Implementing High School Level Professional Learning Communities in SPPS

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White Paper

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In their oral presentation and subsequent report to St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) (May 2007) Education Resource Strategies (ERS) recommended a professional development model that emphasizes Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)\(^1\). The primary high school staff development effort in SPPS, *Focused Inquiry*, strongly promotes a PLC model. This paper provides an overview of *Focused Inquiry*/PLC efforts in SPPS high schools up to the end of the 2007 school year. We hope to demonstrate that high school *Focused Inquiry*/PLC efforts, although in their infancy, have attempted to follow “best practices.” It also provides findings from an internal evaluation study and a proposal for the next phase of PLC implementation.

**Figure 1**
ERS Model, Effective School Based Professional Development

1. The specific PLC model proposed by ERS in their oral presentation to SPPS staff includes the development, use, and discussion of common formative assessments as a core activity for PLCs, with common planning time, and coaching support (Figure 1). This recommendation is based on a significant body of research and development by national experts and organizations (Du Four, R. et al, 2006; Marzano, R. J., 2003; National Staff Development Council & Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2003; Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2007; Schmoker, M., 2006).
History of Focused Inquiry/PLCs in St. Paul High Schools

From its inception, the ultimate goal of the high school professional development program was the establishment of professional learning communities in every high school. Formal efforts towards this goal began in 2004-05 and were called Focused Inquiry. Year one Focused Inquiry efforts began with nine groups of high school teachers from six high schools. During that first year teachers worked in school teams that shared a common interest chosen by the teachers. External consultants were hired as coaches for each team and participation was voluntary. In year two (2005-06) the number of teams expanded to sixteen. Team participation was still voluntary; neither the district nor any individual school required all teachers to participate in what was then called “learning communities.” During the spring of year two Harding High School began planning to implement a specific PLC model developed by DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (2006) by sending key members of their leadership team to various PLC institutes sponsored by Solution Tree. At the same time, the program evaluation plan for Focused Inquiry was developed.

The third year (2006-07) saw efforts greatly expand as the number of teams jumped to thirty-one and the district began to set additional parameters on participation. Teams were now required to organize around district approved content based topics and an action research model (Calhoun, 1994) was specified. All teams were required to submit some type of data as evidence of improvement or effectiveness. In year three Harding High School began school-wide implementation of PLCs. The other teams and schools continued to use non-specific approaches. The director of secondary education also began using the term PLC more consistently when talking about the Focused Inquiry project. He also indicated that the ultimate goal of the Focused
Inquiry project was to have all teachers involved in a PLC with coaching support in three to four years.

In the spring of 2007, based on the recommendation by ERS, SPPS began planning for district-wide implementation of PLCs. In addition, all high schools would be required to have school-based coaches in literacy and mathematics. The external coaches/consultants would still be available but their role would be redefined.

**Evaluation of Focused Inquiry/PLCs**

Below are summarized some of the major findings of the internal evaluation of high school Focused Inquiry/PLCs that specifically address the topic of this white paper: information regarding the implementation of PLCs and the coaching support that is part of the PLC model. The complete evaluation report will be available December, 2007.

**District Findings**

- Although the DuFour model does result in strong PLCs, the DuFour model does not provide enough “guidance” and structure for leaders in large schools or for district leaders. Some topics not addressed sufficiently in DuFour institutes include: group facilitation, team building, development of common formative assessments, and protocols for reviewing student work.

- With the diversity of professional development models in place, it is crucial to establish district-supported models of a professional learning community for the traditional high schools. A different model is required for the ALCs and other small high school sites.

- The “professional learning community model” is not clearly understood across the high schools, or consistently implemented across the high schools.
➢ To ensure consistency and coherence in the development of professional learning communities, central support is necessary. It is not enough to believe that because the district has one curriculum (per subject area) that the PLCs will evolve equally.

➢ There is a continued and growing need for several types of coaching/support.

• Coaching for principals and assistant principals (ex. understanding and implementing PLCs, facilitating meetings, establishing norms of collegiality, coaching teacher leaders, team building)

• Coaching for leadership teams and teacher leaders (ex. writing and monitoring goals, understanding and implementing PLCs, facilitating meetings, collaboration skills, team building, developing formative assessments, reviewing student work)

• Coaching PLC teams for smooth team functioning (ex. collaboration skills, group dynamics, developing common formative assessments, reviewing student work)

• Instructional coaching for teachers (ex. collaboration skills, formative assessments, subject-based best practices)

• Coaching the coaches: both district level coaches and school-based coaches (ex. group facilitation skills, coaching skills, best practices)

School-Based Findings

➢ A clear model (structure) based on research and theory was critical to the successful implementation of “learning communities” including school-wide PLCs.

➢ The support and active participation by the building leader(s) was critical for success.

➢ The support and active participation of a school leadership team was also critical.

➢ Within any school there is a wide diversity of quality regarding “learning community” efforts.
Schools and individuals teams still feel the need for continued and increased support by the district of school-based PLC efforts.

The most successful teams organized their sessions around the implementation and discussion of student results from common formative assessments.

In the large high school with the most extensive implementation of PLCs, the role of assistant principals was as critical as the involvement of the building principal.

One of the greatest challenges for high school PLCs was creating/finding common planning time.

Discussion and Recommendations

We need to step back and look at developing the skills needed for participants to be able to function in a PLC. For example, the traditional model of high school teaching is one of “independent contractor” with each high school teacher operating separately from any team or department. Collaboration and team work do not come naturally to the average high school teacher or to high school leaders. High school teachers and high school leaders are not sufficiently prepared for the type of collaboration, team work, and development of norms or behavior that PLCs require. Additionally, many classroom teachers lack adequate experience and training in the development of common formative assessments and in the breadth of assessment options.

Based on experience within SPPS the following expanded model of PLCs is proposed. (See Figure 2 on the next page).
Planning for 2007-2008

After reviewing the literature on PLCs and the findings from our own evaluation the following action items were proposed for the 2007-2008 school year.

- Establish one District-supported model of a professional learning community for the traditional high schools.

- Establish one District-supported model of a professional learning community for the Alternative Learning Programs/schools.

- Establish SPPS PLC institutes for principals, assistant principals (AP’s), and leadership teams. Topics should include but not be limited to implementing successful PLCs, development and use of facilitation skills, common formative assessments, and reviewing student work. Currently (2006-2007) a very small number of principals, APs, and other
school leaders received such training through national institutes, predominantly out of state.

- Implement district-wide PLCs for principals and assistant principals.
- Build a cadre of trained SPPS coaches based both within schools and in the Office of Academics. This requires an increase in the number of content and general coaches. Some (but not all) of the coaching support can be provided through external consultants. Prior to the 2007-2008 school year the overwhelming majority of coaching support to high schools was provided through external coaches/consultants.
- Provide on-going training and support for SPPS coaches.
- Provide professional development for coaches and school leaders on topics such as coaching skills, implementation of PLCs, team building skills, and facilitating meetings.
- Assist schools in creating common planning time for PLCs.

**Conclusion**

As we look to implement and scale up the PLC initiative, the district must be acutely aware of the tension and find the balance between district standardization and organic site-based flexibility in areas such as PLC structure, decision-making, use of assessments, and common planning time. Too much flexibility leaves schools and staff to flounder. Too much programmatic standardization leaves many schools and staff out in the cold. The high schools have made a promising start and by capitalizing on lessons learned and we are now able to move forward with a clearer vision for PLCs.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


