that were in place for students needing additional support. A similar description by a Maxey teacher illustrated the work of a PLC to improve student achievement in mathematics, particularly for students with disabilities.

Teachers and principals also shared developments in the area of collaboration. A Norwood Park teacher noted that, "These kids now belong to all of us." The team from Irving described the growth in staff relationships as teachers learned together and worked together in PLCs. And from the Prescott teacher, "PLCs are forcing people to share—and that's a good thing. . . . they have made us more in touch with students.

A summary statement by a Maxey teacher is a good summary for the Sharing Fair: "We've learned that committed professionals, using the process, results in improved student learning. Our next steps are to celebrate the short-term wins, strengthen the connection between research and practice, and promote assessment literacy. We've made great strides in student learning and adult learning!"

November 26

“. . . .A FORMAL POSITIVE DISCUSSION THAT LEADS TO SOMETHING”. . . .

This phrase was used by a Clinton teacher in describing the communication that happens in her PLC, especially about the identification of essential outcomes. She went on to say, "It's really valuable to see how as a group of teachers we can create something and see that it makes a difference in student learning."

Those comments reflected the observations of most of those who gathered for the third PLC Sharing Fair, held last Monday, November 26. Teachers and administrators from Clinton, Kahoa, Eastridge, Belmont, Morley, and East shared their stories—what works, what's hard, what they've learned, and what they celebrate. Three major themes emerged from these stories:

- the work of identifying essential outcomes and setting SMART goals has sharpened everyone's focus on what is most important for students to learn;
- formative assessments are being developed and used more and more, with teachers sharing results;
- the whole process is improving student learning.

The teachers from Kahoa shared an organizational strategy of keeping track of student records, along with a central collection of resources for use in re-teaching—very useful, because, as a Kahoa teacher said, “In tomorrow's PLC we get to talk about kids and what we'll do for students who haven't learned yet; we know who needs the help.”

The teachers from Belmont noted that all students who are below grade level are in some kind of intervention, and that they would not have seen this level of detail without PLCs. A Belmont teacher noted that they had to learn to collaborate and to trust one another, and that it's scary to share scores with one another. But now that the trust and collaboration are in place, they're on to SMART goals, interventions, and learning from one another by teaching in each other's classrooms.

A teacher from Eastridge described the process of writing the SMART goal as “like shoe shopping at Von Maur's,” and that essential outcomes help focus the goal-setting process. Teachers at Morley noted the key issues of formative assessments and interventions as areas of focus for their work in PLCs this year. And an associate principal from East noted the huge culture shift involved in the implementation of PLCs at a high school—the importance of collaborating, talking together, sharing data, and being happy for others when their students do well. The observation was also made that at East, they have moved from “doing” PLCs to “being” a PLC. The huge push at East this year is focused on assessments: what to teachers do with the information, and what to students do with the information.

In a discussion about the impact of formative assessments on student learning, and students' responses to formative assessments, teachers made the following comments: “Students have the rubrics, and they know what excellent looks like.” “Students are proud to share their progress on weekly fluency checks; they know how many words per minute they could read last week, and how they've improved this week.” “Students maintain individual graphs of their own performance.” “Students work in small groups, getting feedback from each other.”

It was a conversation at a very high level about what Rick Stiggins describes as assessment for learning—the use of assessment not to mark or rank a student, but to help the teacher and the student bring about better learning. As I listened, I was struck by the depth of understanding on the part of teachers and principals

of complex and sophisticated concepts; we are truly becoming more assessment literate. And, we're living out the concepts of professionals, engaged in learning, in a community. Most importantly, the outcome is better learning for students. It makes me proud to be a part of the conversation.

