

Northwestern College, Iowa

NWCommons

Master's Theses & Capstone Projects

Education

Fall 2023

Improving Collaboration: A School Improvement Plan

Jennifer Trimble

Follow this and additional works at: https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Improving Collaboration: A School Improvement Plan

Jennifer Trimble

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Abstract

The inspiration for this school improvement plan was seeing the need in my school building for departmentalized PLC collaboration following the MTSS framework. Research findings show that PLC collaborations following an MTSS framework provide teachers and students with many beneficial supports that increase student learning and teacher knowledge. Informed by a literature review, this school improvement plan creates a departmentalized PLC collaboration that follows an MTSS framework within the school setting.

Keywords: multitiered system of support, departmentalization, personal learning community, collaboration, intervention, progress monitoring

Table of Contents

Abstract.....1

Introduction.....5

Literature Review.....8

 Departmentalized PLC.....8

 Personal Learning Communities.....13

 MTSS Framework.....16

 Vertical Alignment.....18

School Profile.....20

 Community Characteristics.....20

 School District Characteristics.....20

 School Building Characteristics.....20

 Student Portfolio Performance.....21

 Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment.....21

 Professional Development

Practices.....21

Needs Assessment.....23

Data Analysis.....24

 Data Summary.....24

Improving Collaboration	4
School Strengths.....	24
School Challenges.....	24
Assessment Options.....	25
Action Plan.....	26
Purposed Improvement Plan.....	26
Impact on Teaching and/or Learning.....	27
Alignment to Research.....	27
Summary.....	27
Implementation of School Improvement Plan.....	27
Intro.....	27
Timeline.....	28
Role Clarifications and Assignments.....	28
Progress Monitoring.....	28
Limitations.....	28
Conclusion.....	29
References.....	30

Improving Collaboration: A School Improvement Plan

In 2006 Iowa's Department of Education created curriculum standards for high school students (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.). The Department of Education convened work teams of Area Education Agency consultants, Department content consultants, district curriculum directors, and teachers to identify the essential concepts and skills in the content areas of Literacy, Mathematics, and Science (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.). In 2008, Iowa adopted the Iowa Core Curriculum to include standards for social studies and 21st century skills for kindergarten through eighth grade students.

Iowa Core Curriculum brought many expectations for teachers that demanded accountability (Montero, 2023). This accountability led many school districts to research what instructional and structural methods would yield the most results on the ISASP tests (Montero, 2023). Departmentalizing upper-elementary developed from this research. Researchers believe that by focusing on one or two subjects, teachers can dig deeper into the standards and develop a teaching specialty (Montero, 2023). Departmentalizing was designed to improve student learning (Montero, 2023). With this innovative structure for teaching these grades, teachers could focus their attention on one or two content areas and become an expert in their field.

Research shows that there are advantages and disadvantages to departmentalizing. A disadvantage is that teachers in self-contained classrooms are working with the same children across multiple areas and can assess their needs for a variety of content areas. Using assessment results, teachers can individualize their instruction to support the students' needs (Chang, 2008).

To be successful, departmentalizing must be paired with collaboration. This will close the gap between the pros and cons of departmentalizing (Chang, 2008) When teachers collaborate, they can create cross-curricular themes. Collaborating teachers can work together to create

learning opportunities or problem-solving. Collaborative communities are essential to a school, or district aiming to improve student learning. PLCs (Personal Learning Communities) foster collaborative problem-solving and support and inspire teachers as they work to continually reevaluate their teaching practices (Cubano, et al., 2015) PLCs ensure that all students are learning, ensure collaboration among staff, and focus on results (Cubano, et al., 2015) Teachers work in groups to continually analyze results and work towards improving student learning. Some PLC groups consist of grade-level teams and others consist of content area teams. In a departmentalized setting, PLC groups would benefit from vertical teaming, in which all members of the team are focused on the same content (Cubano, et al., 2015). Vertical teaming allows teachers to learn more about their content area from each other. Vertical teaming involves teachers in the same content area but at different grade levels collaborating to improve teacher practices and student learning. This form of teaming encourages high achievement in all students (Cubano & Ross, 2015).

The problem is that many schools have a professional learning community in place, and many schools are departmentalized in the upper-grade levels, yet they do not participate in vertical teaming PLCs. This school improvement plan fosters high student achievement in departmentalized grades through vertical collaboration.

Expectations on teachers have made it increasingly harder to provide a rigorous curriculum to students and ensure that all students are achieving growth since the introduction of the Iowa Core Curriculum (Montero, 2023). PLCs have been utilized to help teachers fine-tune their practice for years, but could PLCs benefit from having departmentalized teachers too? The problem with most PLCs is that they consist of grade-level teams. When grade-level teams are departmentalized, teachers cannot collaborate with other teachers in their content area. The

inability to collaborate across grade levels makes it difficult for teachers to fully benefit from a PLC, which is designed to help teachers grow in their content area (Montero, 2023). Most PLCs follow the MTSS framework in which teachers use data to drive instruction. They plan for interventions and instruction as a team and then analyze the data. One benefit of PLCs is that teachers can model and reflect on teaching practices (Montero, 2023). The problem with the current PLC is that teachers cannot get content advice from a team that does not teach the same content. The purpose of this school improvement plan is to determine if a departmentalized, or vertical, PLC following an MTSS framework would be beneficial to departmentalized grade levels.

