Griffin Middle School’s Current Reality on Professional Learning

and a Mini-GAPSS Analysis

Tracy Efaw

Kennesaw State University

Ever since the economic downturn spun out of control in late 2008, Cobb County Schools has suffered a great deal of financial loss which has, in turn, caused upheaval across the board in every sense of the word. This upheaval and chaos at the district level has affected Griffin Middle School in a number of ways, but particularly in developing a vision for technology in our schools. We do not currently have an official vision. Because of this lack of direction, technology integration and technology decisions at our school are driven from a reactive, rather than proactive standpoint. Without foresight and focus, our technology vision is blurred at best, and blinded at worst. We want to believe that our school encourages teacher and student use of technology, but the truth is that there are some technology-savvy teachers and students and some teachers and students who don’t even know how to check email regularly…or won’t. It is evident that a plan must be developed which will ensure that teachers and students are using technology not just for the sake of saying they can, but for the advancement of their students’ academic achievement and attainment of higher expectations in the classroom environment with respect to critical thinking and relevant, authentic learning. Professional learning is key in accomplishing this end.

Griffin’s need for professional learning, especially this year, is desperate. After four years of accomplishing Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in compliance with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, our 2012 Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) scores declined radically in various subgroups for both Reading and Math. Although we had a 2012 exemption as did most public schools, these numbers were a wake-up call for our faculty. With the introduction of the Common Core curriculum, the latest push for a nationalized curriculum, coupled with our devastating numbers from last year, it was not a difficult task to determine what our professional learning needs would be for this coming academic school year. To illustrate, marked increases in CRCT test scores for all subgroups were evident from 2005 – 2011. Last year, scores dropped slightly for ALL students and drastically dropped for SWD and EL students. That drop significantly widened the achievement gap that exists between ALL students and those who are either SWD or EL. In 2011, the gap between scores of ALL students and SWD in ELA was 15.6. This gap rose to 39.5 in 2012. In 2011, the gap between scores of ALL students in ELL in ELA was 9.4. This gap rose to 34.8 in 2012. This same trend can be seen in math scores. In 2011 the gap between scores of ALL students and SWD in Math was 16.9. This gap rose to 43.2 in 2012. In 2011, the gap between scores of ALL students and ELL in Math was 8. This gap rose to 13.4 in 2012. Based on this data, we know where our focus needs to be.

In the past several years, our professional learning consisted of learning teams that we call Data Teams and workshops. This year, we will be adding a more stringent monitoring of existing practices, like our Data Teams. We now have two academic coaches who will be working with teachers, and we will be bringing in Reading and Math district specialists to conduct workshops and coaching throughout the year as well. Our professional learning opportunities for this year will be a healthy mix of individual as well as collaborative learning. We will use the Data Team construct to support the training we do with meaningful dialogue and data application. In addition to this in-depth “hands-on” training, our professional learning for the coming year will also consist of a differentiated Thinking Maps Training (a refresh for those who have had the training in the past, and a new in-depth presentation of Thinking Maps for new teachers to the building). We are hopeful that between the two avenues of training, our students’ academic achievement will increase and we can make up some of what we lost this past year.

Technology-related professional learning is an ongoing opportunity at our school. Last year, our technology focus was on maintaining blogs as a form of parent-student-teacher communication. We were also in the process of working out an online lesson plan component to the blogging platform we purchased, called On-Course. Unfortunately, this blogging platform was expensive and we could no longer afford it, so this year, our school has painfully transitioned to Edublogs. This next year, our plan for technology includes adding Blackboard as a tool for Data Team Communication as well as overall communication and data storage for the building. We realize the potential contained in this amazing learning management system, and are exploring the tip of the iceberg this year. Because the Common Core curriculum lends itself to interdisciplinary conversations, both vertically and horizontally aligned, Blackboard will also be a great place to begin a dialogue with fellow teachers of other content areas.

In the past, our school has been fairly weak in providing the follow-up support which is paramount in ensuring the success of a professional learning endeavor. Implementation of new training has frequently been frustrated by of the lack of administrative follow-through and monitoring. So this year, as we implement our content literacy training from our district specialists, the administrative team, along with the coaches, will go through the building supporting teachers in practicing what we are learning in our professional learning sessions. As well, the Thinking Maps training from two years ago failed, because the school leaders did not have a sufficient plan for implementation. So this year, in the spirit of backwards design, we will “begin with the end in mind” by having an implementation plan in place prior to the training beginning. This implementation will involve every teacher in every content area in helping students to fully embrace the utilization of Thinking Maps and to create a culture around the idea. Our Blackboard training this year will be similarly implemented wherein we do trainings every couple of months and ask teachers to practice the training by implementing specific tasks on Blackboard. The academic coaches are available to assist teachers who struggle, so that the whole faculty will be on the same page with proficiency.

