

Teachable Moment

2009-10 WCPSS School-based PLT Implementation Status: Summary

This report summarizes results of a full report available at:
http://www.wcpss.net/evaluation-research/reports/2010/1018plt_2009_10.pdf

Background

Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) were introduced as an alternative to independent, disconnected teachers working in isolation. Within PLTs, teachers actively collaborate, share expertise, improve their skills, use data, and learn from each other – all for the purpose of improving students' learning. In July 2009 the WCPSS School Board officially endorsed and formalized the PLT concept with Board Policy 3610, which specified that "every school-based and certified staff member should have equal access to a minimum of one hour for participation in weekly professional learning teams and to Board-approved early release days for job-embedded professional development." This study evaluated the implementation status of the PLT Board policy during the 2009-10 school year, as well as the anticipated short-term outcomes for teachers and students.

Data Collection Methods and Analyses

This report analyzed data collected from a wide variety of sources: High Five PLT surveys administered annually since 2007-08, WCPSS central databases, principals' surveys, schools' websites and artifacts, and NC Teacher Working Conditions Surveys. Additionally, E&R staff members observed 10 high-performing PLTs from the district's elementary, middle, and high schools between January and March 2010. Afterwards, the observer conducted a focus group interview with the PLT members and reported his or her findings in a case study. Collectively, these data allowed a comprehensive assessment of the district's PLT implementation per Board policy. Additional analyses were conducted to determine if the anticipated short-term outcomes for teachers and students had materialized. The study culminated with a regression analysis exploring the relationship between the schools' level of PLT functioning and targeted academic outcomes.

Implementation

- In 2009-10 nearly all PLTs met at least once a week, aided by the district's early dismissal policy known as "Wake Wednesdays." Attendance was high (over 90%) across all grade levels. Additionally, data showed that PLT meetings in 2009-10 tended to last longer than in previous years (Jackl, 2010).

- Standardized aspects of team functioning, also known as protocols, were utilized on a widespread basis within the PLTs. Examples of these protocols included prepared agendas, recorded minutes, the assignment of specific roles and responsibilities to group members, and well-established methods for conducting the work of the team.
- Information about PLT work was shared with the school community in a variety of ways. Principals reported that their school's website was the most common venue, although approximately one-third of the schools did not use the website for PLT communications. Some aspects of PLT work (e.g., meeting schedules) were more likely to be communicated than others (e.g., agendas and minutes). Elementary principals reported communicating more information, on a more frequent basis, than other grade levels.
- All 10 WCPSS high-performing PLT case studies exemplified a collaborative culture in terms of high participation among members and group decision making. Members valued their involvement in PLTs for a variety of reasons, including camaraderie, guidance on effective lesson plans, sharing of educational resources, and receiving feedback about their teaching strategies.

Short-Term Teacher Impact

- High Five PLT survey data showed that the teachers' level of collaboration has increased steadily over the past three years; the percentage of positive responses pertaining to this theme moved from 87% in 2007-08 to 92% in 2009-10. Additionally, NC Teacher Working Conditions data showed that the vast majority (83.6%) of teachers believe they have time to collaborate with colleagues – up by nearly 16 percentage points from 2007-08.
- Teachers have increased their understanding of learning standards. High Five PLT survey results from 2009-10 indicated that high percentages of teachers had identified essential learning outcomes based on the NC Standard Course of Study (93%), used team-adopted standards to assess their students (88%), developed SMART goals to guide students' progress (91%), and believed their students could master those outcomes (84%). However, approximately 17% of middle school teachers and 22% of high school teachers still did not agree that their students could master the targeted outcomes.



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- Teachers have also increased their understanding of assessments. Most (84%) have developed common formative assessments and the vast majority (83%) examined the results to identify students who need additional support. However, frequency of use of common formative assessments actually declined in 2009-10. Elementary school staff were more likely than middle or high school staff to use common formative assessments to identify students who need support (88% versus 78% and 79%, respectively).
- The most recent 2009-10 High Five PLT Survey items provide strong evidence that PLT collaboration has led to increased job satisfaction, with 92% of the teachers reporting that PLTs create a more supportive environment for teachers. Generally, new teachers (1-2 years of experience) have more positive attitudes towards PLT work than veteran teachers (20+) years of experience. Retention data showed a modest reduction in the number of teachers leaving the district.
- Observation of WCPSS high-performing PLTs determined that all 10 teams had evidence of a well-developed common formative assessment program. Furthermore, they discussed assessment data at frequent intervals and used the information to set new goals, refocus instruction, and modify their classroom strategies.

Short-Term Student Impact

- In the first year of policy implementation, examples of PLT success cases were the primary indicator of the PLT policy's impact. There are many examples of PLT success stories from diverse sources, and some outstanding PLTs have been recognized by the Board. Certified staff members reported cases of increased proficiency on EOC tests and a reduction in failing grades. In the Raising Achievement Closing Gaps Summit of 2009-10, 12 schools cited PLT collaboration as a key to their success in closing achievement gaps over time (WCPSS, 2010).
- By the end of 2010-11, improved student outcomes systemwide in terms of failing grades, fewer retentions, and increased achievement are expected. Baseline information from 2008-09 indicated about 12% of grades given in ninth grade were Fs, and across the district 4% of the students were retained. Slight improvements in EOG and EOC scores were seen over prior years in 2009-10, but it is too early to attribute this to PLT implementation.
- Data show that the district's overall retention rate has declined steadily over a three-year period, moving from 4.59% in 2006-07 to 4.29% in 2007-08 to 3.97% in 2008-09. Unfortunately, finalized data from 2009-10 were not available at the time of this report.

- A regression analysis provided some evidence that PLTs, when implemented over time with consistency at a school level, can positively impact EOG/EOC results and other student outcomes such as attendance rates and student school survey ratings.

Recommendations

Principals and school staff

Ensure that PLT work focuses on enrichment as well as remediation; increase the extent to which PLTs use research-based strategies to guide their efforts and systematically evaluate the success of the interventions tried; review the characteristics of high-performing PLTs documented in the full report and work to instill those strategies and characteristics within your schools' teams.

Central Services staff

Provide additional data training for teachers, especially as it pertains to generating and interpreting Blue Diamond reports, as well as ways that formative assessment data can be used to set objectives and guide instruction; formalize an ongoing training program for PLTs — for leaders, for new teachers, and for differentiated instruction; remind leaders how to obtain available resources, such as the PLT “fishbone;” continue assessing PLT implementation across the district using various means.

For More Information

- Consult the Curriculum & Instruction (C&I) “PLT Fishbone” at: http://www.wcpss.net/curriculum-instruction/resources/admin/plc_framework/index.html to access multiple resources from one convenient central location.
- Visit the E&R website to view additional WCPSS PLT reports at: <http://www.wcpss.net/evaluation-research/reports/index-date.html>.
- Visit <http://www.allthingsplc.info/> for PLT history, links to articles and outside research, evidence of effectiveness, and other tools and resources.

References

- Jackl, A. (2010). *WCPSS High Five PLT survey results: Professional learning team (PLT) implementation over time*. Raleigh, NC: WCPSS.
- North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission. (2010). *2010 NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey Results*. Retrieved Oct. 15, 2010 from: <http://ncteachingconditions.org/reports/>.
- Wake County Public Schools (WCPSS) (2010). *Raising achievement and closing gaps: RACG Annual Summit August 2010*. Retrieved October 15, 2010 from: <http://www.wcpss.net/isd/racg/>.