The research for this school improvement plan relied on journals available through the online Dewitt Library at Northwestern College and Google Scholar. All of the articles were peer-reviewed and published within the last ten years. The author selected articles that focused on departmentalization, PLCs, MTSS framework, and collaboration. Due to the lack of peer-reviewed articles focusing on departmentalized PLCs, the author focused the research on vertical alignment. This scope of research allows readers to consider the importance of PLCs within vertical teams to benefit teachers who teach departmental content in upper elementary grade levels.

The belief is that teachers who meet with a vertical team in a PLC setting will provide support to the team members and allow them to create meaningful, rigorous lessons and interventions that will ensure all students making academic progress (Chang, 2008). A change in the collaboration process will happen because teachers will be allotted a specific time to meet with team members in their content area once a week. The team will create norms, analyze data, and make plans to improve content areas in their classrooms and as a district. Teachers will

collaborate to bring meaningful, evidence-based practices and strategies into their classrooms (Montero, 2023). They will use the MTSS framework to provide instructional support on all three tiers. The collaboration process will improve both short- and long-term learning goals within the district. The teachers in return will be more highly effective in their content areas.

The literature review for this school will follow a thematic approach. It will focus on the importance of departmentalizing for teachers to become experts in their content area. Then the literature review will discuss the value of collaboration within a PLC team with an emphasis on following the MTSS framework. Finally, it will discuss vertical alignment teams and how they would benefit departmentalized content area teachers.

Review of the Literature

Departmentalized PLC

Departmentalized PLCs are collaborative groups of teachers in the same curricular department. Cubano & Ross (2018) led the research of an English department in which five new teachers created a skill-based instructional approach and planned a comprehensive unit in their content area. Cubano & Ross (2018) created a teacher workgroup with the new English teachers. The group articulated the intentions of group meetings and documented their encounters. The learning community meets after school monthly for one to two hours. Two members of the group served as facilitators of the group and created an agenda for each meeting to keep the focus of the meeting meaningful for all participants. The group also created group norms and discussion protocols. According to Cubano & Ross, the group norms and protocols helped foster habits that supported an inquiry stance (Cubano & Ross, 2018). One participant explained that the learning community fostered valuable formative feedback. The feedback allowed the participants to dig beneath the surface and engage directly and concretely with teaching practices. Cubano & Ross's group discussed differentiation practices and ways to blend learning from outside sources; they created opportunities to ask questions and try new things.

According to Cubano & Ross (2018), collaborative learning communities are essential to any teacher, school, or district aiming to improve student learning. Cubano & Ross (2018) further states that the learning communities foster collaborative teacher learning and support and inspire teachers as they work to continually reevaluate their teaching practices. Furthermore, standards-based assessments change both the content that is taught and the way that it is taught (Cubano & Ross, 2018). Inquiry is a teacher learning structure that teachers use as a primary method for generating knowledge (Cubano & Ross, 2018). Inquiry happens best in learning communities.

Professional learning should be intensive, ongoing, connected to practice, focused on student learning, aligned with school improvement goals, and supportive of building teacher relationships (Cubano & Ross, 2018). Cubano & Ross (2018) also argued that teacher work groups provide the opportunity for frequent, ongoing, teacher-led professional learning and serve as a remedy for the shortcomings of professional development that served only isolated teacher groups.

A study conducted by Kotas et al., (2023) centered around vertical teaming of preschool and kindergarten teachers in the area of reading. These teachers also used inquiry-based collaboration. The study allowed time for a vertical professional learning community to construct meaning through collaborative inquiry, video observations, and reflection, all of which informed educator thinking and enriched student interaction for literacy learning.

Traditionally, PLCs have been designed with a horizontal alignment, meaning that a group of educators are from the same grade or discipline such as 6th grade or special education (Kotas et al., 2023). Vertical grouping refers to educators from sequential grades meeting with a common purpose to exchange ideas and focus on academic achievement. Moreover, research indicated the importance of external stakeholders' perspectives to encourage divergent thinking that fosters building new knowledge and deepens pedagogical competency in the classroom.

Kotas et al., (2023) found that teachers who worked in a vertical collaborative group focused on interactive reading brought varied experiences and understandings to the table. The teachers were able to examine the standards and explain their perceptions of the standards and how they would integrate them

into their classrooms. The discussions led to further exploration of ideas from other grade levels.

According to Kotas et al., (2023), the discussions provided an opportunity for the teacher group to reflect on their own understanding and view standards from another grade-level perspective. Educators began to alter their way of thinking and attempt different configurations (Kotas et al., 2023).

Kotas et al., (2023) noted the barriers to implementing vertical teaming as finding time to collaborate and finding time to implement the strategies discussed. Although there were barriers, vertical teaming did provide a unique opportunity for educators to pose questions, engage in conversations, and compare ideas that included developmental expectations across grades and influenced knowledge and application practice among those who participated.

