Promoting Collaboration and Cross-Curricular Interconnectedness:

Enhancing Communication of Professional Learning Committees Using Blackboard

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July 10, 2012

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**Setting and Context**

Griffin Middle School is a Title I school located in Area 2 of Cobb County School District. Approximately 90% of our students are on free and reduced lunch. Demographically speaking, our school has 26.7% African American, 27.6% Hispanic, 13.9% Caucasian, 2% Asian, and 29.8% Other (mixed race). There are 72 certified staff and 12 classified staff members, serving the needs of 1063 students. Many of our staff members hold advanced degrees and are currently continuing educational efforts through graduate study.

Prior to 2008, Griffin Middle School (GMS) was labeled as a Needs Improvement School, having missed Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for six years in a row. The Georgia Department of Education got involved in 2008 when we adopted a program called “America’s Choice” which served to guide the teaching staff to AYP success. This scripted program emphasized consistency and collaboration among teachers, and helped to change the climate of the school. As a result, our school realized gains in our overall academic success, and we have made AYP every year since 2008. On the flipside, this past year (2011-2012) has proven to be a challenge, as we lost our principal of six years to an internal job promotion with the central office. Our new principal has just recently taken over the reins (as of July 1, 2012), and the jury is still out on the kinds of programming this principal will institute. I had received my last principal’s blessing to move forward for my Capstone Project, however the new principal has yet to give me his approval. I do not anticipate a rejection, however, I will not know until I meet with him on July 9, 2012.

Griffin has a number of interested and actively participative stakeholders including our students and teachers, our administration, our district, our parents, and our community at large. Each stakeholder has a vested interest in ensuring the continued success of our school as well as a willingness to participate in programs which will support and encourage that end. The stakeholders who will be most impacted by my Capstone project will be teachers, administrators, and parents, with students as the ultimate beneficiaries.

**Capstone Problem and Rationale**

In this school year (2012-2013), we will begin the implementation of the Common Core curriculum, which we have been hearing about for the past two years. The challenge is that the extensive training which has taken place in English/Language Arts, has not been consistent with other subject areas. One reason for this inconsistency is ELA and Math standards were written to be implemented first. Even so, all teachers, regardless of subject disciplines, will be responsible for teaching college readiness standards, which are mostly literacy standards, starting this year. Teachers across the district, Griffin included, have varying levels of readiness regarding these standards. Even ELA teachers, who have received the most training, currently struggle with applications of this training as we prepare and deliver this ensuing year’s instruction. Ongoing monitoring and training will be essential to ensure that teachers are able to:

1. design and differentiate appropriate instruction around the new standards
2. communicate and share ideas with their respective vertical and horizontal teams
3. ask questions and share difficulties as they arise
4. share common solutions

We need a vehicle with which to accomplish this enormous task.

Griffin Middle School has teams in place, called data teams, which are meant to ensure that teachers are collaborating with respect to lesson planning and student data analysis. These data teams are comprised of each grade level subject area, for example, 8th grade English Language Arts Data Team and 6th grade Social Studies Data Team. Meeting in these teams provides an opportunity for teachers of common disciplines and grade levels to come together to share ideas, study trends in student data, and adjust instruction accordingly. These data teams are Griffin’s version of professional learning committees (PLCs). Research supports the idea of PLCs as a way to collaborate effectively, to share the school’s mission and vision, and to communicate the norms and values of the school culture. PLCs also enable teachers to engage in reflective dialogue and ongoing critical inquiry, and to maintain a sharp focus on student learning and results (AISR, 1998). Griffin teachers accommodate these opportunities for improvement. However, the casual observer might wonder about the extent to which these tasks are carried out. They might wonder how much collaboration is really taking place. They might question how well the discussions that take place in data teams correlate to the school’s ongoing mission and vision. How would a principal effectively monitor how well each of the twelve data teams operates?

Additionally, what about vertical communication? At our school, scheduling prohibits subject areas to meet together (all grade levels, same subject) during the school day. The only time we can meet is before or after school, and invariably, teachers are absent due to personal obligations outside of the school day. Additionally, singular data teams may be very strong, while other data teams of the same content area may struggle to maintain any semblance of order. How could skills and ideas be shared with teams of varying grade levels to ensure overall success? Vertical alignment is a serious issue, and one that must be addressed more frequently than subject area teams are able to meet, which is currently once a month at the most. How can the principal oversee that content, appropriate instruction, differentiation, and scope and sequence are being effectively deliberated at the appropriate grade level?