December 13

## KIDS DON'T FALL THROUGH THE CRACKS ANYMORE. . . .

"Kids don't fall through the cracks anymore, because we really know our students." These words, from a Randolph teacher, summarized the experiences of the Professional Learning Community work at Sheridan, Elliott, Randolph, Humann, Lakeview, and Lux, as teachers and principals shared their stories at the PLC Sharing Fair last Thursday. There were other powerful statements, including the story of the third grade student at Sheridan, who is now a reader because, "PLC offered us (the teachers) time to connect with one another." Teachers talked about the power of their own expertise, the power of collaboration, the power of time to think and reflect. "We have learned that a student's potential lies in the reflection of our own teaching practice." This insightful statement was made by an Elliott teacher, who joined her colleagues in sharing successful literacy interventions from each grade level. Humann teachers talked about the gift of time in PLCs, during which they learn from one another, find the strategies that work, and then plan to use those strategies. Lakeview teachers commented that they are more intentional in setting goals and more research-based in selection of interventions because of PLCs. One Lakeview teacher said, "The PLC keeps us sane, and it helps kids grow." Lux teachers noted that the Essential Outcomes and SMART goals for each PLC are posted in the faculty lounge, so everyone knows the areas of emphasis for each PLC. A Lux teacher, in describing how the members of the PLC have learned from one another about assessment, said, "We're solid together because of PLCs."

Themes that emerged from this sharing fair:

- There is a high level of professional knowledge of PLC process, formative and summative assessment, and identification of interventions.
- Time spent in collaboration improves both teaching and learning.
- Work with colleagues in a collaborative setting, identification of essential outcomes, determination of formative assessments, and using that assessment data to focus on learning is becoming "part of the way we do things" in LPS.

Thanks to the principals and teachers from these six schools for sharing their PLC stories. I look forward to the next PLC Sharing Fair, scheduled for January 24 at 4:00 in the boardroom at LPSDO. You are all welcome to attend!

January 24

“GET ALONG AND GET IT DONE!”. . . . .

These words, from the Cavett grades 1 and 2 Professional Learning Communities, described not only their work but the work of other PLCs that told their stories at the PLC sharing Fair last Thursday. PLCs from all schools present talked about the work they had done to develop group norms (getting along) and their efforts to improve student learning (get it done). Schools in attendance were Cavett, Southeast, Northeast, Pound, Yankee Hill, Everett, and Pershing—a group of very diverse schools, all pursuing the goal of PLCs—that “one foot” look at each student.

Another common theme was the recognition and affirmation of the importance of the time spent in PLCs. As a teacher from Southeast said, “If we did not have PLC time, we would have had to invent it.” And a Pound teacher commented on the importance of “time set aside to work together on areas in need of improvement—work on common goals, make progress.” A Yankee Hill teacher noted that her PLC “enjoys the time, and is thankful for the opportunity.” And a Pershing teacher summed it up, saying, “The more time we have, the more we need, because there’s more we want to accomplish.”

A variety of SMART goals were described by the PLCs from the seven schools, with content including, but not limited to, high frequency words in first grade, reading comprehension in fourth grade, operations of integers in middle school math, food safety and sanitation at high school, and writing across the curriculum at high school. Two teams reported on using DocuShare as a way to share materials; one teacher noted, “That’s what it’s meant for—sharing!”

Very encouraging were the reports from two schools that when their students achieved the SMART goal, the team set another goal, and made it higher. If the goal was 85% of the students demonstrating proficiency, and the PLC met that goal, they set the next goal at 90% . One PLC set the goal at 100%, a high, but worthy, reach.

Finally, the Cavett team provided another rallying point for the entire Sharing Fair, with their straightforward statement that they’ve discovered they work better if they have snacks! Most of us nodded in agreement, as we enjoyed the popcorn that’s become the customary snack at PLC Sharing Fairs!

Thanks to all PLCs who shared their stories, and to those who came to listen. All are invited to the next Sharing Fair, scheduled for 4:00 p.m. on February 11, in the Board Room.

February 11

“WE’RE MAKING PLCs WORK FOR US. . . .”

These words, spoken by a member of the Arnold staff at the PLC Sharing Fair last week, described the efforts in many schools. We’re far enough into the process that principals and teachers are seeing that PLCs aren’t about additional work; instead, PLCs support the work of teaching and learning. Several schools described the close tie between their School Improvement Plan and their professional learning communities.

We heard many excellent examples of key components of PLCs. One teacher noted that the conversation about essential learnings is “one of the best conversations we’ve had.” All PLCs had established SMART goals. Several described frequent monitoring, which is one of the contributing factors to improved student learning. Meadow Lane and Hartley teachers showed examples of weekly and monthly monitoring of fluency measures, and Campbell teachers described weekly measures of math facts. Teachers from Arnold have developed and implemented interventions at each grade level. The PE PLC at Dawes talked about their learning of the importance of developing a rubric for assessing the skill that was the focus of their SMART goal. They also described the challenges of re-teaching and re-testing, challenges faced by teachers at every grade level and in every content area.

