

Optional: Peer-to-Peer Practice Submission

Strengths identified through the Standards Assessment Report can benefit not only your school, but also other institutions striving to improve their adherence to the seven AdvancED standards. As part of the SAR, you are invited to submit a Peer-to-Peer Practice to the AdvancED Resource Network, an online knowledge network of practices, research, and tools. You may submit a practice at any time prior to submitting your report by going to www.advanc-ed.org/resourcenetwork and clicking “Submit a practice.” You can also follow the instructions contained in the online Standards Assessment Report.

Background

A peer-to-peer practice is a description of interventions, strategies, programs, or activities that have been identified by a school/district to be effective. It includes practices that support classroom teachers and/or schools/districts in their efforts to improve student learning.

The submission form asks for the following information:

- **Name of the practice**
Professional Learning Communities
- **Contact information for the practice**
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- **Description of the practice – Describe what you were trying to accomplish, how it was implemented, and what evidence you have that it worked**

“A Professional Learning Community involves educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006).

The teachers and administrators in Orange County Schools work collaboratively to function as a professional learning community. For the past five years, K-12 teachers, building administrators and Central Office staff have participated in ongoing professional development with Rick and Becky DuFour, Peter Noonan, Mike Mattos, Cassandra Erkens, Douglas Reeves, Terri Martin, Janet Malone, Eric Twadell, Bill Ferriter, and other national consultants. Each of these consultants have shared how to deeply implement professional learning communities in a school system. Training topics have included developing team norms, unpacking the standards, developing common formative assessments, implementing a Pyramid of Academic and Behavioral Interventions, data analysis, supporting students when they don’t learn the first time, developing collaborative teams, tools for facilitating team meetings, and strategies which support the work of professional learning communities. These opportunities would not have been possible without the generous support of

five major business partners and collaboration of five school districts located in the heart of the Piedmont area of North Carolina.

In 2004, five Triangle business leaders and five public school systems created a unique public/private sector high school reform initiative designed to increase the number of graduates, reduce the dropout rate, and better prepare students for successful lives after high school. Entitled *High Five: Regional Partnership for High School Excellence*, the five-year, \$2.5 million project represented the first collaborative venture for the five major area public school systems.

The partnership, created in April, 2004, was designed to support and enhance public high school performance by developing a regional approach in sharing best practices; facilitating collaboration between school districts, colleges and universities; identifying alternative delivery systems to reach at-risk students and broadening community support. In 2007, High Five started offering training and professional development to K-12 teachers and administrators. This is when Orange County Schools began implementing Professional Learning Communities in elementary through high school.

The regional partnership funding came from The News & Observer Publishing Company, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation, SAS, Progress Energy and Capitol Broadcasting Company. The five Triangle public school systems participating in the program are: Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, Durham Public Schools, Johnston County Schools, Orange County Schools and Wake County Public School System.

In 2009, the five year partnership came to an end. Through professional development and generous donations, High Five had raised nearly \$500,000. The funds were given to the five school districts and the five superintendents were charged to continue the work that High Five started in 2004.

Supporting Evidence

The following curricular initiatives, data, and programs allows us to see how each collaborative team is working to support the school and district's goals through operating as a Professional Learning Community.

Weekly PLC Meetings (Building Level)

Ongoing Collaboration (Electronic and Face-to-Face Meetings)

Student Achievement Data

Dropout Data (In 2009-2010, 22% fewer Orange County Schools students dropped out of high school).

High School Graduation Rate (Orange County Schools was recognized by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction as one of the Top Ten School Districts in NC. The Graduation Rate for 2009-2010 was 81.4%).

OCS Teacher Collaborative

TechPaths

Curriculum Maps

The district purchased ClassScape for developing common assessments and district benchmarks.