Hutchinson & Woodward (2018) used both qualitative and quantitative data sources to answer research questions. This study was conducted to determine if students' digital literacy skills were enhanced and if the teachers' pedagogical expertise was increased through the collaboration of teachers focused on technology integration. The findings were that students who were in classrooms of teachers participating in the collaboration performed significantly higher than those who were not. Hutchinson and Woodward (2018) focused their research on exploring a PD approach that builds teachers' knowledge and pedagogy associated with technology and supports teachers as they seek to overcome barriers to integrating technology. Researchers found that through participating in a larger sustained PD project that included targeted PLC involvement, teachers not only increased the digital tools they were using in the classroom but also changed how they viewed their role in the classroom and switched from teacher-driven to student-driven instruction (Hutchinson & Woodward, 2018).

Hutchinson & Woodward's research focused on grade-level teams that met as a team weekly and with their instructional coach bi-weekly. However, the PLC group met three times throughout the year to provide additional support and to gauge the needs of the PLCs (Hutchinson & Woodward, 2018). The participants of this study completed a pre-and post-questionnaire in which teachers found significant differences in their perceptions of proficiency and students were assessed and found that their abilities had notably increased from the pretest results. The teachers participating were observed and then were

asked to reflect on the observation of their lesson. The research recorded PLC meeting minutes. The teachers were interviewed at the beginning, middle, and end of the project to determine how much their goals had changed over time.

Overall, teachers in this project believed that their proficiency in technology integration was due to the support of the PLC. Several teachers commented in their survey that the instruction shifted their traditional role in the classroom and invited them to envision different approaches to student learning. The teachers noted that they would bring goals or obstacles for the group to discuss and collaborate on solutions (Hutchinson, Woodward, 2018).

Page (2009) researched the impact of departmentalization on sixth-grade achievement in the Missouri assessment program. Page (2009) noted that departmentalization first came about in junior high schools in the 1920s. It was introduced as an innovative way to improve student achievement. No Child Left Behind mandated accountability for districts and teachers, leading to schools researching what methods would yield the most dramatic results on state tests. Departmentalization was introduced in upper elementary with the new configuration.

Page's (2009) research analyzed if a relationship exists between departmentalization and sixth-grade student achievement on state tests. The study considered conflicting arguments about the effectiveness of departmentalization. Page noted that if departmentalization is carried out, the collaborative team is instrumental to this form of the school structure. There is a strong relationship between collaborative community contexts in schools and support for authentic learning experiences for all students (Page, 2009). Page (2009) reported on a case study showing that the best teachers found help outside of school to enhance instruction.

Besides allowing teachers to specialize in their content area, departmentalization fosters teacher satisfaction and retention. A PLN differs from a PLC in that teachers research a topic on their own rather than as a group collectively. Teachers who engage in departmentalization have higher levels of job satisfaction and low levels of leaving the profession due to job-induced stress. Oddone (2019) emphasizes the importance of Personal Learning Networks (PLN). PLNs connect people and resources for informal

personal learning. Oddone (2019) addresses that there is a shift towards self-directed, interest-based learning that follows the structure of PLNs. According to Kay's research, teachers are experiencing increasingly complex contexts, rapid changes, and high demand for accountability (Oddone, 2019). Kay's research suggests that teachers learn collaboratively both online and offline. Oddone (2019) pinpoints that teachers who learn as connected professionals share learning attributes that influence their experience of professional learning.

Montero (2023) writes about the pros and cons of departmentalizing elementary schools. An advantage is teachers can work together to create cross-curricular lessons that meet the standards for different subject areas. Moreover, teachers who are departmentalized also have first-hand insight into problems a student may be having. Teachers can work together to solve learning barriers. According to Montero (2023), teachers who are departmentalized benefit from collaboration in which they can assess and problem-solve student learning.

Personal Learning Communities

Personal learning communities are designed to allow teachers to choose their own professional development. Oddone's (2019) study focused on network and connected learning. Oddone found that Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) enable active, interest-driven, and connected professional learners. This new model of learning integrates three elements of learning: personal, pedagogical, and public. Each of these elements is characterized by experiences that link, stretch, or amplify the individual's learning and practice. Oddone concluded that engaging in continuing professional learning is one way that teachers can ensure their teaching practices are effective in a time of rapid change. PLNs provide an opportunity for teachers to maintain their professional knowledge in an ongoing and cost-effective way. Oddone (2019) found that teachers who participate in PLN can extend their practice, grow as educators, and demonstrate learning for their students.

Ehri & Flugman (2017) conducted research on PLNs, analyzing the systematic teaching of phonics to beginning readers. The study consisted of a year-long mentoring program to improve teachers' knowledge and effectiveness in teaching phonics and the extent to which it improved students'

achievement in reading and spelling. The approach that Ehri & Flugman (2017) found highly effective was that teachers were matched with coaches who observed and advised the teachers on how to teach reading. Ehri & Flugman (2017) compared the results of student scores from classrooms whose teachers did not have a peer coach to those who did. Reading gains of the students in the coached classroom were significantly higher than those in the noncoached classroom.

Kreunen, Klink et al., (2017) determined that teacher-team involvement is a key factor in achieving sustainable innovation in higher education. The researchers identified a team as a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems. Three essential learning behaviors were identified in successful teams: sharing, constructive conflicts, and co-construction. All three team learning behaviors are deemed relevant to develop innovative solutions collectively, sharing their expertise, integrating different viewpoints, and collaboratively building new knowledge. It was noted that team learning behavior benefited from vertical leadership (Kling, et. Al, 2017).

