

Professional Learning Current Reality and GAPSS Review

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Part A: Professional Learning Reality

Introduction

The standards movement in education, which began nearly thirty years ago, sought and continues to seek to “increase the effectiveness and equity of education for all students regardless of their circumstance or postal code” (Standards for Professional Learning, 2011, p. 17). Clearly defined standards for student performance, educator performance, leader performance, and school performance help to collectively raise expectations for all facets of a student’s education. One important component to this standards movement is the way in which technology can assist educators in demonstrating competency of the standards. Whether teachers use technology to access professional learning information, leaders use technology to provide feedback on teacher performance, or students use technology to prove mastery of the standards, “technology implementation” has become a buzz word in educational arenas and a hot topic of educational literature, especially as related to professional learning. The Standards for Professional Learning (2011) acknowledged technology’s ability to “create opportunities to access information that enriches practice” (p. 33), to “[participate] in local or global communities or networks” (p. 33), and to “[increase] possibilities for personalizing, differentiating, and deepening learning, especially for educators who have limited access to on-site professional learning” (p. 41). This report will describe one school’s vision for technology integration and the professional learning provided to address implementation of the vision.

Vision

Woodland High School (WHS) is a suburban high school of approximately 1,500 students and 100 teachers in a large southeastern school district with over 48,000 students. The

school's vision derives from the district's vision of "Ensuring Success for Each Student".

Principal Bret Cook described the school's goals as identifying and addressing the diverse needs of its diverse student body by offering an array of learning environments, courses, and activities or programs, as well as a positive, professional staff committed to providing every student with opportunities to be successful (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014). His primary goals at WHS are to increase student achievement, with special emphasis on the African-American achievement gap, as well as appropriately challenge all students so that they are adequately prepared for post-secondary education (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014). Accordingly, he envisioned the school implementing technology for the purpose of addressing these unique student needs, rather than simply implementing technology for "technology's sake" (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014).

The school has already been outfitted with a wireless network that allows students to use both school-owned and personal electronic devices in the classroom in accordance with a Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT) initiative. Similarly, several classrooms are equipped with interactive whiteboards, document cameras, and/or electronic response systems; teachers may check out one of ten school owned laptop carts so that their students can use word processing software or access the Internet for in-class assignments. Still, to deem WHS a state-of-the-art technology facility would be remiss. Cook noted the following:

At WHS and in Henry County Schools, we are trying to be smart about technology purchases. There is no hiding the fact that we are still facing economic hardships. Rather than jumping on the bandwagon and spending exorbitant amounts of money on technology that sits idle, strategic implementation is helping to ensure that the money that

is spent is done so wisely and with students' best interests in mind. (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014)

Technology also facilitates data collection and analysis of student achievement at WHS through subscription purchases to USA Test Prep and countywide implementation of POINT, a learning management system that promotes data analysis, differentiation, and personalized learning.

WHS's technology vision, therefore, comprises research-based uses of technology for the purpose of differentiated and personalized student learning, whether directly involved in student performance or through professional learning, communication, collaboration, and data analysis for teachers. Cook acknowledged that he envisions WHS offering students several personalized approaches to learning through technology—whether through online classes, blended learning, or simply technology-rich classrooms (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014).

Needs Assessment

According to WHS's school improvement plan, various focus teams share the responsibility for determining the professional learning needs for the school (WHS School Improvement Plan, 2014). The Technology Focus Team is comprised of members from each academic department, including special education, as well as representatives from the Media Center, counseling office, and administrative team. The Technology Focus Team works throughout the year to identify the technology needs of the school, in terms of purchasing equipment and providing technology-related professional learning. School-wide teacher surveys are administered three times each year to determine perceived technology needs and to measure the effectiveness and implementation of various technology initiatives or professional learning. Administrators are able to pull data from the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System's [TKES] self-

evaluations and formative and summative assessments; counselors provide data related to student achievement in each academic discipline and at the classroom, teacher-specific level, and academic department representatives serve as collectors of anecdotal data from each academic disciplines.

