



professional LEARNING

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Building Blocks of High Performing Schools

By Dr. Irma J. Hamilton

The Building Blocks of High Performing Schools are a set of nine research based characteristics that are found to be effective in high performing schools. The original research study, Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools, was conducted in 2003 by the Office of Superintendent & Public Instruction in Washington under the leadership of Dr. Terry Bergeson. This research based study has had a far reaching effect on education. Currently the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB) has adopted the nine characteristics in their Building Blocks of High Performing Schools, as a means of recognizing effective strategies for school improvement.

The MASB is a voluntary, non-profit association of local and intermediate boards of education located throughout the State of Michigan. The mission of the MASB is to "provide quality educational leadership services to all Michigan boards of education, and advocate for student achievement and public education." The Building Blocks of High Performing Schools was introduced as a part of their strategic plan to inform all board members of the research based characteristics that contribute to high performing schools. The nine characteristics are:

- Clear and Shared Focus
- High Standards and Expectations

- Effective School Leadership
- High Levels of Collaboration and Communication
- Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Aligned with Standards
- Frequent Monitoring of Teaching and Learning
- Focused Professional Development
- Supportive Learning Environment
- High Level of Parent & Community Involvement

According to MASB, "one of the most important responsibilities board members and superintendents have is to ensure that all the students in their districts have every opportunity to succeed". School districts may reference these nine characteristics as a guide for framing their discussions on developing and implementing their district and school improvement plans. The Building Blocks of High Performing Schools are also reflected in the new School Improvement Framework. The MASB believes that "having an understanding and common language of school improvement concepts is the first step in achieving systemic educational reform."

The Building Blocks of High Performing Schools also informs the work of our educational leaders, teachers, staff developers, consultants and coaches as they work

toward school improvement and increasing student achievement in Michigan. The close alignment with the School Improvement Framework would hopefully ensure that as districts and schools develop their improvement plans they would incorporate these effective nine characteristics.

Information for this article was adapted from the MASB and the Office of Superintendent & Public Instruction in Washington.



Building Blocks of High Performing Schools

Research shows that high student performance is not a result of any one single action taken by schools. Rather, high performing schools tend to have the following nine characteristics.

- 1. Clear and Shared Focus**
From the board of education down to the students - everyone is focused and committed to a shared vision and agreed upon goals based on common beliefs and values. At the root of these values is the belief that all students can learn.
- 2. High Standards and Expectations for all Students**
Teachers and staff believe that all students can learn and meet high standards. Although it's recognized that some students have certain barriers to overcome, the barriers are not seen as insurmountable. Students are offered an ambitious and rigorous course of study.
- 3. Effective School Leadership**
Effective instructional and administrative leadership promotes excellence, quality and professional growth and steadfastly supports people, programs, services and activities that lead to the accomplishment of district goals.
- 4. High levels of Collaboration and Communication**
High performing schools encompass a community of learners. There is strong teamwork among teachers across all grades and with other staff. All members of the learning community, including students, parents, and members of the community work together to create a supportive learning environment and to actively solve problems and create solutions.
- 5. Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Aligned with Standards**
High performing schools have aligned curriculum with the state standards which staff implements using research-based teaching and learning strategies. Staff understand the role of classroom and state assessments, what the assessments measure and how student work is evaluated.
- 6. Frequent Monitoring of Teaching and Learning**
Teaching is adjusted to meet frequent monitoring of student progress and needs. Assessment needs are used to improve student performance and improve instructional programs.
- 7. Focused Professional Development**
Professional development is based on needs assessment and sustained over time. Data-driven decisions are made to support professional development that is aligned with the school district vision and goals.
- 8. Supportive Learning Environment**
The school has a safe, civil, healthy and intellectually stimulating and personalized learning environment. Students feel respected and connected with the staff and are engaged in learning.
- 9. High Level of Parent & Community Involvement**
Parents and community members understand and support the basic mission of the school and have an important role in achieving that mission.

Adapted from the Office of Superintendent & Public Instruction in Washington

Mission Statement:

“MSDC advocates for quality research-based professional development policies and practices to increase the capacity of those who work to improve student learning.”

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Challenging the Bracelet Mentality

By Theodore J Gardella

How far are you willing to go to do something important? So many people now will proclaim their activist status by wearing a colorful, flexible bracelet with some kind of inspirational acronym. As the number of bracelets multiply, the individual level of activism declines. For some, all they are willing to do is wear the bracelet. Even more significant, some people don't even need a bracelet – they just have an acronym so deeply ingrained that they have come to live by it. The acronym that is currently frustrating for professional development leaders is WWCDT. What does this acronym stand for? It is a frequent response to any challenge of the status quo – “Why We Can't Do This.”

