

The Montezuma PLC Story: We Be PLC

Why did your district decide to implement collaborative teams?

Montezuma Community Schools began using collaborative teams in 2010 as a part of our Iowa Core Curriculum implementation plan. Secondary teachers (grades 7-12) were organized around content areas and would meet once a week during the school day to vertically and horizontally discuss the Iowa Core. Elementary teachers were organized around grade levels and were meeting on staff professional development days, before and after school and at lunch to do the same. Towards the end of 2010 we realized the power of collaboration to influence the culture, climate and practice of teaching and the improvements in student results. Teachers were asking for more school day time to collaborate and a more comprehensive process.

In the summer of 2011 we sent a group of administrators and staff to Solution Tree's PLC Institute. Those that attended state it was one of the most powerful professional events they have experienced. The DuFour PLC model gave us a vision of what collaboration is and how to get there. We implemented a DuFour PLC model beginning with the 2011-12 school year. The PLC process for our school focuses on four main questions: (1) What is it that we want our students to know and be able to do as a result of this unit or class? (2) How will students demonstrate that they have acquired the essential knowledge and skills? (3) How will intervene for students who struggle and enrich the learning for students who are proficient? (4) How can we use the evidence of student learning to improve our individual and collective professional practice?

What was the driving force for implementing PLC?

The driving force for implementing PLC in our school was better student results. Our district level summative results were generally inconsistent over time and not keeping up with a growth trend line. We knew that staff and students were working hard at improving achievement but the results just weren't there. The PLC Institute showed us that there were better ways to work at improving our results and it all starts with how we work together.

How are your teams structured? (i.e. grade level, content area, etc.)

In the elementary, our PLC teams are created by combining classes and grade levels. We choose to align in the following ways: K, 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6 with special education, Title I, and Talented and Gifted teachers mixed into each group. Our PLC teams also have the ability switch their schedules to create groups in the following fashion: K-1, 2-3, 4-5 and grade 6 being able to meet with JH/HS. Any change in groupings need to be communicated to our exploratory teachers at least 2 days prior, as common courtesy.

At the secondary level, our PLC teams are content driven. We have: math, English, science, social studies, fine arts (music and art), physical education, special education, at-risk and vocational (business, agriculture, industrial technology and Spanish).

How have you made time for your daily schedule for collaborative teams to meet?

Time certainly proved to be a challenge, but it was extremely important to find time during the day to ensure positive implementation. We do not believe we would be as consistent or productive with our implementation if PLC meeting times occurred outside of the school day or only on professional development days.

Finding time caused a dramatic change to the elementary schedule. Prior to PLC implementation our elementary utilized a six-day cycle while sharing staff with the JH/HS. The exploratory schedule along with lunch drove our schedule and caused many inconsistencies. Our first step was for the elementary and secondary principal to identify times when our shared exploratory teachers (music, art, and physical education) could be available to the elementary. Through this principal collaboration, the opportunity for four exploratory classes to meet daily at regular times was established. This created a 4-day cycle with which the classes rotate through. This provided four classrooms, 2- grade levels with 2-classrooms per grade level, a 50 minute common planning period each day of the week. We have also set our exploratory schedule to allow different grades the chance to swap times for a day to allow for new conversations. We do not require 50 minutes per day, we require one hour per week for PLC meetings, but the team has that opportunity built into the schedule. The days when our teams do not meet the members are usually planning together in grade level groups. Since elementary staff was using planning time to meet as a PLC, additional planning time has been allotted for them during the day. The elementary staff has only have one 15 minute recess duty during a week. Associates cover the rest of our recesses. This additional time also allows our staff the opportunity to modify meeting times, if needed.

The secondary school is a modified block schedule. 1st and 5th periods are 45 or 55-minute periods that meet every day. Periods 2, 3 and 4 are 85-minute periods that meet every other day. The teams are spread throughout the day so that not more than one team meets during one period. For instance, math meets 1st period everyday and science meets 4B every other day.

We have had a lot of schools ask how did you get the time to have your teachers meet during the day. First, Montezuma went from an eight period day to a modified block with eight periods over two days. Then we took study halls out of the day so teachers didn't have to supervise a study hall. Teachers were required to teach 6 out of 8 classes in the old system with a prep. We tried to keep the same theme in the 8 periods over two days. Teacher still teach six class periods and instead of study hall supervision they meet in a PLC group. Teachers still get a prep every other day or everyday depending on the period of the day. It took some change in the thinking of what we wanted to have happen at Montezuma, but the teachers at Montezuma embraced the change and have enjoyed the collaboration time.

