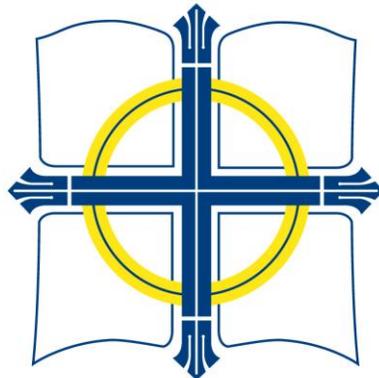


Developing a Professional Learning Community: Creating an Environment of Best Practice for Student Achievement



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The focus of this year-long project was developing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) at St. Thomas More Catholic School. A Professional Learning Community can be best described as collaborative and collegial group that is engaged in ongoing conversation and professional development that helps improve teaching and learning and ultimately student achievement. The primary goals of the first year of a Professional Learning Community included: engaging faculty in meaningful conversations about curriculum and instruction, having the faculty participate in professional development, and connecting this professional development to larger school-wide initiatives.

Some of the positive outcomes of the first year of developing a Professional Learning Community included: reduced isolation of teachers, better informed and committed faculty, as well as ongoing conversation about teaching and learning among all faculty. In addition, a year-long series on professional development was developed for faculty and they engaged in ongoing conversations about learner outcomes and the alignment of these outcomes with state and national standards in order to develop curriculum handbooks for each grade level.

St. Thomas More Catholic School is a K-8 school with an enrollment of 350 students and is located on historic Summit Avenue in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The school first opened in 1904 and was staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph. The school is now staffed by a 26 member faculty comprised of one nun and 25 members of the laity. As one of the oldest Catholic schools in the Twin Cities area, St. Thomas More has a long history of shared faith, service, and academic excellence.

Prior to 2006 the school had experienced numerous issues including decreasing enrollment, high faculty attrition, and lack of a clearly articulated mission/vision. In October of 2006, a new principal was appointed, and during the 2007-2008 school year a self study was conducted and a strategic plan was collaboratively developed by the school's principal, faculty, and the parent community. One of the key initiatives of the school's strategic plan was creating a professional development plan for faculty that was tied to the school's strategic initiatives. Initially in the spring of 2009, a faculty committee was charged with writing a professional development plan that is required in order for the school to gain access to Title II Professional Development money that is distributed to nonpublic school through the St. Paul School District (See Appendix A for the 2010-2011 St. Thomas More Professional Development Plan), as well as for the school's accreditation through the Minnesota Nonpublic School Accrediting Association. However, this simple document blossomed into the notion of developing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) during the 2009-2010 school year.

A professional learning community can be best described as a collegial group of administrators and school faculty who are united in their commitment to student learning. They share a vision, work and learn collaboratively, visit and review one another's classrooms, and participate in decision making (Hord, 1997). Hord goes on to say that a professional learning

community is seen as a powerful staff-development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement. In carrying out this applied project over the past year, the book, *Professional Learning Communities at Work* by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker was an invaluable resource. In this book, DuFour and Eaker outline the main characteristics of a professional learning community which include:

- Shared mission, vision, and values
- Collective inquiry
- Collaborative teams
- Action orientation and experimentation
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- Results orientation

During the 2009-2010 school year, the principal and faculty of St. Thomas More strived to recognize and implement these important characteristics while also acknowledging that realistic and achievable goals were essential for the first year success of a Professional Learning Community at St. Thomas More. As such, the primary goals of the first year of a Professional Learning Community included:

- Engaging faculty in meaningful conversations about curriculum and instruction
- Having the faculty as a whole participate in professional development that fostered best practices around teaching and learning.
- Connecting ongoing professional development to larger school-wide initiatives.

An effective Professional Learning Community starts with actively engaging teachers and giving them leadership in planning and carrying out ongoing professional development that positively impacts student achievement. A faculty committee was organized that was responsible for surveying teachers and identifying topics that were most relevant and important

to school-wide goals. In addition, faculty was engaged in conversations throughout the year that were focused on subject philosophies, as well as talking about learner outcomes and their alignment with state and national standards. Time was dedicated each month for professional development topics, as well as conversations among teaching partners and grade level teams (K-2, 3-5, & 6-8) about learner outcomes and the alignment of these outcomes with state and national standards for each subject and grade level. Some of the immediate positive outcomes of developing a PLC and having these ongoing conversations included:

- Reduced isolation of teachers;
- Better informed and committed faculty;
- Ongoing conversation about teaching and learning.