Challenging current practice is difficult. But different results can only come from different practices. Asking for personal change without offering different sets of resources can cause the emergence of the WWCDT response.

What resource requests do you hear most frequently? Do you ever hear that the potential barriers to change focus around time and money? It's possible that we now take the existence of these barriers for granted. We assume that we will never have enough time or money to make a significant change in practice.

In our small rural/suburban district, we decided to try to answer the time and money questions before they were asked. Our money for professional development came from Title II funds. Our Title II funds had been used for class size reduction – a strategy that was not providing increased student achievement. Our Board of Education approved a bold move – we would make a full commitment to professional development by allotting all of our Title II funds to teacher and principal professional development. Each principal was required to create a professional development plan for the building staff that was completely aligned with the building

school improvement or accreditation goals. The district allocated the Title II funds on a per pupil basis to a professional development line item for that school, under the direction of the principal. While the move cost our general fund about \$120,000.00, it has certainly returned dividends already. Each one of our district schools received NCA accreditation last year – a first time event. All of our buildings experienced enhanced, coherent professional development.

While our professional development was now more strongly funded, we were still stealing moments for important work. Our teachers were working after school or on release time. We needed to create shared time for teachers embedded into the regular school day. As part of the principal's professional development plan, a conference on building unique schedules provided a possible answer. Our Board of Education again took a bold move. In the face of declining student enrollment and declining fund balance, the board approved K-8 building schedules that provide for common planning time for every core teacher at each grade level. Increased “specials” at the elementary level, and electives at the middle school level allowed our principals to create schedules where all 6th grade teachers have the same planning period – and each of the grade levels shares this characteristic. Teachers now have time embedded in their regular schedule to meet, collaborate, discuss student work and share instructional practices.

Time will tell if our district's money was well spent. But all of the readings from the best thinkers in professional development are validating the bold steps taken by our Board of Education and our administrative staff. The interesting thing about the WWCDT acronym is that it can also stand for Why We CAN Do That!

PLCs: Strengthening Connections in Schools

by Nicole Huff

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) comprise groups of educators, administrators, community members, and other stakeholders who collectively examine and improve their own professional practice. PLC's can be school-based, district based, cross district or national, the membership in a particular PLC is determined by its focus.

The literature on PLCs repeatedly gives attention to five attributes of such organizational arrangements: supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. The reports in literature are quite clear about what successful PLCs look like and act like. The requirements necessary for such organizational arrangements include:

A. The collegial and facilitative participation of the principal, who shares leadership- and thus, power and authority- through inviting staff input in decision making

B. a shared vision that is developed from staff's unswerving commitment to students' learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced for the staff's work

C. Staff collective learning and application of that learning to solutions that address students' needs

D. The visitation and review of each teacher's classroom behavior by peers as a feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement and

E. physical conditions and human capacities that support such an operation

Research demonstrates that the development of a strong PLC among educators is the key ingredient in improving schools (Fullan 1999; Langer 2000). Little and McLaughlin (1993) identify effective PLCs as being firmly embedded in school and using school wide reform goals as the basis for teachers' commitment and interaction. These PLCs provide opportunities for adults across a school system to learn and think together about how to improve their practice in ways that lead to improved student achievement.

Overall, creating strong PLCs hold several potential advantages for schools and districts. Among the positive outcomes reported are: increased efficacy, collective responsibility for student learning, reduction in teacher isolation, substantial learning about good teaching and increased content knowledge, higher staff morale, greater job satisfaction, greater teacher/student retention rates, and enthusiasm.

Sharing Best Practices

MSDC's Professional Learning e-newsletter is a monthly publication of the Michigan Staff Development Council. MSDC members are encouraged to contribute articles that showcase effective practices in staff development occurring around Michigan. If you have an article on an effective staff development practice you would like to share, please send it as an electronic file to Dr. Dan Jonker, MSDC e-newsletter editor, at djonker@oaisd.org. Articles should be between 150-300 words and digital photographs are welcome. The MSDC Communications Committee reserves the right to edit articles to meet publication standards and guidelines. Articles must be submitted five days prior to the first of each month during the school year (Sept-June).



Michigan Summit on Model High Schools

Another edition of the Michigan Summit on Model High Schools has been set for April 16-18, 2008 in Kalamazoo at the Radisson Hotel. The Michigan Department of Education is coordinating this effort to provide opportunities to:

1. Stimulate thinking about high school design to promote:

Successful implementation of rigorous high school standards

Relevant high school academic study for each learner

The necessary relationships to foster academic success.

2. Understand strategies practiced by model high schools

3. Create a supportive and collaborative network among those partners that deliver secondary education in Michigan.

A host of Michigan sponsors/partners and the International Center for Leadership in Education, President Dr. Willard Daggett will be involved in the planning and presentations. During the 2006-2007 school year over 1000 Michigan educators attended similar Summits in Novi and Traverse City. MSDC was one of the sponsor/partners. The evaluation comments were very complimentary.

