

Commitment to a Vision at Fruita Middle School

"One of the most damaging myths that aspiring school administrators often learn is that the change process, if managed well, will proceed smoothly."

– Professional Learning Communities at Work, 1998

Building a Successful PLC

In 2011, Fruita Middle School had one of the lowest organizational health scores in a 21,000-student school district in western Colorado. Academically, the six hundred 6th and 7th grade students (approximately 40% on free and reduced lunch) in this suburban and growing community achieved mixed performance results on statewide testing. Teachers worked independently, with a few pockets of cohesiveness, and most in the school considered themselves separate from the school district. Originally built in 1936, Fruita Middle School was about to get a new principal and experience the challenge and excitement of building successful PLCs.

Brig Leane, a first-year principal, who knew firsthand the power of Professional Learning Communities (see Phi Delta Kappan, March 2014 Issue: "How I Learned the Value of a True PLC"), was selected to lead Fruita Middle School in the summer of 2011. Principal Leane began the work of building PLCs by meeting with same subject, same grade teachers and asking the group what they expected students to know and be able to do, and how teachers would know if students could do it. These meetings took coordination, as common planning time for teachers in these groups did not fit into the schedule. Principal Leane slowly took each PLC through the "Critical Issues for Team Consideration" inventory from *Learning By Doing* twice that year (and each year since) to increase awareness and knowledge of the attributes of successful PLCs. These baby steps were the beginning of a transformation from simply teaching students, to the necessary and more difficult work of actually verifying the learning of students. In addition to these new meetings, several district-wide changes had been made that year which were unpopular with many on the mostly independent FMS teaching staff. These significant changes included the shift to standards-based grading, a new district-wide curriculum to be followed for all subjects, and a new testing system, as well as new district-wide expectations that these changes would be verified and reported on by building principals.

By 2012, the staff, with low organizational health to begin with, was divided by significant district changes, as well as the difficulty encountered when attempting to become *interdependent*. Change had come to Fruita Middle School from a variety of sources and the inevitable storms came with it. With union and school district directors involved, the situation worsened in December with a painful staff meeting arranged to voice feelings. In spite of the difficulty of the meeting, Principal Leane began the next day as he had every other day at Fruita Middle School – cheerfully greeting students and staff, continuing to be a presence in classrooms, and maintaining his belief that the shift to interdependence would not only be positive for students, but for teachers as well. A tipping point had been reached. Principal Leane's courage to stay the course in spite of the challenges along the way inspired many staff members to join the worthy cause.

Teachers who had previously maintained a low profile began to support the idea of a collaborative culture. This group of teachers knew that to facilitate collaboration, the complex master schedule had to be changed. This was challenging, as there were 14 identified constraints on the master schedule, but with the expectation of collaboration on essential skills leading to a common assessment, it had to be done. When the brutal facts were confronted that many students were not learning what had been taught, it became obvious more changes needed to be made. Teachers could see that students who lacked essential skills needed more focused time, in addition to differentiation in class. The staff shaved minutes from classes and decided to start school five minutes earlier in order to make additional time during the school day to extend and intervene with students who lacked essential skills. This 30-minute extension and intervention time has evolved so that each core teacher gets one day per week for his or her subject to pull in students for interventions while the lessons from those essentials are still fresh. Also during that year, Principal Leane started tracking student learning of essential skills, with PLC results being measured on large, visible 'thermometers' in the main office. It was becoming obvious to teachers that all students were not learning essential skills and that more needed to be done.

To further the collaborative decision making capacity of the staff, in 2013 the school began an elected Building Leadership Team. Their task was to resolve staff issues – those issues that frequently arise and linger when large-scale changes uncover inevitable challenges. This collaborative decision making team, co-led by teachers (with the principal as a member, not a co-leader), worked on many issues, one of which was to adopt a new school vision. The proposed vision was simple: *Fruita Middle School's interdependent teams work together to define, measure, intervene, and extend essential academic skills.* Through many small group and school-wide discussions, the Building Leadership Team approved the new vision for FMS. This vision became the lens through which decisions would be made.