Heather McCormick, chairperson of the Technology Focus Team described the process as “intentionally multifaceted” (H. McCormick, personal communication, January 2014). Rather than school administrative leadership making all decisions for the school, teachers themselves engage in professional learning communities that have direct influence on school improvement procedures (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014). Such is the case for other focus teams, including 9th grade transition, multi-tier support systems, Advanced Placement/Honors, etc. Each teacher serves on a focus team and thus plays an integral part in helping to improve student achievement and facilitating professional learning in the school. Each focus team offers a variety of professional learning opportunities, many of which involve teacher choice, thus ensuring that teachers are more likely to be receptive of professional learning and to implement new ideas into their classroom instruction or professional practices (WHS SIP, 2014). Indeed, McCormick’s phrase “multifaceted” truly encompasses WHS’s approach to assessing professional learning needs. The data collected is multifaceted since it comprises student achievement, teacher’s perception on surveys, informal interviews and conversations, and anecdotal classroom analysis; the personnel is multifaceted since a variety of staff members from teachers, to paraprofessionals, to counselors, to media specialists, to special education specialists, to administrators serve on each of the focus teams. Consequently, the professional learning that derives from these focus teams is also multifaceted, in terms of learning design, facilitators, topics, and required time commitments. Knight (2007) describes a partnership as a relationship

defined by choice in which both partners are seen as equals. WHS's approach to focus teams and professional learning communities makes all staff partners in the professional learning process.

Professional Learning

Multiple forms of professional learning occur concurrently at WHS. To begin, each academic department participates in collaborative planning, during which department and grade level goals are created and assessed, lesson plans are created, common assessments are produced and evaluated, classroom instruction techniques are shared, and student work is observed. The school also provides opportunities for teachers to attend workshops out of the building related to specific needs or interests of the teachers. For example, WHS particularly utilizes the local Regional Educational Service Agency [RESA] for professional learning, and routinely shares with teachers course offerings and solicits interested parties to attend on behalf of the school. Teachers also attend workshops sponsored by the College Board for AP training and many teachers have and are currently pursuing gifted endorsement at the school's expense. Teachers are expected to provide some sort of follow through after attending professional learning outside the building, whether that be an informal conversation with the teacher's primary observer, a school-wide email with pertinent information, a presentation at a department meeting, or a school-wide workshop offering if appropriate (WHS SIP, 2014). Those teachers who have specific professional needs outlined by a professional development plan engage in teacher observations and mentoring with various master teachers in the school (WHS SIP, 2014). Almost all professional learning at WHS is collaborative and much is voluntary, thus ensuring that teachers participate in learning environments in which they are interested and engaged.

Each focus team also offers a variety of professional learning opportunities throughout the year, so the Technology Focus Team is specifically responsible for technology-related professional learning. At the beginning of the school year, the Technology Focus Team administered a needs assessment survey that suggested teachers wanted less training on hardware—how certain pieces of technology worked—and more training on how to implement the technology into lessons (WHS SIP, 2014). Teachers also expressed a desire for content-specific professional learning so that each discipline could learn ways to use technology that were directly relevant (WHS SIP, 2014). Consequently, during the 2013-2014 school year, Technology Focus Team members provided differentiated instruction on Google apps, offering beginner, intermediate, and advanced sessions related to the use of Google Drive, Google Docs, Google forms, etc. (WHS SIP, 2014). Intermediate and advanced sessions also included information related to QR codes and data analysis using Google Forms. The differentiated approach helped to ensure that the needs of all teachers were met and that teachers could immediately implement the ideas discussed. Follow up sessions were offered a week later for teachers to attend voluntarily if they had questions arise, and the two facilitators have continuously fielded questions throughout the year (WHS SIP, 2014). Furthermore, the Technology Focus Team has assumed responsibility of several department meetings; typically focus team members from a specific academic department design professional learning based on the needs identified by department members, another personalized approach that ensures professional learning is relevant. Topics have included subject specific software and BYOT apps students can use in each academic classroom (WHS SIP, 2014). The Technology Focus Team has been actively researching purchase of Ipevo interactive whiteboards for classrooms that currently do not have interactive whiteboards; these alternative, less expensive whiteboards

involve a small camera, operate using existing LCD projectors, and do not require mounting of large whiteboards. Several teachers are piloting the interactive whiteboard currently and encouraging other teachers to visit their classrooms to try the devices; since current Promethean software can be used with the Ipevo interactive whiteboards, the Technology Focus Team will offer a final workshop on the Promethean software and once again use differentiated sessions for various skills levels (WHS SIP, 2014).