Another opportunity for rich dialogue and improved instructional potential is by providing opportunity for interdisciplinary discussions. At Griffin, the only time grade level pods meet is to discuss discipline issues and to disseminate day-to-day information about school business. A pod is comprised of one teacher from each subject, ELA, Science, Social Studies, and Math. While this is necessary discourse, opportunities for talking about improved student achievement through interdisciplinary means are lost. This is a huge shortcoming for Griffin teachers and hence, Griffin students. In general, students must be able to transfer the information they learn in one subject area to other aspects of their studies. Without allowing teachers the space for this interconnectedness, applicable planning does not take place and ultimately, the students suffer. Sandra Kaplan (2002) believes that an interdisciplinary curriculum presents students with “the opportunity to forge understandings between or across disciplines by asking them to seek the areas where the curricular areas are related, connected, and/or associated” (p. 6). It is a way to make connections between a literary work in Language Arts and an historical period in Social Studies, or a way to connect an era in history with current political trends. This interdisciplinary approach ensures students have a thorough understanding of the subject matter, as they are employing higher level thinking skills to make these connections. Yet, at Griffin Middle School, our teachers do not have the time built into the day to meet across content areas. Any planning that does occur involving other disciplines is currently more by happenstance than by design.

One more additional opportunity for growth in Griffin’s current PLC design is professional development. In the current fiscal environment where teaching allotments are decreased every year as class sizes increase, less time is available for teachers to increase their knowledge base through professional development. Despite the availability of these opportunities, higher expectations and a greater demand for performance excellence often depletes teachers’ time and make attending professional development sessions difficult if not impossible. The only time for professional development (critical this year because of Common Core implementation) currently is during the time we need to be planning collaboratively. Because of this, Griffin PLCs face a difficult challenge. It would be extremely beneficial if Griffin’s teachers were able to access professional development opportunities at any time during of the day or night. Equally beneficial would be the additional time to collaborate with team members at one’s own convenience.

Lack of time is the common nemesis that rips into the effectiveness of Griffin’s current PLCs. We need a way to effectively communicate with each other without creating additional demands on our time. We need an efficient way to collaborate with one another which can meet the needs of teachers whose time is spread so thin, while expectations of performance run so high. We need a way to ensure that our PLCs are working at their maximum capacity. It is only then that we know we are doing all that we can to meet the needs of our diverse student population. Creating a vehicle to allow for ongoing, interdisciplinary, horizontal, and vertical dialogue between teachers, administrators, and even parents will ensure that Griffin teachers are using PLCs as they were intended. After all, we know the advantages of PLCs: increased collective and individual efficacy, collective responsibility for student learning, reduction in teacher isolation, substantive learning and increased content knowledge, higher morale, greater job satisfaction, and greater teacher retention rates (AISR, 1998).

There is a solution. It is cutting edge and technological. It is a way to enhance teacher collaboration and increase teacher professional development opportunities. It is a tool to assist school leaders in monitoring how the school vision is being implemented. It is a way to increase and encourage parent involvement. It is a system for connecting all of the errant parts of an organization so that the real work of impacting student achievement can take place.

**Objectives and Deliverables**

In response to the aforementioned challenges, I propose developing and maintaining an online learning Blackboard account for our school’s professional learning committees. Implementing Blackboard will enable our school to accomplish the following:

**Objectives:**

* Implement Blackboard technology to improve
  + data team communication from teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-administrator as Common Core curriculum is discussed
  + ability for administration/leadership team to monitor data team activity “at a glance,” ensuring teams are focusing on important issues related to Common Core implementation
  + vertical communications in same subject area, but across grade levels
  + interdisciplinary communication (subject area-to-subject area)
  + availability and accessibility of professional development opportunities, to maximize planning time during school hours for teachers
  + time deficiency by adding technological dimension to meeting management and professional development
* Design ongoing teacher training for Blackboard use in data teams, interdisciplinary teams, vertical teams, and professional development opportunities
* Convey the importance of Common Core implementation and develop a culture around this process

**Deliverables:**

The evidence of the activities involved with this Capstone project are listed below. For a clearer idea of how these deliverables fit into the implementation plan, please see the Project Description later in this proposal.

