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The Missouri Professional Learning Communities Project is a state-sponsored initiative for school improvement that began during the 2003-04 school year. It evolved from the Missouri Accelerated Schools Project, which had served as a school-reform initiative for many years. During the 2007-08 school year, the statewide PLC staff almost doubled in size and currently serves schools in all parts of the state.



Fall Focus: Strengthening Missouri's Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities Implementation Assessment Goes Statewide

For the first time, a comprehensive data-collection system has been developed, field-tested and piloted in the state of Missouri to measure the degree to which schools are implementing key principles of professional learning communities.

The MO PLC Benchmark Assessment Tool (MO PLC BAT) is designed to probe the depth of a school's PLC implementation in three domains: collaboration, student learning and teacher learning. Within these domains are 12 benchmarks, and each benchmark is broken down further into specific PLC practices. The MO PLC BAT results give

schools insight into their collaborative culture by identifying strengths and areas of improvement.

In spring 2011, the instrument was field-tested in 31 schools throughout the state to further refine the MO PLC BAT and determine its reliability in measuring school PLC implementation. Following an analysis of the field-test results, the instrument was launched statewide. This pilot of all schools currently involved in the MO PLC Project consisted of an online survey, which all professional school staff were asked to complete. The survey was then followed up with a personal phone interview with each building

principal. Open-ended questions allowed principals to elaborate on their schools' professional learning community development.

The perceptual data gathered through the MO PLC BAT does not, by itself, paint a complete picture of each school's implementation. However, when combined with other measures – such as student-achievement data, artifact evidence and personal school visits – the instrument does help schools reach deeper levels of PLC implementation.

(For additional information about the MO PLC BAT, contact Data/Web Manager Robert L. Gordon at the email address listed on page 4.)

Jackson High School Leaders Speak to State Special Education Panel

The Missouri Special Education Advisory Panel heard from Jackson High School leaders during its June meeting in Jefferson City. The panel is composed of individuals from all parts of the state who provide feedback to Department of Elementary and Secondary Education leaders responsible for programs that assist students with disabilities.

Vince Powell, principal, and Pam Deneke, special

education instructor, shared how the implementation of professional learning communities has not only dramatically increased the performance of all students over the past several years, but also how PLCs have made a profound impact on the achievement of students with disabilities. Powell and Deneke were accompanied by Peggy Hitt, a PLC resource specialist who works closely with Jackson school leaders.



Pictured left to right: Pam Deneke, Vince Powell and Peggy Hitt.

Powell explained why the school became involved in the PLC process, citing the need to increase the rigor of classroom instruction, to change from a top-down style of leadership to a more shared/collaborative

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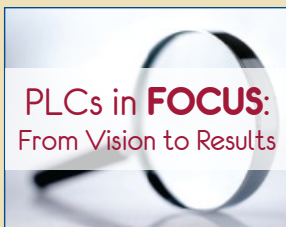
The Four Corollary Questions of a PLC

1. What do we want children to learn?
2. How do we know when they have learned?
3. What do we do when they haven't learned?
4. What do we do when they have learned?

WHAT: 2012 Powerful Learning Conference

WHEN: Jan. 30-31

WHERE: Tan-Tar-A, Osage Beach



*"At its core, team learning is a discipline of practices designed, over time, to get the people of a team thinking and acting together. ... The team members do not need to think alike."
- Peter Senge*

State PLC Project Refines Design and Delivery

During the winter and spring of 2011, resource specialists from the MO PLC Project collaborated to refine how assistance is provided to schools developing professional learning communities.

The following are areas in which MO PLC Project participants might experience some modifications.

Readiness: Research continually supports that the rate of successful implementation of any initiative is, in part, determined by a local education agency's factors of readiness, preparedness and conditions.

As part of the initial assessment phase, resource specialists will work with

school administrators to assess the likelihood of successful implementation. Resource specialists will clearly communicate outcomes and expectations of the process.

Training and support: Based upon assessment data, resource specialists will be responsive in designing and delivering differentiated

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"Focused" Powerful Learning Conference for 2012

Plans are coming together for the 2012 Powerful Learning Conference, sponsored by the MO PLC Project. The 2012 conference theme is "PLCs in Focus: From Vision to Results."

The conference will be held Jan. 30-31 at Tan-Tar-A in Osage Beach. It promises to be another excellent professional development opportunity for educators throughout

the state. Featured keynote speakers will include Anne Conzemius and Jan Chappuis. Conzemius will present on Jan. 30, addressing why a systemic focus on student learning is important to school improvement, as well as how to create a vision that is focused on goals.

Chappuis will be the featured speaker on Jan. 31. She will talk about which areas to

focus on for better results and using assessments for learning.

The educators who attend, however, are what always makes the Powerful Learning Conference such a special event. For individuals or groups interested in presenting, the call for proposals is now available at dese.mo.gov/divteachqual/sii/plc_new_pg.html. We hope to see you at the Lake in January!

Strategies to Deepen Team Collaborative Skills

A core component of any professional learning community is high-functioning, collaborative teams. Are your teams achieving their desired results? Do teacher teams engage in the right conversations? Are team meetings becoming stale? If so, consider these helpful hints to strengthen your teaming structures.

1. Determine the purpose and outcomes before organizing another team meeting. Is the work of the team necessary, or could the work be accomplished in

a different, more efficient manner? Is the team's primary purpose focused around instructional issues, or is it primarily management in nature? Be clear about all intended outcomes.

2. Deepen your learning norms of collaboration. In addition to process norms, which guide how teams work together (be on time, no side conversations, be prepared, etc.), consider establishing learning norms that define how teams will deepen their own

understanding and skills. One example might be to ask for evidence supporting voiced opinions or declarations. Another might be to request clarification whenever things are not evident. Practice paraphrasing.