Johnson et al., (2018) conducted a study to consider the importance of ending isolation through teacher teams. These researchers noted that instructional teams are a central component intended to decrease professional isolation, promote teachers' ongoing development, and substantially reduce variation in teacher effectiveness in the classroom. Johnson et al., (2018) observed six school districts. Each district had a collaboration already in place, but all six schools had similar functionality. The collaborative groups each had two main areas of focus. The first focus was curriculum development, lesson planning, and ongoing review of data about students' learning and achievement. The second area of focus was the student cohort or the students' well-being and progress. The study found that teachers were effective, and students' needs were being met when teachers were not isolated. Toste et al., (2022) showed that collaboration can optimize data use opportunities. These findings were consistent with prior research observing that teachers in small groups interpret data more accurately, clarify problems, ask follow-up questions, problem-solve, and correct errors.

Waddell (2022) states that professional learning communities should focus on becoming responsive to students. Groups should provide opportunities for teachers to develop shared goals related to student learning and hold themselves accountable for those goals. Waddell (2022) demonstrated that high-depth conversations occurred when there were meeting agendas aligned to problems of practice. The teachers in this study were asked to use standardized assessment data to identify student needs. The group then worked collectively to provide learning opportunities to meet student needs.

Kolleck et al., (2020) identified that collaboration requires trust, commitment, effort, and co-constructive practices. Teachers who have a high efficacy or belief in their capabilities are more likely to engage in collaboration. Aas's (2020) research supports Kolleck et al., (2021) in stating that high-depth meetings consist of content analysis of assessment data. Trust is a key component to the effective collaboration of teachers. Kolleck et al., (2021) indicate that teachers who enter trusting relationships seem to be more involved than those who do not have a trusting relationship with their team. Cubano (2018) supports the studies stating that positive outcomes are not the result of simply placing a group of teachers in a room together for an hour a week. Cubano (2018) states that healthy inquiry-oriented learning communities establish a vision, build trust, understand collaboration, encourage and appreciate diversity, hold each other accountable, acknowledge the difficulty of change, analyze data, and work with administrators. To further support Kolleck's findings, Darnell (2019) states that PLC team members benefit from unpacking standards. Teachers on PLC teams outline a goal and identify instructional and assessment strategies that align with the standards to increase student achievement. Chang (2017) identifies a PLC as a community of peers with which to troubleshoot.

Kotas et al., (2023) describe collaborative inquiry as a conversational process for teachers to intentionally explore new ideas and examine current practices as well as student learning. Hutchinson and Woodward (2018) also found that through participating in a larger sustained PD project that included targeted PLC involvement, teachers not only increased the digital tools they were using in the classroom but also changed how they viewed their role in the classroom and moved from teacher-driven to student-driven instruction. Oddone (2019) concedes that to remain effective and up-to-date, teachers, like other

professionals, are encouraged to undertake regular learning opportunities to extend and enhance their knowledge and practice. Oddone (2019) found that professional learning increases teaching quality, thereby providing opportunities for enhanced student achievement.

MTSS Framework

MTSS (multi-tiered system of support) is a tiered infrastructure that uses data to help match academic and social-emotional behavior assessment and instructional resources to a student's needs. MTSS Framework outlines the process of PLC collaborations. Progress monitoring is essential to an MTSS framework. Toste et al., (2023) found that teachers who use progress monitoring data to inform their instructional decision-making have a greater impact on student achievement by students with learning disabilities. Teachers must have the knowledge and skills to estimate a student's response to intervention and to determine when adjustments are needed. Data teams center on data use practices and collaborative analysis of data for decision-making.

Weddle (2020) states that an MTSS community is concerned with the same object or goal. Members of the study collaborated in teams and divided the responsibilities of each group member. Researchers in these teams discussed how students would be assessed. Teachers in Weddle's (2020) study stated that groups collaborated best when there was an agenda created.

Kotas et al., (2023) studied a collaborative team focused on inquiry within a vertical PLC. In the collaboration process, teachers developed an understanding of how to differentiate or modify whole-class lessons concerning all learners. Teachers provided students with opportunities to select complex materials that would resonate with students across grade levels and their real-life experiences. Text selection lent itself to differentiation. Teachers within Kotas et al., (2023) study differentiated writing by allowing students to draw pictures or write sentences. This study found that inquiry-based lessons increased when the collaboration process was utilized.

Page (2009) found that departmentalizing allowed for flexibility and permitted teachers to assist students in progress at different rates and depths, making instruction individualized. Page (2009) states that the age of post-standardization is upon us: the new reform is to differentiate lessons to be tailored to

each student. Oddone (2019) found that the PLN exists for the social construction of knowledge through the exchange of information. It leads to the development of learning opportunities. Each learner engages with others and constructs individual understandings to meet personally identified learning needs. Oddone (2019) states that PLN allows teachers to differentiate their learning to meet the needs of their students and classroom.