Teachers from several schools described their goal-setting process, most of them realizing that they could set a higher goal the next time—and they did. A Meadow Lane kindergarten teacher was excited to report that her students met their letter-recognition goal at the end of the first semester, earlier than expected, so they celebrated, and then moved on to the next goal! Having exceeded the mid-year goal of 50% proficiency in the Meadow Lane 5th grade PLC, the team moved the target to 75%. These are significant learnings—we can set, and reach, higher goals than we thought.

The staff at Southwest had worked in department PLCs to develop the model for each entry-level course, and they have now begun work in content-specific PLCs. A Southwest teacher noted with appreciation, “collaborative time with my colleagues.” A PLC at Bryan is focused on the students in the student-parent program. They have identified essential learnings for those students, and the team meets weekly to monitor each student’s progress. A very impressive statistic from that report is that 17 of the 18 students in the program completed first semester with no failures, and the overall GPA and attendance rate for these students exceed that of the total Bryan population.

An overall impression from listening to these PLC stories is that the work of PLCs is becoming a part of the culture, a part of the way we do things. The process is becoming less laborious, less step by step, and more an ongoing way of working

together to be clear about what it is that students should learn, how we'll know when they've learned it, and what we do when they don't, and do! It's exciting to know this implementation is taking hold, and that student learning is better because of it.

March 12

“WE DO A LOT OF REFLECTING ON OUR WORK”. . . .

This statement, made by a Mickle teacher, summarized much of what was shared at the PLC Sharing Fair on March 12. Teachers from Zeman, Fredstrom, North Star, Pyrtle, Mickle, and the Behavior Skills Program came together to learn from one another. A common theme was the recognition that time together, to do the work of PLCs and to reflect on that work, was resulting in better student learning. A Zeman teacher noted that it's powerful to look at teaching and re-teaching together, as a grade level. A 5th grade teacher at Fredstrom observed that “All of us love PLCs because we have time to go over the data and talk about it.” A North Star teacher leader described that the North Star faculty have learned the importance of good communication and working to “change the changeable.” A kindergarten teacher at Pyrtle commented that time together is so very important, and they use that to cheer each other on in their work, and cheer each other's successes. The BSP teachers shared that they have enjoyed the focus on academics in the PLCs, and that within the therapeutic setting, they are creating “a disposition for learning.”

We're far enough into the year that PLCs are seeing the results in improved student learning, as planned for in SMART goals. Evidence abounds, whether it's kindergarten students learning their letter names and sounds, middle school students participating successfully in oral presentation, or students at all grade levels meeting fluency goals. Teachers are sharing rubrics with students, helping students to share their own progress, bringing parents into the process with information and suggested “at home” practice ideas, and continuing to focus with precision on the essential outcomes and finding ways to organize for re-teaching. One PLC shared the heart-warming story of a father who said, with tears in his eyes, “My kid is reading—I didn't think it would ever happen.

Powerful connections are being made. The teachers at North Star are emphasizing formative assessment that they can use to inform instruction; they're now looking at common grading, using the same rubric in the same way, and beginning to grade exams together. A kindergarten teacher exclaimed that in the future, “We aren't going to have dropouts in LPS, because we're saving them now!”

What's growing is student efficacy and teacher efficacy—all of us are becoming more confident of our ability to learn and to make learning happen. That's evidence of a learning organization, and our students are the better for it.