Our professional learning opportunities are always developed with the advancement of student achievement as the primary goal. The strategies being used by Griffin staff to help increase student achievement (as outlined in our School Strategic Plan) include:

• Refine and improve the implementation of the collaborative planning process

• Refine and improve the implementation of the use of researched-based strategies (Differentiated Instruction, Specialized Instruction, Co-Teaching, Thinking Maps, and Instructional Technology) to meet the needs of each student; giving special attention to SWD, ELL, and bubble students.

• Refine and improve the implementation of an effective instructional framework (opening, work session and closing)

• Build capacity to facilitate a sustainable, continuous school improvement process

Our professional development plan for this coming year addresses these goals by keeping coaching, modeling, accountability, collaboration, technology innovation, and teacher performance as fundamental necessities for increased student achievement.

Because we are a Title I school, funding for professional learning is usually not at all an issue. In past years we have used Title I money to fund some of the professional learning, but this year we spent a great deal of Title I money for additional teachers so to reduce class sizes. Therefore, this year, our Title II grant money, solely dedicated for professional development, will be highly important to our success in the 2012-13 school year.

Teacher incentives for participating in professional learning and improving their teaching practice are both extrinsic and intrinsic. Every year, because our professional learning is so extensive, the administration always arranges for our staff to get Professional Learning Units (PLUs). In the past, we have always received 5 PLUs for attending all the professional learning for the year. The intrinsic incentive is that teachers have opportunity to better their practices and to enliven their classrooms with research-based best practices in teaching. Teachers can become more effective at what they do, and they can increase their own students’ achievement by being the best that they can be.

As for professional learning made available to assist teachers in working with special needs students, we do offer, and will continue to offer, specialized trainings for co-teachers (who are special education teachers) to assist them with developing specialized instruction for their students. These trainings are conducted by district personnel and substitute teachers are paid from Title funds to allow teachers to attend these trainings.

This year we have also written a $35,000 grant to get 60 iPads in English Language Learner classrooms. If the grant is awarded, our ELL students will begin a special program using iPads to assist in their language acquisition and learning. CRCT scores for students in this subgroup continue to lag behind those of all students. Based on the 2011-12 CRCT results for English/Language Arts, an achievement gap of 35% exists between ELL students and All students (All: 89% met or exceeded minimal expectations, ELL: 54% met or exceeded minimal expectations). In Math, an achievement gap of 14% exists between ELL students and All students (All: 78% met or exceeded minimal expectations, ELL 64% students met or exceeded minimal expectations). The adoption of the America’s Choice Workshop Model and a clear focus on the structures of the Georgia Department of Education’s (GaDOE) Framework for Instruction have helped, but the achievement gap continues to exist. Griffin ELL teachers believe that adopting an iPad classroom for students in the ELL subgroup will help increase student learning and thereby further reduce the achievement gap.

As mentioned earlier, Griffin teachers participate in collaborative school-wide professional learning teams called Data Teams. The idea behind data teams is to provide teachers a protected time that they can plan lessons, analyze student data as a way of guiding instruction, discuss and unpack learning standards, review student work for standards mastery, and develop differentiated instruction based on the needs of individual learners. These data teams are generally aligned by content area and grade level. Our school has 12 data teams. This year, due to the interdisciplinary nature of the Common Core, it is becoming evident that teachers will need a forum to dialogue with each other from an interdisciplinary perspective as well. In order to protect teacher planning as much as possible (rather than having yet another meeting), we have developed a place on Blackboard for teachers to collaborate and share ideas with each other about their content. We are hopeful that once teachers fully embrace Blackboard and realize its potential to save time, it will become an invaluable piece of technology that will assist teachers in many collaborative ways. These collaborative data teams connect with the school improvement plan to increase student achievement by facilitating collaboration and the sharing of best practices throughout the building. No longer are teachers islands, locked away in their own rooms. Instead, teachers are coming together to share insights and ideas in ways that engage students and inform the teaching and learning processes for maximum effectiveness.

Professional learning continues to be one of the most important strategies for achieving the results that Griffin Middle school desires in our 21st century classrooms. Without it, we cease to be innovative and visionary in our responses to what students need. Student achievement is always the vision, and professional learning is one giant stepping stones essential to getting us there. Ensuring that what we teach our teachers is working, we must measure the impact of professional learning on teacher practice and student learning. We do that by consistent administrative monitoring and coaching of teachers, and by making sure that professional learning has follow-through and application. Student learning is also evaluated throughout the year by using common assessments, pre-tests and post-tests, district benchmarks and checkpoints, and of course, our state-mandated test in April, the CRCT. Results from these tests help to guide instruction throughout the year by pointing out weaknesses in standard mastery which must be addressed and readdressed. By exercising vigilance in refined student assessment, teachers learn how to shift instruction to accommodate what students need in order to improve their learning. In other words, results of professional learning must be proven through the science of data collection and analysis. By do this, teachers can then refine the art of teaching by using best practices learned in professional learning environs.