EVAAS Training

Pyramid of Interventions at every school and a district wide Pyramid of Interventions and Support

Lunch Tutorials and Other Methods of Academic Support

Behavioral Interventions

Additional Courses for Supporting Literacy (6-12 grade)

Closing the Gap Data

Common Formative Assessments (Building-Level)

Benchmark Assessments (District Level)

PLC Survey (Annual Data Collection for assessing our efforts to support students)

PLC Matrix Analysis

Whole-to-Part Reading Intervention (K-8 Implementation)

K-8 Mathematics Program Implementation (Vertical and Horizontal Alignment)

- **Reason for the practice – Describe the problems you addressed with this practice or the reason you chose to implement the practice.**

Orange County Schools seeks to improve curriculum, instruction, and student support through analyzing existing practices and searching for new strategies which will support our students and teachers. When we learned about Professional Learning Communities, we were part of a regional partnership with five area school systems. The superintendents of the five school systems decided to implement Professional Learning Communities at the high school level as a method to increase the high school graduation rate, reduce the high school dropout rate, and serve as a practice for high school reform in our region.

Teacher isolation has been a norm in high schools and this is a barrier that we overcame through professional development, operating as a professional learning community, and meeting weekly to address student achievement. Teachers met in collaborative teams to develop unit goals, create common formative assessments, analyze current levels of

achievement, discuss student misunderstandings, and create strategies for supporting all students.

Once teachers started job-alike collaboration within their school, we attempted to create a district wide professional learning community. Orange County Schools has two high schools, so a district wide professional learning community includes all of the high school teachers meeting groups before the school year, during after school meetings, on early release days, and via email. As teachers started sharing ideas across the district, we started to notice gains in student achievement and collaboration became the norm.

Communication within a building can be difficult, but communication across a school district is a challenge we faced due to the limited number of district wide meetings. In an effort to support our district wide professional learning community, we increased the number of times in the year that our teachers have face-to-face meetings. When our teachers said that they needed more time to meet to discuss essential student learning outcomes and to share strategies, the district developed the Orange County Schools (OCS) Teacher Collaborative. The OCS Teacher Collaborative serves as an archive, a common place to post teacher created resources, and it allows teachers to communicate during the school day, in the evening and on weekends. The OCS Teacher Collaborative is password protected and it provides our teachers and administrators with a place to review the district's curriculum maps, respond to blogs about curriculum development and revision, post questions, share links, and have a voice in the ongoing work of supporting students enrolled in Orange County Schools.

The OCS Teacher Collaborative is developed by classroom teachers and powered by Drupal. Drupal is a free software package that allows an individual or a community of users to easily publish, manage and organize a wide variety of content on a website.

“Since a student’s path involves numerous teachers over a journey of 13+ years, it is advantageous when teachers have instant access to the maps that represent each small step” (Jacobs, 2004).

- **Subject areas, grade levels, student groups, and adult groups – Select from a list of choices the various areas, levels, and groups to which the practice applies**

The practice is implemented throughout the K-12 arena. Teacher teams include grade level teams, course-specific teams, and vertical teams. The district also schedules early release days for teachers to meet with their colleagues from other schools to address essential learning outcomes, assessment data, and to plan for supporting all students with future lessons and units of study.

The guidance counselors, Technology Facilitators, Career and Technical Education teachers, school nurses, principals, assistant principals, and other staff members have collaborative teams which are part of the district’s professional learning community as support PLCs.

- **Length of implementation of the practice**

The high schools implemented the practice of professional learning communities in 2006-2007.

The elementary and middle schools implemented the practice of professional learning communities in 2008-2009.

- **Resources – Describe the human, material, and financial resources needed to implement the practice**

Human Resources:

Classroom teachers work in new ways and they structure their weekly team meetings differently than a traditional department chair or grade level meeting which focused on managerial issues. The high school teachers meet in their respective professional learning community between 8:00 a.m. – 8:30 a.m. once per week. The middle school and elementary teachers have a common planning period or they meet before or after school, depending on the schedule of each team member.

Materials:

There are professional books and DVDs that principals have purchased, along with materials to support teacher meetings. A district license for ClassScape was purchased. ClassScape allows classroom teachers to develop common formative assessments, district benchmarks and analyze student test data.

Financial Resources:

Substitute Fees:

Each time a classroom teacher attends a professional development training, the school must pay the daily salary for a substitute teacher.

Registration Fees:

The High Five business partnership allowed high school teachers and administrators to attend professional development for free, but K-8 teachers and administrators were required to pay a registration fee in order to attend.

Stipends:

Curriculum Mapping work has been completed during the summer months, along with test item development. Teachers who shared their expertise and developed district documents during the summer months were provided a stipend.