3. Support and encourage diversity of thought. Multiple views are generally better than one. Cherish, rather than limit, differing viewpoints. Practice collaboration techniques that encourage strong dialogue

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PLC Design and Delivery

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instruction including (when appropriate) whole group, small group or individualized attention during trainings. To more effectively assist schools in reaching deeper implementation levels, the standard model of delivery has been modified to a four-year commitment with five regional trainings per year.

Another area of emphasis will be more direct assistance to individual schools through additional site visits (at least three per school per year). These visits will follow up on knowledge taught during regional trainings, work on building positive relationships with the entire school and connecting with school leaders, provide new information, and help to develop systemwide capacity.

Administrator support:
Strong administrative

leadership is a necessary condition for deep PLC implementation. Attention will be given to school leaders to assess their understanding of and commitment to the MO PLC process. Technical assistance will also be available to sustain the new learning for administrative leadership.

Assessment: In PLCs, assessment is a participatory and ongoing process. Assessment provides data and information to determine the level of learning by staff, and it produces evidence that schools are implementing intended outcomes. Assessment tools are used to document efforts being made by the school, to reflect the depth of PLC implementation and to determine whether changes made have improved student learning. The tools are used to inform future needs.

PLC resource specialists will use a variety of assessment opportunities to help school-leadership teams monitor progress. In particular, two assessment instruments will be vital to PLC implementation. The first is the PLC Implementation Rubric, which is specifically aligned to the PLC curriculum. This rubric will be used by teams periodically throughout the training cycle to self-assess their progress.

The second is the MO PLC Benchmark Assessment Tool. This will consist of an online survey completed by all professional staff in participating schools during the spring. The survey will be followed up with a personal phone interview with each building principal. Open-ended questions will enable principals to articulate the progress of their PLC implementation.



MO PLC Project participants might experience some modifications in:

- Readiness
- Training and support
- Administrator support
- Assessment.

Deepen Team Collaborative Skills

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and discussion such as probing, paying attention to the self and others, and pausing.

4. Consider creative team roles to encourage candor and trust. In some team conversations, it might be helpful to have a member challenge the team to make persuasive arguments that a specific recommendation is the best one. Or, have another team member be a proponent of a suggestion for change, making the case by citing reasons and benefits. Creative roles will breathe life into stale meetings.

5. Support team stability and focus. Resist placing staff members on too many teams. Encourage relationships and long-term teamwork. Strengthen the orientation process for new team members. Above all, encourage collaboration as routine and necessary components of teaching and learning.

6. Clarify and encourage team decision-making authority on instructional issues. Clearly delineate between functions that are decision making and advisory. Work at strengthening staff

skills in building a consensus and conflict management.

While these suggestions are not all-inclusive, paying attention to the growth of collaborative teams is vital to a school's continued improvement. Try some of them, and see what results you get.

(Concepts for this article were taken from "Beyond the Numbers: Making Data Work for Teachers & School Leaders" by Stephen White. Go to books.google.com and type in "Beyond the Numbers" to preview this helpful book.)



Consider these helpful hints to strengthen your teaming structures!

Jackson Leaders Speak to State Panel

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leadership environment, and to build better relationships with the high school students and their parents.

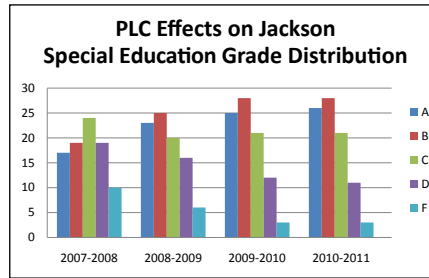
Major changes at school have included late-start Wednesdays for collaboration, an extended school day to allow for an advisory period, shared leadership and decision making, and a focus on the four guiding questions for professional learning communities. Powell shared data showing how the performance of the special education subgroup has improved due to an increased focus on the needs of students with disabilities and the students' inclusion in advisory groups and regular education classes.

Deneke explained the importance of PLCs to the

welfare of students with disabilities. Her inclusion on the school's leadership team has been important in advising other teachers about the needs of these students.

"As with most typical people, accommodations and modifications are not usually things we consider when planning events," Deneke said. "There is no blame to be placed here, only the opportunity to shape the thinking of others in respect to the needs of those with disabilities, and for them to shape my thinking at times."

She also described the benefits of including students with disabilities in advisory groups.



Principal Vince Powell credited Jackson High School's focus on PLCs with increasing the number of A's and B's and decreasing the number of D's and F's earned by students with disabilities over a four-year period.

"This practice gives the student a reason for becoming a more self-determined person – knowing and communicating about their disability to those who ask," she said.

Robert L. Gordon, MO PLC Project data/web manager, followed the presentation with information regarding statewide PLC school data related to special education.

State Contact Information



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For more information about this newsletter, please contact Robert L. Gordon, MO PLC Project data/web manager, at gordonrl@missouri.edu.

MO PLC Project Mission & Vision

Our mission is to build a sustained culture for learning in Missouri schools through the professional learning communities process.

It is **our vision** to:

- Be a nationally recognized model for a statewide school-improvement initiative.
- Be a respected authority for establishing a focus on learning, creating a collaborative culture and developing a results orientation in schools.
- Be reputable, trained and credible experts who provide high-quality professional development.

In order to fulfill our vision, we will:

- Provide a consistent, results-oriented curriculum implemented with fidelity throughout the state.
- Collaboratively learn together and build our knowledge base in our own professional learning community.
- Collaboratively work with other projects in the Regional Professional Development Centers and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.