During the first year of developing a Professional Learning Community among the faculty of St. Thomas More the following accomplishments were achieved:

- A faculty committee was formed that met to discuss the professional development needs of teachers at our school.
- Teachers were surveyed to determine topics that would be most relevant, as well as to identify presenters for ongoing professional development. (See Appendix B for an example of the Professional Development Survey that was given to teachers in the spring of 2010).
- A year-long schedule of professional development was created, as well as ongoing opportunities for teachers to talk about curriculum and instruction.
- Faculty was engaged in year-long conversations about the school's curriculum. Subject philosophies were revised, learner outcomes were clearly identified for each subject and grade, and curriculum was aligned with state and national standards.
- Curriculum handbooks were created that outlined subject philosophies, learner outcomes, and curriculum alignment with state and national standards.
- Some of the professional development sessions focused on:
 - Integration of technology into core curriculum
 - Strengths Quest
 - Assessment for Learning

- Listening Skills
- Catholic Identity
- Civility

- Faculty received year-long, ongoing training related to SmartBoard technology in their classroom
- Teachers earned approximately 15 clock hours of continuing education.

In many respects, the first year of developing a Professional Learning Community at St. Thomas More yielded many positive outcomes, but both the faculty and principal recognize that a successful PLC builds on its successes and works to create a culture among all faculty that is focused on academic excellence and student achievement. During the upcoming school year, St. Thomas More Catholic School will continue to develop a Professional Learning Community, and will implement the following changes/improvements:

- Faculty members will be leading more of the professional development sessions.
- Professional articles will be shared, read and discussed by the entire faculty.
- A case study approach will be implemented so faculty can gather more input about student and learning situations from one another.
- Multiple professional development opportunities will be offered on a few specific subjects (technology, school culture, assessment, etc.) rather than covering too many subjects over the course of the year.
- Faculty will take an inventory of their knowledge of the Catholic faith and their attitudes/practices about their faith/spiritual life so that specific professional development can be offered to faculty to enhance their ability to be teachers of faith.
- More feedback will be gathered from faculty following professional development opportunities. (See Appendix C for a Professional Development Feedback form that was developed and will be put into place during the 2010-2011 school year.)
- More collaboration will take place with our local Catholic universities to bring in experts who can share their knowledge.

In reflecting on the first year success of developing a Professional Learning Community at St. Thomas More, the following quote is quite applicable: “Today, it is important to recognize that learning is a lifelong experience. Rapid, radical changes in contemporary society demand well-planned, continuing efforts to assimilate new data, new insights, and new modes of thinking and acting,” (To Teach as Jesus Did, 1972, 43). Over the course of the past year, the development of a Professional Learning Community at St. Thomas More empowered faculty to be actively engaged in professional development that positively impacted teaching and learning. As a school that is committed to preparing young people to be prepared, productive, and prayerful in the 21st century, it is imperative that the faculty of St. Thomas More Catholic School be continually engaged in ongoing professional development through a Professional Learning Community so that students grow intellectually, interpersonally, and spiritually.

APPENDIX A
St. Thomas More Catholic School
Saint Paul, Minnesota
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

- 1. Briefly describe the academic needs of your students based upon the most recent data available to you. Please consider results from standardized assessments and school-level data and identify these sources in your narrative.**

In keeping with our School Improvement Plan, our faculty continually re-evaluates the needs of our students, using standards-based measures of all areas of our curriculum. After trying the criterion-referenced test, Learnia, to assess students' academic performance for the past two years, St. Thomas More Catholic School switched back to using a norm-reference test; the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT10) during the 2009-2010 school year. This achievement test was administered to students in grades 6 & 8.

After students in grades 6 & 8 completed the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT10) in October, data about each student and grade was gathered online and printed off for teachers to review and discuss at their grade level, as well as within the 6-8 team. In addition, results from this test were also shared with the entire faculty at a meeting held on December 1, 2009. In addition to looking at students' overall performance on the test, teachers examined the specific standards that students did not perform as well on.