Fien et al., (2020) identify MTSS as an approach to service delivery that spans general, remedial, and special education. MTSS emphasizes high-quality instruction in the general education setting, interventions for at-risk students that match instructional needs, and the use of data response for instruction and intervention. Student response data is used to determine the appropriate tier of support, whether interventions should be intensified, and specific learning disability eligibility. Teachers provided daily reading instruction using a published reading curriculum during a 90-minute reading block in Tier 1. Students in Tier 2 received an additional 30 minutes of small group reading instruction each day. The Tier 2 interventions were aligned with the Tier 1 instruction. Students were grouped based on assessment performance. The results demonstrated that students in Tier 2 made significant growth (Fien, et al, 2020).

Mars (2022) identified the MTSS structure as a pyramid. The base of the pyramid is Tier 1. This is the core instruction all students receive. Some students will not respond to Tier 1 and will move to Tier 2. Tier 2 students meet with the teacher in small groups with more frequency and intensity than Tier 1. Tier 3 is at the top of the pyramid serving the smallest number of students. Tier 3 students require more frequent and intensive interventions to make progress. Students can move vertically among the tiers. Mars (2022) concludes that student needs can be more effectively met when teachers focus on improving their practices, analyze data to support decision-making; and utilize the MTSS Tiers efficiently as well as the school's resources.

Snyder (2023) notes that using a schoolwide framework for reading interventions that is consistent through all grade levels in the building will create clear data to gauge student growth. Snyder (2023) finds that using universal screeners throughout all grade levels will align the data and make it comparable. MTSS serves as a driver for inclusion in schools. The expectation is that all students should

be educated and included in general education. MTSS helps meet the needs of diverse learners both socially and academically by providing students with the level of classroom support needed for each student. The MTSS intervention framework will help increase student proficiency by educating teachers on new processes, strategies, curriculums, and confidence. The framework will connect and align the general education curriculum and standards to the intervention. Data will be used to inform decisions in the intervention placement process. Progress monitoring ensures that students are making academic growth. Overall, Snyder (2023) notes that the use of the MTSS framework and collaboration will improve student academic performance.

Vertical Alignment

Vertical alignment allows teachers of the same department but different grade levels to collaborate. Ehri & Flugman (2017) recognized that teachers who were mentored in progressive phonics instruction from grades kindergarten through third grade made significant improvements on reading instruction. Students profited from phonics instruction, yet second-grade teachers were somewhat less skilled and less committed to teaching the program, and their views were somewhat less consistent with the program by the end of the year than K and first-grade teachers. The second-grade teachers taught only phonics when the mentor was present. Ehri & Flugman's (2017) study determined that teachers mentoring in a vertical alignment benefit students.

Kreunen et al., (2017) identified that teacher-team involvement is considered a key factor in achieving sustainable innovation in higher education. Teacher teams require engaging in team learning behaviors that should result in new knowledge and solutions. At the high school level, this approach involves departments working together. Kreunen et al., (2017) identify a team as a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, and who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems.

Toste et al., (2023) further support the need for the collaboration of data by a team of individuals. They identify that the most common way to group team members is based on the grade level they teach.

Weddle (2020) also noted that the depth of collaborative conversations significantly affects student learning supported by the instruction and interventions planned in team collaborations.

Kolleck et al., (2021) recognize that while exchanging classroom or test material results does not require much time or effort, more intense forms of collaboration, such as an effective synchronization of team members or the mutual development of classroom practices and standards for teaching, can be regarded as being more effortful. For example, Cubano & Ross (2018) conducted a research project in which they worked with five new-hire English teachers to move towards skill-based instruction and comprehensive unit planning. The study forged a professional collaboration to grow as teachers. The group met regularly and discussed assessment data. The study structured collaboration and feedback in a way that allowed the group to dig beneath the surface and engage directly and concretely with teaching practice.

Kotas et al., (2023) led a research forum identifying how to adapt a reading program with vertical teaming to improve reading instruction in grades kindergarten through third grade. Vertical teaming in conjunction with collaborative inquiry formed a unique opportunity for educators to engage in conversations and compare ideas, including developmental expectations across grade levels. The collaboration influenced the teachers' own knowledge and application of practice.

Hutchinson & Woodward (2018) led a research study of technology integration in the classroom with an emphasis on collaboration in the field of technology. The design of PLCs in this project provided opportunities for teachers to share and discuss first- and second-order barriers and work together to plan instruction. Participants provided an opportunity for teachers to reflect and discuss their instructional goal(s) for their lesson and their learning regarding technology integration that might also inform their future practice (Hutchinson & Woodward, 2018). Oddone (2019) suggests that through connected learning networks (such as PLNs), teachers can extend their practice, grow as professionals, and demonstrate contemporary learning for their students. Darnell (2019) states that it is important for schools, and especially PLCs, to track progress toward their literacy and learning vision. Sailin &

Mahmor (2018) identify that students accelerate when they are involved in meaningful learning activities. Meaningful learning activities are created when teachers collaborate and mentor with peer teachers.

School Profile

This school improvement project is intended for the Wayne Community School District, a public school district in Corydon, Iowa. Corydon is located in southeast Iowa, near the Missouri border. The school serves students from the towns of Corydon, Allerton, Millerton, Cambria, Harvard, Lineville, Clio, and Promise City. The school consists of two buildings in the district: the elementary, or grades Pk-6, and the middle school/high school, grades 7-12. Both schools are located in Corydon. The elementary school is located three blocks south of the middle school and high school. The elementary building is designed in a circle formation. The PK-1st grade students and Title I students are in the circle with the lunchroom in the center of the circle. The second and third grades are in the first new addition wing. The fourth and fifth grades are in a wing, and the sixth grades and SPED are located in yet another wing of the building.