* Signed Document indicating principal approval
* Time logs of training sessions
* PowerPoint and Video tape of initial training session (roll out) with staff
* Screencasts and PowerPoints of ongoing staff training
* Mid-year and End-of-year survey results
* Mid-year and End-of-year survey analysis and reflection

**PSC Standards**

The following Georgia PSC/ISTE Instructional Technology/Coaching Standards (ISTE, 2011) will be addressed in this Capstone Project:

**Visionary Leadership:** Technology Coaches inspire and participate in the development and implementation of a shared vision for the comprehensive integration of technology to promote excellence and support transformational change throughout the instructional environment. Technology Coaches:

1. Contribute to the development, communication, and implementation of a shared vision for the comprehensive use of technology to support a digital-age education for all students
2. Implement strategies for initiating and sustaining technology innovations and manage the change process in schools and classrooms

**Digital-Age Learning Environments.** Technology coaches create and support effective digital-age learning environments to maximize the learning of all students. Technology Coaches:

1. Model effective classroom management and collaborative learning strategies to maximize teacher and student use of digital tools and resources and access to technology-rich learning environments
2. Maintain and manage a variety of digital tools and resources for teacher and student use in technology-rich learning environments
3. Coach teachers in and model use of online and blended learning, digital content, and collaborative learning networks to support and extend student learning as well as expand opportunities and choices for online professional development for teachers and administrators
4. Collaborate with teachers and administrators to select and evaluate digital tools and resources that enhance teaching and learning and are compatible with the school technology infrastructure
5. Use digital communication and collaboration tools to communicate locally and globally with students, parents, peers, and the larger community

**Professional Development & Program Evaluation**: Technology coaches conduct needs assessments, develop technology-related professional learning programs, and evaluate the impact on instructional practice and student learning. Technology Coaches:

1. Conduct needs assessments to inform the content and delivery of technology-related professional learning programs that result in a positive impact on student learning
2. Design, develop, and implement technology-rich professional learning programs that model principles of adult learning and promote digital-age best practices in teaching, learning, and assessment
3. Evaluate results of professional learning programs to determine the effectiveness on deepening teacher content knowledge, improving teacher pedagogical skills and/or increasing student learning

Indirectly but most importantly, the following standards will be addressed:

**Teaching, Learning, & Assessments:** Technology Coaches assist teachers in using technology effectively for assessing student learning, differentiating instruction, and providing rigorous, relevant, and engaging learning experiences for all students. Technology Coaches:

1. Coach teachers in and model engagement of students in local and global interdisciplinary units in which technology helps students assume professional roles, research real-world problems, collaborate with others, and produce products that are meaningful and useful to a wide audience
2. Coach teachers in and model design and implementation of technology-enhanced learning experiences emphasizing creativity, higher-order thinking skills and processes, and mental habits of mind (e.g., critical thinking, meta-cognition, and self-regulation)
3. Coach teachers in and model design and implementation of technology-enhanced learning experiences using differentiation, including adjusting content, process, product, and learning environment based upon student readiness levels, learning styles, interests, and personal goals
4. Coach teachers in and model incorporation of research-based best practices in instructional design when planning technology-enhanced learning experiences
5. Coach teacher in and model effective use of technology tools and resources to continuously assess student learning and technology literacy by applying a rich variety of formative and summative assessments aligned with content and student technology standards
6. Coach teachers in and model effective use of technology tools and resources to systematically collect and analyze student achievement data, interpret results, and communicate findings to improve instructional practice and maximize student learning.

**Project Description**

The timeline below describes in a concise way the actions I will take during the course of my Capstone Project. Blackboard is a new technology tool for me, so this will be a “baptism by fire” as I train myself in its use prior to training the staff.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Action** | **Deliverable** | **Time**  **(in hrs)\*** |
| July 2012 | Discuss Capstone project with new principal to obtain approval to continue. Capstone proposal to be shared with principal in this meeting. | Signed Document indicating principal approval | 1 |
| July 2012 | Check in with District to ensure I still have access to Griffin’s Bb shell. |  | .5 |
| July – September 2012 | Work on self-training in Bb and setting up Bb account for Data Teams, Interdisciplinary Teams, Vertical Teams, and Professional Development | Time Logs of Training Sessions | 30 |
| September 2012 | Preparation for and roll out of initial training to Administration and staff about how our school will utilize Bb | PowerPoint and  Video tape of Training Session | 10 |
| October - December 2012 | Create training screencasts and narrated PowerPoints to illustrate various uses of Bb for teams | Screencasts  PowerPoints | 20 |
| October 2012 – May 2013 | Create short training sessions to give at monthly staff meetings to keep the idea of using Bb in front of staff members |  | 5 |
| October 2012 – May 2013 | Create and maintain a monthly checklist of usage by group | Checklist | 5 |
| December 2012 | Create and conduct a survey about usage and effectiveness of Bb on Survey Monkey. | Survey results | 5 |
| January 2013 | Collect and interpret results of survey and adjust accordingly | Survey Analysis and Reflection | 10 |
| May 2013 | Create and conduct a final survey of usage and effectiveness of Bb on Survey Monkey | Survey results | 5 |
| May 2013 | Collect and interpret results of survey and adjust for developing strategies for continued and improved use in 2013-2014 school year. | Written Survey Analysis and Reflectoin | 10 |
|  | **Total Time Investment\*** |  | **101.5 hours** |

\*The time allotments indicated above are anticipated time allotments. I will maintain a log of hours I spend in anything related to my Capstone project.