Technology Focus Team members have also participated in several workshops out of the building, including offerings by the local RESA and the Georgia Educator's Technology Conference [GA-ETC]. In response to this professional learning, Technology Focus Team members are currently creating a webpage hosted on the school's website with technology tips and examples of ways in which current teachers are using technology in the school (WHS SIP, 2014). The hope is that other teachers will use the website to identify resident teacher experts in certain types of technology, both those addressed in professional learning and additional resources, and engage in individualized technology coaching with these experts. WHS does not have a full time instructional coach or technology specialist, so teacher-to-teacher coaching fulfills this need. Since technology integration is a component of teachers' TKES evaluations, teachers are asked to demonstrate the ways in which they have addressed technology knowledge in their year-end evaluation conference with a primary observer.

WHS's approach to professional learning truly seems to address the Standards for Professional Learning, especially in terms of active engagement. The Standards for Professional Learning (2011) described active engagement as occurring "when learners interact during the learning process with the content and with one another" (p. 42). Collaborative professional learning led by teachers from within, rather than outside, the building helps to "[respect] adults

as professional and gives them significant voice and choice in shaping their own learning” (Standards for Professional Learning, 2011, p. 42). The Professional Learning Communities implemented by the creation of focus teams have helped to recognize, value, and capitalize on the expertise teachers already have.

Alignment to School Improvement Goals

All professional learning at WHS aligns with the school’s goals of meeting the needs and ensuring the success of each student. According to Principal Cook, “student achievement is a derivative of teacher achievement. If we want our students to perform well, teachers have to be prepared and comfortable in the classroom” (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014). Furthermore, he suggested that numerous studies cite teachers, as opposed to class sizes, technology available, parental support, and school location, as the most influential factor in determining student success (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014). WHS, therefore, has actively involved its teachers in the process of determining professional learning needs, by creating focus teams, administering needs assessment surveys, and finding the support needed for teachers who struggle with student achievement or classroom management, as well as those teachers who choose to be innovators and early adopters of new technology and programs. Because the school’s goal involves the needs of individual students, the school’s professional learning goals are not broad, but instead relate to the specific needs of individual teachers. Though the school is in its first year of focus group implementation, Cook reported that preliminary data, in the form of mid-year surveys, first round TKES summative assessments, and informal conversations with teachers suggest teachers appreciate this approach to professional

learning and have found the learning more relevant to their classroom needs and thus more beneficial to student learning (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014).

Funding and Incentives

A local education-special purpose local option sales tax (E-SPLOST) paid for the wireless infrastructure at several county schools, but individual schools or county curricular departments purchase other forms of hardware. WHS has purchased interactive whiteboards for several classrooms, as well as document cameras, and LCD projectors; similarly, the equipment in some classrooms has been purchased by curricular departments at the county levels, such as the math department's purchase of I-Pads for all math teachers. At WHS, academic department chairs are asked to relay technology needs to the Technology Focus Team, which researches solutions and costs and then provides the principal with suggestions. This method of teacher involvement has already led to the English department's acquisition of document cameras, the Foreign Language department's plans for a language lab, and other minor technology needs from each department. Technology's potential for increasing student achievement and student engagement is well-documented before purchase and the expectation is that technology will prove an integral component for ensuring student needs are met. Much of the school's technology budget also allows for teachers to attend professional learning outside the building, including technology workshops sponsored the local RESA, as well as state conferences such as GA-ETC.