April 15

### THREE IMPORTANT WORDS. . . .

At the PLC Sharing Fair last Tuesday night, eight Huntington teachers described and summarized their work using three important words. Those three-word phrases capture the PLC stories of each of the schools present. Here are some examples:

- Protected discussion time: A teacher from Rousseau said, "PLCs gives us time together without interruption to focus on individual students; we use our resources to help kids learn."
- Benchmarking data reviewed: Brownell 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers described their work in helping students achieve proficiency in reading comprehension. As the year has gone on, they've delved more deeply into the thinking and organizing reflected in the benchmark data, and that informed their decisions about appropriate and helpful interventions.
- Researched best practices: Teachers at Riley described their efforts to find and implement best practice in helping students learn to edit their writing. Results? Students are much better editors!
- Power of assessment: An art teacher at Lincoln High described the work of her PLC in spending time on assessment, "We spend a lot of time on assessment, thinking about how to judge creativity, how to teach the rubrics to students to use in their own self-assessment."
- Focus on student needs: West Lincoln kindergarten teachers use assessments to know which student needs more emphasis on what skill; 80 to 90% of their students, including SPED and ELL students, are demonstrating proficiency on the kindergarten reading and math essential outcomes.
- Collaborating with colleagues: As a result of collaboration, nearly all of the Huntington 5<sup>th</sup> graders have benefited from a math intervention.
- Validation of PLCs: First graders at Roper have progressed from no student being proficient on math facts at the beginning of the year to 86% of the students now being proficient on math facts.
- Learning circle continues: The Hawthorne teachers noted that PLCs have kept them focused on students, in a year of many distractions. They also commented that they have learned from one another, they have learned from their students, and that they found common ground in assessment measures.

Other insights shared by the participants included on principal, who said, "We're not doing PLCs, we are a PLC." An elementary teacher commented that in

PLCs, “Teachers needs are met as well—we’re energized we’ve grown and changed. Learning is never done, and it’s best done together. The learning environment to teachers affects learning for students.” Another elementary teacher noted that SMART goals were confusing at first, “but now they’re clear.” A high school teacher observed that, “Collaboration has enhanced commitment for the teachers and success for the students.”

We’re far enough into the school year that PLCs are beginning to see the gains in student achievement that result from their collaborative work. They have also encountered the reality that not every intervention or strategy works, at least not with every student, so teachers are monitoring and adjusting—and frequent assessment helps make those decisions. This Sharing Fair was another fine example of professional knowledge and skill, enhanced by time to work together in collaboration. I could not be more proud to work with such excellent colleagues.

May 22

“WE JUST KEPT ADDING INTERVENTIONS. . . . “

This statement, shared by the Calvert 5th grade PLC at the PLC Sharing Fair last week, summarized the learnings from many schools. The Calvert teachers talked about it as their biggest finding, that they needed to add layers of interventions to support all students in meeting the fluency standard. The McPhee teachers talked about how they rearranged time and resources to create a quilt of collaboration, one that supported students with disabilities (their biggest gap group) in reaching grade level standards. The Goodrich 8th grade English PLC teachers shared a similar story, noting that one of their learnings is that interdependency is the key to success, that, “We were all responsible for the success of all the students.” That PLC had realigned students and time and involved the SPED teachers to create more opportunities for re-teaching—more layers of intervention. Teachers at the Science Focus Program have developed interventions as a part of their advisory groups, and they adjust the groups based on skills that students need.

Other end-of-year themes were also prominent. It’s evident that teachers and principals have become much more comfortable and skilled with the use of data. The Scott teachers identified data as one of the ten things they like best about PLCs. Saratoga kindergarten teachers have created systems for organizing assessment data in a way that’s useful for planning for instruction. Goodrich teachers commented that in addition to having data, you have to know what questions to ask, what to do with the data—a very powerful statement!

We heard repeated affirmations of the power of establishing essential outcomes, the importance of time for collaboration and reflection, and of the use of formative assessment to strengthen instruction. We also heard of the joy that comes from reaching and exceeding goals. The first grade PLC at Calvert established a goal that 65% of the students would be proficient in the vocabulary standard. By the end of first quarter, 87% of the students were proficient. So, they celebrated, and then they raised the goal!

That's an important part of the PLC work—celebrate accomplishments (also on the list of the Scott teachers' top ten things they like about PLCs), and then set a new, and higher, goal.

Thanks to all for sharing your stories at the PLC Sharing Fairs throughout this year. They are powerful, and they serve as inspiration and example. They're powerful not just because of the successes, and there were many, but because of the thoughtful and professional work that underlies the stories. At the heart of the PLC story is the work of the professional learning community—clarity about what it is that students should learn and how we'll know when they know it, acknowledging the expertise within, and the persistence to develop layers of interventions.