The population of Corydon is approximately 1,500. The elementary student population is 335 students. The elementary student population is 94.9% White, 1.5% Asian, 1.2% Hispanic, 1.2% Multi-racial, .9% Black, and 3% Native American. The gender ratio is 49% male to 51% female. Of the student population, 11% are disabled, and 2% are English language learners. The low socioeconomic status population is 53.4% (State of Iowa, 2022).

The district has a total of 183 students who took the state assessment (ISASP). Of those students, 99 were of low socioeconomic status, and 24 were students with disabilities (on IEPs). In 2022 the district scored 52.66% on the statewide English Language Arts Assessment just over the statewide average of 50%. The district also received 52.56% on the statewide mathematics assessment achievement, compared to the statewide average of 50%. The district growth for ELA was 58% while the statewide average was 50%. The distinct growth in math was 77.5%

while the state average was 50%. Overall, 78.45% of district students were proficient in ELA, while the state average was 70.84%. In mathematics, the district students were 72.38% proficient with a state average of 64.97%.

The school's mission statement is to provide students with the opportunity to gain the skills and knowledge needed to succeed beyond the structure of our school system, including but not limited to being 1. productive citizens, 2. effective parents, 3. proficient, dedicated, and knowledgeable wage earners, 4. students prepared for all facets of post-secondary education, and 5. moral and ethical leaders. The district is a Capturing Kids Hearts (CKH) school district. The CKH model that the district follows is the EXCEL model. The district uses this model in everything that they do in the classroom and as a district. E-stands for engage, X -Xplore, C-Communicate, E-Empower, and L-Launch. The school's mission statement follows the EXCEL model in preparing our students for the future.

The district is dedicated to promoting an equal opportunity for quality public education to its students within the limitations of the school district's ability and willingness to furnish financial support. The district will provide students, in cooperation with their parents and the community, the opportunity to develop a healthy, social, intellectual, emotional, and physical self-concept. The district will provide this in a learning environment that provides guidance and encourages critical thinking in the students for a lifetime.

The Wayne district strives for quality education by adhering to the elements of active student and teacher engagement, excitement, depth of knowledge in content areas, standards and alignment (teaching the right things, at the right time), and having the resources needed, including training, clear expectations, curriculum, and supports. All staff development meetings

are centered around quality education standards and follow the CKH EXCEL model for the presentation of material.

The parents in the district are involved through collaboration with the staff. The district provides daily assignment books in which parents and teachers can communicate daily about work or behavior. There are also parent-teacher conferences held two times per year that are attended by 85% or more parents. The district also has a CSIP (comprehensive school improvement plan) committee that meets regularly to discuss district improvement plans. There is not a PTO in place at this time.

The district purchased the HMH Math series three years ago and has been implementing it district-wide. Last year the district purchased the HMH Into Reading series and has been implementing it in most grade levels. The fifth grade does not implement the series in whole groups but the program in interventions. There have been improvements in reading and math since the purchase of the programs.

The district meets once per year to analyze the previous year's ISASP test results. The group creates both individual and district goals to work towards for the upcoming year. This is the extent of collaboration in content areas. The remainder of the district collaboration takes place as a building or by grade level. The grade level teams have a common plan time each day when they can collaborate on curriculum or instructional practices.

The area that needs collaboration is assessment. Wayne Elementary is departmentalized in upper elementary. Teachers in grades 3-6 teach either ELA and Social Studies, or Math and Science. The teachers are allotted time to work with their grade level teams, but they do not teach in the same content area. The time is not used to its fullest potential because teachers are

not able to share instructional practices or analyze test results with their peers who are also teaching the same content area.

Needs Assessment

Wayne Community Schools has strong inter-school teacher teams, but the district lacks an MTSS structured collaboration for their departmentalized teachers. An area in need of improvement is curriculum and instruction.

Revising the MTSS collaboration system would ensure that teachers are meeting student needs by coordinating with vertical teachers in the same domain. Currently, teachers have a common plan time with their grade level teams, but the upper elementary is departmentalized. Common planning within grade levels is beneficial for grade-level discussion of topics but just touches the surface of the bigger issues. Grade-level collaboration does not allow teachers to collaborate and analyze data of students in their content areas with other teachers who teach the same content. MTSS collaboration focuses on assessing data in a content area and planning for instruction in each tier collectively. The collaboration team also shares instructional ideas and support. A grade-level collaboration in departmentalized classrooms does not allow teachers of the same content to reflect on instructional practices or give support to teachers in the same content areas.

A departmentalized personal learning community (PLC) with a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) structure would benefit the teachers at Wayne Community School. The collaboration would be held once or twice a month. The teachers would meet for forty minutes to analyze data. The team would collaborate on ideas to improve content instruction. The group would focus on both short-term and long-term goals. The long-term goals could be centered around ISASP scores and areas needing improvement as a district. The short-term goals could focus on standard alignment.