In addition to PLC time during the team all staff are encouraged to plan multi-level team on a vertical basis when necessary. This could be part of a day or an entire day for which substitutes are used. For example there have been team meetings this year of K-12

Language Arts and math respectively.

Thinking back to when the PLC process just started, what were your first steps?

The most important thing we did to start this process was not spending too much time trying to get all staff to buy-in. After the PLC Institute we had a core group of teachers ready to lead with complete administrative support. Some staff were not initially prepared or convinced that collaborating with others about these four questions was the best use of their time. We plodded ahead anyway. The administration outlined that teachers were going to collaborate and that they were going to collaborate in a certain way. However, the teachers had quite a bit of autonomy in determining what the collaboration looked like and how it actually worked.

Another important part of the process is that each PLC was required to incorporate specific requirements into their work. Each group needed group norms, to use an agenda each meeting, establish a SMART goal (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound)

What is the greatest challenges of implementing PLCs for your school?

It is a challenge to develop groups for elective, non-core teachers such as vocational, fine arts, physical education and counselors. Their work and student success is not easily defined as improving math, reading or science and there is usually only one person teaching in these areas. While a challenge, combining these teachers into productive PLCs does work. It takes a different perspective to see what they might have in common as teachers and how they can share collaboratively together.

Another challenge is developing meeting time during the school day. We felt that it was important to impede the time into the school day. Each principal has had to be creative and strategic about staff assignments and schedules to make this happen but it has been worth it.

If you were to start this process over, knowing what you know now, what would you do differently and why?

Knowing what we now know now we don't think we would do much different except start earlier, like years earlier. Becoming a PLC school is a process. Success has to build upon itself and just doesn't happen because teachers are meeting and talking. Teachers need to meet and talk about the right things in the right way and then take action.

The best driver of systemic improvement has been the development of an overall district goal. Our goal for 2012-13 school year is: 75% of all students will meet the end of the year RIT expectations on spring the MAP (Measurement of Academic Progress) assessment in reading, math and science. The district goal has led to a tighter alignment of building level and PLC goals and focused teachers efforts. It has been a very good way to hold all aspects of improvement accountable.

What advice do you have for a school that is just beginning this journey?

Our advice to a school just beginning this journey is get started. Don't wait, don't just dabble in the process, jump in and get started. Use resources from Solution Tree and others to define the right work and what to do, but get started.

Do you have teacher leaders?

We have teacher leaders as a part of our PLC process. These are not paid positions but positions that a PLC group has given to one of its members or someone the principal has asked to be the leader of the group. The leaders facilitate their respective PLC meetings and meet on a weekly basis with the principal to discuss common group and implementation issues. Some groups prefer to rotate the leadership of their groups and other groups stick with the same leader.

How are you connecting (aligning) district goals, CSIP plan, building goals, grade level, and Individual teacher career development plan with PLC goals?

Aligning district goals, CSIP plan, building goals, etc. is a real challenge. For us the driving force is the district goal. We expect all subsequent goals such as building goals, individual PLC SMART goals, etc. to line up with the district goal.

How are you making sure implementation of PLC is student focused?

We monitor the implementation of our PLC process and ultimately the results of student achievement. We monitor the work of each PLC by using a quarterly staff survey that is based on the 4 main questions as listed earlier.

How do PLCs and RtI align and work together?

RtI is embedded on the PLC process for us as a part of question #3, How will intervene for students who struggle and enrich the learning for students who are proficient?

How do you celebrate your success?

Celebrating successes is something we continue to improve upon. At this time in the elementary we work to meet with groups or an individual teacher to discuss the successes each group or individual has achieved. Small notes in newsletters thanking staff members for the commitments and efforts each person has made are also provided and appreciated. You can never go wrong with food, either.

Tell me about your administrative team and how they are a PLC Team?

Our administrative team also function as a PLC. We have established our own meeting norms and developed a SMART goal based on the quarterly implementation survey mentioned earlier. Our current goal is: At the end of the 2012-13 school, 100% of staff will indicate "very true" or "true" for all items on the PLC Survey." Our quarterly targets are 5 questions at 100% for the 1st quarter, 10 questions at 100% for the 2nd quarter and so forth. A majority of our administrative team meeting time is based on the data from the survey and discussion of interventions appropriate for groups that are struggling and enhancements for those that are thriving. The survey is completed via google docs. We track the answers by staff member and PLC group over time for results and growth. The overall data is shared and discussed with all staff each quarter. This process has allowed the administrators to model being a PLC. We do everything that is expected of teacher PLCs.