

Professional Learning Communities in Portsmouth Schools

In Portsmouth Schools, we believe all children can learn and that a teacher's primary responsibility is to ensure learning. This responsibility doesn't rest squarely on the shoulders of individual teachers, rather it's the collective duty of interdependent teams-to work collaboratively to ensure student learning.

Under our Professional Learning Community (PLC) process model, teams of educators meet regularly to monitor student attainment of knowledge they've identified as essential. We want kids to learn everything we teach them but through this process, we are able to filter curriculum to focus on essential concepts and skills. Teams discuss students and student work to develop timely responses to address the needs of individual students. Responses may include reteaching, remediation or enrichment.

Teams collaboratively develop, administer and score targeted common assessments to help inform their instruction. Based on the outcomes of these assessments, teams set learning goals and develop strategies and action steps to ensure that students attain mastery of these skills. Through shared ownership and responsibility, individual accountability for students becomes a team accountability.

Through common goal setting, team members are mutually accountable to one another. Students benefit from the collective wisdom, experience and ingenuity of a group of educators; effective practices are shared, new strategies are developed and embedded professional development occurs as educators share their knowledge.

Professional learning teams are guided by four questions:

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How do we know when they've learned it?
3. How do we respond when some students don't learn?
4. How do we respond when some students already know it?

What Do We Want Children to Learn?

"Powerful, proven structures for improved results already exist. They begin when a group of teachers meet regularly as a team to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals and then share and create lessons and strategies to improve upon those levels." – Mike Schmoker, 2005

The Professional Learning Community process shifts the focus away from what teachers have taught and focuses in on what students have learned. This occurs as teachers at the same level or content area identify core standards, skills and competencies they deem essential for all students to be able to know and do. While still responsible for addressing all the standards through our curriculum, these core standards are what we target and monitor through the PLC process. By establishing a “guaranteed and viable” curriculum across grade levels and schools and within content areas, we ensure that all students, regardless of teacher or school, attain essential knowledge and skills.

How Do We Know When They’ve Learned It?

“Teachers of the same course or grade level should have absolute common agreement on what they expect all their students to know and be able to do. Therefore, they should have common, collaboratively scored assessments...The classroom assessments leading up to these assessments might differ. The need to administer the same assessment should not...” – Doug Reeves, 2002

After identifying essential knowledge and skills, teams develop a plan for monitoring student growth in the area they’re targeting. PLC teams develop and employ focused “common formative assessments” to track student learning. It’s worth noting that common formative assessments are not summative tests, rather they are brief, targeted snapshots of student learning intended to inform an appropriate instructional response. Frequent and timely monitoring of student learning is an essential component of effective teaching. Common formative assessment results help identify students who need additional time, support or enrichment and help inform and improve teacher practice.

Common formative assessments can be used throughout a unit of study to allow teams to make strategic instructional adjustments in response to the changing landscape of learners. A common metaphor compares formative assessment to a check up at a physician’s and summative assessment to an autopsy. We want to be able to intervene before it’s too late.

By developing, scoring and analyzing common formative assessments together, teams ensure inter-rater reliability and deepen the understanding that these are “our students.”

Learning teams also use results from these assessments to set Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-Sensitive (S.M.A.R.T.) learning goals for a group of students. Having a S.M.A.R.T. goal gives teams a yardstick against which they can measure the progress of their students.

How do we respond when some students don’t learn?

How do we respond when some students already know it?

“When time and support are the variables, learning is the constant” - Rick Dufour

During PLC meetings, teams develop action plans for responding to student learning needs. Teachers examine student work and determine if they have met their identified standard of proficiency. Teachers plot a course of instruction for children who already are proficient and create strategies for working with those not yet demonstrating proficiency.

In our K-12 district the number of responses and structures for intervention and enrichment are too numerous to list. The work may take place in an intervention block. It may involve re-teaching during direct classroom instruction. It may include strategic re-grouping of students.

The interventions must be supplemental and should not supplant any new classroom instruction.

As they work to ensure essential learning, teams increase time and support for struggling students. In a fluid intervention system, teachers frequently monitor student learning. Students should quickly move out of certain groupings as they attain proficiency. This allows for more concentrated time to provide powerful responses to children who aren't learning.

As teams complete a cycle of intervention, they reflect on what they've learned. They identify what practices were effective and document them to ensure they're hard-wired into their next round of instruction. Teams take note of stumbling blocks the students and teachers experienced and ensure they are avoided in the next go-round. After a period of reflection, that's hopefully accompanied by some celebration, teams turn their focus to the next piece of essential learning.

Teacher Improvement in a PLC

“...successes of individual teachers tend to be born and die with them; beneficial consequences extend only to those pupils who have personal contact with gifted teachers.” - John Dewey

Portsmouth educators share a commitment to ongoing improvement in student learning and continuous improvement in our own instructional practice. By continually analyzing our practices through the lens of how they affect student learning outcomes, we can pinpoint, replicate and retain our most successful techniques. The goal isn't simply for educators to learn something new, but to weave effective strategies into our teaching. Innovation shouldn't be an event, but a routine as teams continue to discover what's

effective. When teachers collaborate around a shared problem or goal, years of training and experience form a greater mind that benefits the students and the educators sitting around the table.