For the past two summers, our district has paid a high school guidance counselor to recruit high school dropouts and invite them to come back to high school. We utilize high school credit recovery programs, provide the student with a graduation plan, and ask what the school can do to support the student if they should choose to return to high school and earn

their high school diploma. These costs were paid for through state “at-risk” dollars or Title II Federal funding.

Consultant Fees:

Some schools paid teachers, administrators, and educational consultants to visit their school in order to provide additional professional development to teachers and administrators related to the work of a professional learning community. A consultant was paid to work with the district’s elementary staff in August 2009. Title I funds were used to support the professional development which focused on Professional Learning Communities in Elementary Schools.

Student Rewards:

Schools have purchased prizes and recognition certificates to reward students at assemblies. Student awards include honor roll, citizenship, character, attendance, academic growth, leadership, and academic excellence. Some of the schools were able to have items such as televisions, ipod, and other prized donated from area businesses. Using the Pyramid of Interventions, each school focuses on positive rewards as well as other methods of support.

Community Learning Centers:

Orange County Schools has three afterschool Community Learning Centers that provide free academic support to Level one and Level two students at our elementary Title I schools. The Community Learning Centers were established in 2008, as an effort to support student achievement. The district funds a coordinator, three teachers and three teacher assistants. In addition to funding positions, computers were placed in each Community Learning Center. The Community Learning Centers are part of the district’s effort to decrease the achievement gap.

- **Research – Identify any research that supports the practice**

Ainsworth, L. & Viegut, D. (2006). *Common formative assessments: How to connect standards-based instruction and assessment*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Barth, R. (2006). Improving relationships within the schoolhouse. *Educational Leadership*, 63(6), 8-13.

Bierma, L.L. (1999). The process of the learning organization: Making sense of change. *NASSP Bulletin*, 83(563), 46-56.

DuFour, R. & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & DuFour, R. (Eds.). (2005). *On common ground: The power of professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (2008). *Revisiting professional learning communities at work: New insights for improving schools*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

- Eaker, R., DuFour, R., & DuFour, R. (2002). *Getting started: Reculturing professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Ferriter, B. & Graham, P. (2008). One step at a time: Many professional learning teams pass through these 7 stages. *Journal of Staff Development*, 29(3), 38-42.
- Fullan, M. (2006). Leading professional learning. *The School Administrator*, 10(63), 10-14.
- Marshall, K. (2005). It's time to rethink teacher supervision and evaluation. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(10), 727-735.
- O'Neill, J., Conzemius, A., Commodore, C., & Pulsfus, C. (2006). *The power of smart goals: Using goals to improve student learning*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Schmoker, M. (1999). *Results: The key to continuous school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Schmoker, M. (2006). *Results now: How we can achieve unprecedented improvements in teaching and learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

- **Conclusion – Describe your next steps in implementing the practice**

A professional learning community “starts with a group of teachers who meet regularly as a team to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals, share strategies, and then create lessons to improve upon those levels” (Schmoker in *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities*, 2005, p.xii) . In the first two years of operating as a professional learning community, our school district focused on each school making the transition from teacher isolation to collaboration. In the third year, we focused on district wide collaboration. As a school district we want parents, guardians, community members, and other stakeholders to know that all students have the opportunity to learn the district’s essential curriculum. Our focus has shifted from ‘these are my students’ in a classroom or school to ‘these are our students.’ When principals meet for their monthly meetings, they are focused on data, curriculum alignment, and strategies that are successful in other schools. The principals collaborate with one another to increase student achievement for the students in our district.

Our main goal is 100% high school graduation, while preparing all students for the next level of learning. We will use common formative assessments, district benchmarks, EVAAS data, and feedback provided by teachers as they meet as a professional learning community in collaborative teams to discuss student achievement. We continue to develop and revise our curriculum maps in an effort to support all students and make certain that we clarify our district priorities for teaching and learning.

As you identify a practice for submission, you may want to ask some basic questions. Does the potential practice have: 1) a defined problem or specific reason why you implemented the practice; 2) a research base or a research-based premise; and 3) documented results? If the answers to these questions are yes, you have a good practice to submit.

Submitting a practice allows the school to highlight a practice that it feels is indicative of the quality work occurring in the school. The practice is included in the online AdvancED Resource Network where it can be accessed by other practitioners using the network.