Hard copies of registration brochures and links to electronic registration forms will be available to all partners in November.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact Laurie Bradley (517.373.2677) or Doug McCall (517.241.4420) at the MDE, Office of Special Education.

By Dr. Fran Loose

Context-Embedded Professional Learning by Dr. Dan Jonker

The Michigan School Improvement Framework addressed professional learning in the context of “improving staff practices and student achievement.” In order to accomplish this, the authors suggested that “teams of staff members within and across grade levels and/or departments (including English Language Learners & Special Education) meet...to collaborate around context-embedded professional development” (MDE SIF, 2006). As one of the key characteristics of School Performance on which all schools are required to self-assess, it is imperative that principals and central office staff pay particular attention to how they plan and implement professional learning opportunities for their staff members to insure that those learning experiences are context-embedded.

For professional learning to have any impact on teacher practices or student achievement, it must be relevant to the teacher’s immediate or ongoing work. The simple fact that teachers are meeting on a regular basis in staff meetings, early dismissals/late starts, etc. does not necessarily constitute context-embedded learning. As the district school improvement team or building school improvement team creates their school improvement plans and accompanying professional learning plans, they need to create goals based upon the priorities exhibited within their data, align their learning opportunities to those goals, and develop checks for learning and transfer to teacher-student interaction.

Data Dialogues

As professional learning plans are created, data dialogues need to take place regarding where students perform well and where emphasis needs to be placed for improvement. Too often professional learning plans become unfocused and the learning opportunities become a mixed bag of awareness pieces and critical trainings with a little “other stuff” added in that may lack relevance. Once the data are reviewed, a dialogue needs to take place regarding what professional learning will provide the best return on the investment of time and money to achieve better and more lasting results in the classroom. In addition, ongoing data dialogues need to take place at least monthly throughout the year to analyze classroom assessments and student work samples to see if progress is being made toward the goal.

Alignment

Once goals are established for professional learning, the planning team needs to develop an aligned set of learning opportunities that include full staff sessions, departmental or grade level sessions, and individual support as it relates to a teacher’s Individualized Development Plan (IDP). If a building team creates an exemplary professional learning plan and the building principal does not follow through with the expectation that it should align to department or grade level activities or the individual discussions in reference to the IDP, the teachers’ focus for learning can easily become fragmented. The greater the fragmentation for the

teacher, the less opportunity exists that the professional learning will transfer into real change in the classroom.

Monitoring the Learning & Transfer

Too often professional learning opportunities are created and implemented but no checks for learning or transfer take place. While some sessions require an evaluation form, most often that form evaluates the quality of the session and whether the participants physical needs were met (climate, food, time, etc.). Even when teachers attend workshops or conferences outside of the building or district, very little has been required in terms of reporting on what learning has taken place and how it will apply to teaching practices. In order to be context-embedded, professional learning plans need to create reporting tools and monitoring procedures to check for learning on the part of the teacher and transfer to the classroom in terms of evidence of implementation. Such tools and procedures can include surveys, meeting minutes, walk-through logs, and data reports that give evidence of learning and transfer.

If we are truly committed to creating quality context-embedded professional learning for our staff members, we need to focus on data driven priorities, align learning opportunities to those priorities, and monitor that learning and the transfer into classroom implementation to have any chance of truly impacting “teacher practices and student achievement.”

New Board Member Bio: Theodore J. Gardella

Currently Superintendent of Lakeville Community Schools in Genesee County, Ted has a long history in professional development. A mathematics teacher for 15 years, he worked on NSF curriculum projects and mainstream textbooks. He was a Studio Teacher for the *Tune In Math And Science Project*, a joint project of MSU and Kettering Universities in the early 1990’s. It was in that project that he first began working with teachers to build a professional community centered on regular embedded professional development.

Ted was a national professional development consultant for Prentice Hall for three

years, and then returned to Michigan to begin Central administration roles focused on professional development for teachers. He worked at the Saginaw ISD for 4 years as the Director of Instructional Services, where he also provided leadership in developing a rubric for HOUSSE portfolios to demonstrate HQ status for teachers. He is currently in his second year as the Superintendent of Lakeville Community Schools, and is committed to supporting improvements in instruction for all students.

As Ted begins his service on the Board of MSDC, he states: I’m always energized by

the possibilities for Michigan Teachers and Students when I work on professional development issues. MSDC has the opportunity to craft the definitive view of High Quality professional development in collaboration with other groups so that our teachers have a clear understanding of the expectations for certification and advancement into the ranks of true teacher leadership. My hope is that this all will be created with the ultimate goal of improved student achievement for ALL Michigan children.”