Cook stated that administrators use several incentives to reward teachers for implementing strategies that align with the school's improvement goals (B. Cook, personal communication, January 2014). Teacher of the month recognition, voted on by all staff, includes

a small monetary award supplied by the school. Similarly, the school pays for substitute teachers for teachers who conduct in-house professional learning and provides these teachers with monetary gifts as well. Agendas, minutes, and artifacts are recorded for all collaborative professional learning so that teachers may earn Professional Learning Units [PLUs] that they can use for contract renewal.

Diversity

WHS offers training for diverse populations primarily through the local RESA. One teacher works with students who are non-native English speakers, and she is routinely used as an intermediary when teachers struggle to communicate with parents who are non-native English speakers. The Multi-Tiered Support Systems Focus Group has also spent time identifying economically disadvantaged students, as well as other diverse students who may benefit from a mentoring program (WHS SIP, 2014). Teachers volunteered to serve as mentors and then participated in an after-school training facilitated by the school social worker and psychologist about mentoring. Students were then assigned to individual teachers, typically those who were former but not current teachers, who serve as another level of support for struggling students.

Additionally, special education teachers regularly participate in training sponsored by both the county and the individual school. These teachers, many of whom teach in collaborative settings with regular education teachers, are expected to redeliver appropriate information in academic department meetings so that regular education teachers benefit from the shared knowledge.

Finally, outside training has been conducted to help teachers learn how to analyze data using POINT, the county's learning management system. POINT allows teachers to track the

progress of various student sub-groups, design remediation and intervention, and assess the results of intervention. Data on specific subgroups can be gathered at the classroom, grade, school, and county level.

Collaboration

Teachers meet bi-weekly with subject-specific, grade level teams for the purposes of lesson planning, creating and evaluating common assessment, and examining student work. Each academic department meets twice a month, once for department housekeeping and another for department-specific professional learning. Typically, a teacher from within the department, a department representative from a focus team, or an outside source arranged by the department chair facilitates this professional learning. Each of these meetings occurs during a teacher's planning time so the emphasis is certainly on job-embedded learning. Additionally, each teacher participates in a school focus group, which meets once each month after school for purposes of collaboration and planning professional development opportunities for teachers. Finally, a school wide faculty meeting occurs once each month for the purpose of school wide professional learning. Essentially, all teachers at WHS are engaged in some form of collaborative professional learning each week.

Agendas and minutes for all collaborative meetings are recorded and posted on the shared teacher network drive. Such emphasis on collaboration ensures that all teacher voices are heard and that teachers are empowered to make professional learning decisions.

Evaluation

Focus Teams and administrative leaders regularly survey staff, both formally and informally, on perceptions of professional learning with the goal of determining how relevant and practical teachers perceived the learning to be (WHS SIP, 2014). However, teacher practice is also evaluated through informal and formal observations. Each teacher participates in at least six evaluations each year, four formative and two summative. During these observations, teachers must demonstrate competency in each of ten professional standards in order to earn a proficient score on the annual evaluation. Included with these observations is regular feedback in the form of written comments and evaluation conferences in which evaluators provide teachers with praise and constructive criticism. Since the observations occur at regular intervals throughout the year, rather than exclusively at the end of a semester or a school year, administrators are constantly collecting data on the professional learning needs of the teaching staff. Data from observations is partly used to determine the professional learning needs of academic departments, grade levels, and specific teachers. Since the school improvement plan relates to addressing the individual needs of students, special emphasis is placed on standards related to the ways in which teachers deliver instruction, assess, and differentiate learning, all of which are addressed through ongoing professional learning.

Also administrators, who serve as teachers' evaluators, regularly observe grade-level and department meetings or professional learning to determine how professional learning goals are being implemented. Teachers must turn in logs for all meetings so that minutes can be reviewed for meetings in which an evaluator was not present. Moreover, year-end student achievement data is another component that helps to determine any professional learning needed by teachers in specific academic disciplines, grade levels, or individual classrooms. By ensuring teachers

meet certain professional standards and implement professional learning initiatives, administrators are directly influencing student achievement, since teachers are the single most important factor in student achievement.

References

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