In the fall of 2014, Principal Leane attended a *PLC at Work* conference in Denver, and brought two teacher leaders from a newly reformed Instructional Leadership Team to the conference as well. Upon return, the enthusiasm of the two teachers sparked more excitement with the rest of the Instructional Leadership Team, who decided the entire staff should read *Learning By Doing*. The book study greatly increased every teacher's knowledge of PLCs, and the book has now become a resource guide, frequently used during staff meetings where teachers work through the continuums to further improve the effectiveness of PLCs.

Improved Student Learning

Also in 2014, state test results from the previous year revealed significant improvement. FMS was recognized for achieving student academic growth that exceeded the state median for growth in every grade, in every tested subject, and with every subgroup of students. FMS was the only middle school out of eight in the district to attain this accomplishment, and it had not happened at the school

previously. This exciting news was further evidence that PLCs at Fruita Middle School were significantly impacting student achievement for all students.

Teachers throughout the building are now visually displaying student progress towards the essentials in their own classrooms, with a growth mindset that supposes students who don't have an essential mastered - just don't have it 'yet!' Students are realizing that they can meet high expectations when those expectations are clear and the feedback is frequent. Students want to know where they are at, and they grow in motivation and belief in themselves as they observe their progress.

"When a teacher says something is an essential skill, I know those are big things to focus on – and I work super-hard on those things. When I see I've got it, I move on to other challenges." – A. B., 7th grade student

Advancing Instructional Best Practices

In 2015 Fruita Middle School's Instructional Leadership Team began to further refine processes so that the PLC process would be standardized at FMS, and could be replicated at other schools. This involved creating products which each PLC completes for each essential skill, such as the common assessment, a goal, data from the assessment results, an action plan based on the data, and the learning the teachers gleaned from the process. These products channel PLC discussions toward a coordinated intervention plan and discussions about instructional practices that yielded the best results, with changes to teaching practices expected. This cycle of improvement and feedback for both students and teachers continues to energize novice as well as veteran staff, as indicated in the most recent all-staff survey of the organizational health at Fruita Middle School – where improvement from 2011 was significant. PLCs are the main driver of professional development at FMS, as teachers are now formally discussing what practices yielded the best results on the agreed upon assessments. Regardless of the shift towards nationalized common-core testing, and the delay of those results, FMS is awash in real-time and relevant data about student achievement and effective teaching practices.

"When we compare results, we can really see what worked," said Jenna Dahl, a 7th grade science teacher, when asked how the PLC process is impacting instructional practices. Foundationally, this can only work in an atmosphere of trust – a challenge when teachers compare differing results on common assessments. When this product is due to the principal, teacher and student names are removed. Principal Leane cares that the process of comparing results, with a focus on teacher growth, was done, not on which teacher was more effective.

Our Future

Currently the staff are collaboratively defining how singleton elective and SPED teachers can take part in meaningful PLC work in new ways. In addition, Fruita Middle School is changing academic awards to ensure that those ceremonies more closely point students towards mastery of essentials.

“While it may not be our fault that students at Fruita Middle School sometimes don’t learn essential skills, it is our problem to solve,” said Principal Leane during a recent staff discussion. He went on to encourage the staff about the impact they were having on student achievement, as well as potential teachers, by sharing a conversation that took place over the summer: “I knew we had come a long way when an applicant to teach at Fruita Middle School said during an interview, ‘I can actually picture your school’s vision - I have never seen that before.’”

As isolation is the enemy of improvement for teachers, it is the same for whole schools, and yet the nearest other Model PLC school is across the continental divide. FMS’ great old school building requires lots of upkeep, taking most of the budget. If FMS were to win the DuFour award, the money would be used to fund trips to visit other Model PLC schools and to bring in PLC presenters who could further advance the success. At the beginning of this year, another Colorado Model PLC school principal led a half day in-service at FMS, and a January 2016 trip is planned with the few staff members FMS can afford to send to the same Model PLC school. Winning this award would accelerate the realization of our school vision.

With the challenges the staff have overcome together, the future is very bright and exciting for teachers and students as the vision becomes a reality at Fruita Middle School. It isn’t a straight or easy path to get from independence to well-performing PLCs. It’s messy and complex – but so worth it!