Data Analysis

During professional development the first week of the 2024-2025 school year, district administration will introduce PLCs that follow the MTSS framework. They will discuss the important components of a PLC and the MTSS framework structure. The staff will be trained in how to effectively collaborate with groups and how to create group norms. Collaboration groups will be formed, and a meeting date and time will be preset by the district administration. There will be professional development of different personality types to ensure that all staff recognize the diverse ways that people process information. The administration will also introduce the collaboration data form that will be filled out and submitted by each group after the collaboration. The form will contain the criteria the group will discuss to help keep the team's collaboration focused. The groups will have time during in-service days to meet as a group to discuss what they want to get from the group's interactions and to establish group norms.

The first departmental meeting will take place in the 3rd week of school. This timing will allow teachers a period to get back into their routines in their classrooms. It will also allow time for the Title teachers to administer the FAST Bridge benchmark assessments to district students. The first meeting will be geared towards analyzing FAST assessment data. The teachers will group students into college pathways, low risk, some risk, and high risk. The teachers will determine which students will receive Tier II interventions. The team will discuss intervention strategies.

The team will meet again in two weeks. The team will discuss how interventions are going. The team will analyze progress monitoring results. Teams will discuss standards and collaborate on instructional strategies to use for reading instruction.

The team will meet every two weeks. The third meeting will consist of analyzing data from progress monitoring and the most recent reading assessment. The team will then discuss writing standards and instructional practices. The team will add writing to their collaborative agenda.

The fourth meeting will be held two weeks later. This meeting will consist of analyzing data of progress monitoring, reading assessments, and writing assessments. The team will collaborate each time and give instructional support to the team members.

Once the team has established a routine of analyzing and discussing data and instructional practice strategies, the team will add long-term goals. The team will analyze ISASP data and determine areas the district scored low. The team will create long-term goals to focus the district instruction toward improving scores on ISASP.

The teachers at Wayne Community Schools will be expected to implement the following goals in the 2024-2025 school year:

1. Meet bi-weekly as a departmentalized PLC team following the MTSS framework and submit documentation of the meetings to administration.
2. Analyze FAST Bridge assessment data and create short-term goals.
3. Analyze ISASP assessment data and create long-term goals.
4. 80% of students will score low risk to college pathway on the spring FAST assessment.
5. 80% of students will score proficient on the ISASP test in the spring.

Action Plan

To make data-based decisions and better support the MTSS system through collaboration of departmentalized teachers at Wayne Community Schools, the following steps will be implemented in the 2024-2025 school year:

1. After the students are given the FAST Bridge Universal screener, the teachers will assess the data and determine which students will need Tier II interventions.
2. The teachers will bring this assessment data to a PLC collaborative group meeting in which they will use MTSS framework to analyze the results and discuss intervention strategies. The team will collaborate for 40 minutes every two weeks.
3. After two weeks of implementation the group will meet with progress monitoring goals and discuss further intervention strategies if needed. The team will also discuss current instructional standards and instructional strategies to meet the standards.
4. The team will meet again to discuss progress monitoring assessment data and data of most recent reading assessments.
5. The team will meet to discuss progress monitoring data, reading assessments, and writing goals. The team will discuss writing instructional strategies.
6. The team will meet to discuss progress monitoring data, reading assessment data, and writing assessments.
7. Each week the groups will continue to meet and analyze data and discuss instructional practices and intervention strategies. The group will also create goals for the short and long term. Short-term goals will be set for each data collection period. Long-term goals will focus on the district's ISASP goals and will be long-range goals that focus on improving ISASP district scores.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

A departmentalized MTSS PLC collaboration is needed, and the evidence can be found in new teacher interviews. The evidence is also evident in ISASP scores and FAST scores. The data suggests scores were improving in the district when the teachers followed the curriculum with fidelity. The teachers who showed improvement in ISASP and FAST scores had been through extensive training with district personnel on how to implement the district's reading, writing, and math programs. They also received numerous training courses on intervention strategies to use in their instruction.

New teachers were hired, and the scores started to decline. Upon further investigation, it was determined that the new teachers to the district and newly graduated teachers who had not been taught how to utilize the district's reading, writing, and math programs were not instructed on district practices. The teachers were also never instructed on intervention strategies that the district used.

The district uses FASTBridge to assess student fluency. The FAST test consists of a universal screener given in the fall, winter, and spring. The screener consists of three grade-level passages. The student reads each passage in one minute. The students' fluency rate is determined by the middle score of the three timed readings. Students' results are compared to the benchmark goal and then students are identified as college pathway, low risk, some risk, or high risk. Students who are identified as high risk or some risks are progress monitored weekly. High-risk students receive interventions daily. Students can exit interventions and progress monitoring once they have met the grade level benchmark goal.

ISASP is administered to all students in grades 3-12 at Wayne Community Schools. The ISASP data is assessed once per year as a district. The teachers create individual goals for their own instructional purposes to improve their instructional practices.

Multi-tiered systems of support structure require that 80% of students are on grade level. The MTSS system is structured so all students receive grade-level instruction in Tier I. Tier II students scored some risk or high risk on the benchmark assessment. These students are the intervention students. They receive twenty minutes of additional instruction each day in a small group setting. Tier III students are the students who receive additional support from a specialist. Tier III are students pulled from the general education classroom setting for more support. The 2023-2024 sixth graders Fall FAST data found that 7% of students are at high risk, 7% are at some risk, 50% are low risk and 37% are on a college pathway.