The resources which will be utilized will consist of the following:

* A Blackboard account with the Cobb County School District
* Teacher computers provided by the district
* Administrative support in the form of time allotments during meetings to conduct trainings for staff
* Software programs such as Microsoft’s PowerPoint and Web 2.0 tools which are freely accessible

**Evaluation Plan**

The success of the infusion of Blackboard technology into the daily routines of Griffin teachers hinges on several factors. First, the introduction of the technology must be thorough and professional. Teachers must also be convinced that the technology is worthwhile and time-efficient. Second, the administrative staff must be fully on-board, and must support the culture of using Blackboard to encourage various forms of collaboration and professional development through data teams (PLCs). The leadership must also hold teachers accountable for the use of Blackboard in the daily activities of school business. Teachers generally will not use that for which they are not held accountable. Third, for Blackboard to be successful, the exposure to the technology must be continual, through trainings, emails messages, and staff meeting reminders. That being said, evaluating the effectiveness of the implementation of Blackboard would involve a mid-year and end-of-year survey, as well as monthly check-ups into whether or not and how various groups (data teams, interdisciplinary teams, vertical teams, and professional development teams) are utilizing the technology. Samplings of monthly checklists and surveys are located in Appendix A and B of this proposal respectively. The surveys will determine whether or not teachers consider using Blackboard the time saving convenience it was intended to be. They will also determine how this technology enhances the functionality and overall communication/collaboration of PLCs.

The evaluative timeline has already been embedded and communicated in the Product Description category above.

References

Annenberg Institute. Professional learning communities. Retrieved from: <http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/proflearning.pdf>

International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). (2011). *National educational technology standards for coaching*. Retrieved from http://www.iste.org/standards/nets-for-coaches.aspx

Kaplan, S. (2002a, Fall). Interdisciplinarity: support and concerns. Gifted education communicator, 6-8.

**Appendix A**

**Month**

**Checklist for Monthly Blackboard Usage**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **Usage** | | | **Comments** |
|  | Low | Medium | High |  |
| **Data Teams** |  |  |  |  |
| ***Grade 6*** |  |  |  |  |
| ELA |  |  |  |  |
| Math |  |  |  |  |
| Science |  |  |  |  |
| Social Studies |  |  |  |  |
| ***Grade 7*** |  |  |  |  |
| ELA |  |  |  |  |
| Math |  |  |  |  |
| Science |  |  |  |  |
| Social Studies |  |  |  |  |
| ***Grade 8*** |  |  |  |  |
| ELA |  |  |  |  |
| Math |  |  |  |  |
| Science |  |  |  |  |
| Social Studies |  |  |  |  |
| **Interdisciplinary**  **Teams** |  |  |  |  |
| ***Grade 6*** |  |  |  |  |
| Pod A |  |  |  |  |
| Pod B |  |  |  |  |
| Pod C |  |  |  |  |
| ***Grade 7*** |  |  |  |  |
| Pod A |  |  |  |  |
| Pod B |  |  |  |  |
| Pod C |  |  |  |  |
| ***Grade 8*** |  |  |  |  |
| Pod A |  |  |  |  |
| Pod B |  |  |  |  |
| Pod C |  |  |  |  |
| **Vertical Teams** |  |  |  |  |
| ELA |  |  |  |  |
| Math |  |  |  |  |
| Science |  |  |  |  |
| Social Studies |  |  |  |  |

**Appendix B**

**Mid-Year Survey**

The mid-year and end-of-year surveys will be completed on Survey Monkey electronically. However, the following questions will be utilized.

1. How does Blackboard use facilitate collaborative efforts in your Data Team groups?
2. How does Blackboard use facilitate collaborative efforts in vertical teams?
3. How does Blackboard use facilitate collaborative efforts in interdisciplinary teams?
4. How has using Blackboard allowed for more planning time for you?
5. How does Blackboard help you in your job responsibilities?
6. How have you used Blackboard from home for the purposes of Professional Development?
7. How do you see Blackboard as a solution to your challenges with time management?
8. Please explain how has Blackboard helped your teams (please specify which team) with the collaborative process?
9. How does Blackboard help you to feel more connected?
10. In what other ways do you see Griffin using Blackboard technology?