Upon further reflection of the data, it became apparent that the intervention strategies vary between grade levels. Some of the teachers had attended training on fluency intervention strategies and were practicing those with fidelity. Other teachers were using what they had found in their research. The interventions were not consistent. AEA consultants observed the classrooms during interventions and determined there was an inconsistency. The inconsistency fell within the classrooms of teachers new to the district or new to the profession. The collaboration of teachers in the same department would break the consistency barrier found in the district's intervention program.

Conclusion

At Wayne Community School 33% of the staff in the upper elementary school where the classrooms are departmentalized were new to the district or new to the profession. Data from the

2022-2023 school year determined that the students' scores were lower than the previous year. Students who did not make the grade level benchmarks were provided with additional instructional support during interventions with little to no growth. By implementing departmentalized PLC collaboration that follows the MTSS framework, the district will provide growth opportunities for teachers and students. The teachers will be supported by peer teachers to provide high-quality instructional support to students during interventions and reading instruction.

References

- Aas, H. K. (2020). Learning through communication: Exploring learning potential in teacher teams Lesson Study talk. *International Journal for Lesson & Learning Studies*, 10(1), 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijlls-07-2020-0046>
- Chang, M. K. (2017). Reevaluating collegiality: Relationality, learning communities, and possibilities. *Policy Futures in Education*, 16(7), 851–865.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210317722285>
- Cubano, K., & Ross, C. (2018). A legacy of collaboration: Supporting reflective practitioners through teacher work groups. *English Leadership Quarterly*, 40(3), 6–10.
<https://doi.org/10.58680/elq201829504>
- Darnell, B. (2019). *A Journey for Content Area Literacy Development and PLCs*, 7(2).
- Ehri, L. C., & Flugman, B. (2017, October 28). *Mentoring teachers in systematic phonics instruction: Effectiveness of an intensive year-long program for kindergarten through 3rd grade teachers and their students reading and writing*. SpringerLink.
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11145-017-9792-7>
- Fien, H., Nelson, N. J., Smolkowski, K., Kosty, D., Pilger, M., Baker, S. K., & Smith, J. L. (2020). A conceptual replication study of the enhanced core reading instruction MTSS-reading model. *Exceptional Children*, 87(3), 265–288.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402920953763>
- Hutchison, A. C., & Woodward, L. (2018). Examining the technology integration planning cycle model of professional development to support teachers' instructional practices. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, 120(10), 1–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811812001002>

- Johnson, S. M., Reinhorn, S., & Simon, N. (2018). Ending isolation: The payoff of teacher teams in successful high-poverty urban schools. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, 120(5), 1–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811812000502>
- Koeslag-Kreunen, M. G. M., Van der Klink, M. R., Van den Bossche, P., & Gijsselaers, W. H. (2017). Leadership for team learning: The case of university teacher teams. *Higher Education*, 75(2), 191–207. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0126-0>
- Kolleck, N., Schuster, J., Hartmann, U., & Gräsel, C. (2021). Teachers' professional collaboration and trust relationships: An inferential social network analysis of teacher teams. *Research in Education*, 111(1), 89–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00345237211031585>
- Kotas, J., Bridi, J., & Garrity, S. M. (2023). Enhancing preschool-kindergarten educator implementation of interactive reading instruction through vertical teaming: Exploring Collaborative Enquiry. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 23(2), 262–287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798420978521>
- Literacy. Literacy | Iowa Department of Education. (n.d.). <https://educateiowa.gov/standard/literacy/literacy>
- Mars, Riley. (2022). Improving reading skills: A school improvement project. Northwestern College, Iowa
- Montero, M. (2023, September 5). *The pros and cons of departmentalizing elementary schools*. teaching with a mountain view. <https://teachingwithamountainview.com/the-pros-and-cons-of/>

- Oddone, K. M. (2019). Teachers' experience of professional learning through personal learning networks. *Teachers as connected professionals: a model to support professional learning through personal learning networks*, 20(3).
<https://doi.org/10.5204/thesis.eprints.127928>
- Page, S. J. (2009). The impact of departmentalization on sixth grade achievement on the missouri assessment program. *A Dissertation Submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University*.
- Sailin, S. N., & Mahmor, N. A. (2018). Improving student teachers' digital pedagogy through Meaningful Learning Activities. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 15(Number 2), 143–173. <https://doi.org/10.32890/mjli2018.15.2.6>
- Snyder, Mariah. (2023). Improving the schools MTSS reading intervention framework. Northwestern College. Iowa.
- Toste, J. R., Filderman, M. J., & Espin, C. A. (2022). Data teams in teacher preparation: Improving data-based instruction in reading. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 59(1), 40–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10534512221130073>
- Weddle, H. (2020). Teachers' opportunities to learn through collaboration over time: A case study of math teacher teams in schools under pressure to improve. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, 122(12), 1–40.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812012201204>
- Wyss, A., & Preston, C. (2022). Is there a benefit to upper elementary departmentalization? A district level analysis. *Impacting Education: Journal on Transforming Professional Practice*, 7(4), 16–25. <https://doi.org/10.5195/ie.2022.218>