In addition, to this more formal assessment, teachers used a variety of classroom-based assessments including monitoring student participation, daily assignments, quizzes, tests, projects, and presentations, as well as teacher observation. The faculty of St. Thomas More strongly believes this type of assessment data, gives us, as well as parents and students, a much more complete picture of student learning and achievement.

The faculty of St. Thomas More believes that assessment data is essential to guiding instructional decisions. The use of formative and summative assessments provides insights related to the strengths and challenges of our curriculum, as well as the needs of our students.

During the 2010-2011 school year our school will continue to use the SAT10 for all students in grades 6 & 8 so that we can gather data that enables us to improve teaching and learning while meeting each student on their learning continuum. In addition, we plan to begin testing students in grades 4 with the SAT10 during the 2010-2011 school year.

Our faculty continues to work on curriculum mapping of our core subjects using online software created by Rubicon. Curriculum mapping is important to our school's re-accreditation that took place in the spring of 2008. It is an important objective from our school's strategic plan and will provide stakeholders within our school community with a clearer picture of what we do and where we are headed in terms of our curriculum. During the past year, teachers completed curriculum mapping of all subject areas and spent the last several months clearly identifying the learner outcomes in every grade and subject, as well as aligning these outcomes with state or

national standards. During the 2010-2011 our school's Social Studies curriculum will be reviewed; insuring that it aligns with Minnesota state standards.

In order to prepare ourselves and our students for the future in terms of how best to integrate technology across the curriculum, we completed installation of 23 SmartBoards throughout classrooms in our school. SmartBoards are one way to gain best practice knowledge and experiences. Continuing to provide faculty with ongoing professional development regarding the integration of technology across the curriculum is a high priority.

In order to meet the varying needs within the confines of each classroom, from the more advanced students to those in need of remediation, our school has focused more of our attention on improving curriculum over recent years as we have incorporated aspects of Differentiated Instruction as well as other examples of best practice. Our teachers want to continue to grow in their knowledge and understanding of how learning takes place.

2. Describe the professional development needs of your staff. Consider the academic needs of your students as well as any gaps in training, knowledge, or experience your staff possess for their current assignments.

- Training in using the Professional Learning Community model to enhance teacher collaboration;
- Continued training in curriculum development and curriculum mapping;
- Continued evaluation of a greater variety of assessment tools, training in best practices for a broad variety of assessment tools. What works best for all grade levels?
- Further work on differentiating instruction in the classroom, and the role assessment plays in this on-going effort;
- Math best practices to enhance both concept-development and calculation-accuracy;
- Literacy skills improvement; specifically the teaching of reading, writing, spelling, phonics, listening, and speaking;
- Further curriculum development in the content areas of Science, Social Studies, Spanish, Music, Physical Education, Media, and the Arts;
- Technology skills improvement and integration of technology throughout our curriculum;
- Continued updating of library/media literacy skills in order to navigate web-based and print resources;
- Advanced degree pursuit for individual licensure (Social Studies, Music, students with special needs, etc.);

- Additional professional development provided in the areas of Behavior and Classroom Management.

3. Detail your professional development plan for SY 2010-2011 under Title IIA that reflects both the academic needs of your students and the professional development needs of your staff. *Be as specific as possible when describing areas of focus and types of professional development involved.*

Types of professional development include: 1) In-state workshops; 2) Out-of-State workshops; 3) Use of consultants to provide training; 4) Tuition reimbursement for courses related to assignment; and 5) On-site training during non-duty time.

Follow-up activities must always be included.

From USED guidance: Activities to be carried out for private school personnel must be based on a review of scientifically-based research and must be expected to improve student academic achievement. Professional development activities may include:

- *Improving the knowledge of teachers, principal, and other educational personnel in one or more of the core academic subjects and in effective instructional teaching strategies, methods, and skills;*
- *Training in effectively integrating technology into curricula and instruction;*
- *Training in how to teach students with different needs, including students with disabilities or limited English proficiency, and gifted and talented students;*
- *Training in methods of improving student behavior, identifying early and appropriate interventions, and involving parents more effectively in their children's education;*
- *Leadership development and management training to improve the quality of principals and superintendents; and*
- *Training in the use of data and assessments to improve instruction and student outcomes.*

1. Continued curriculum mapping, curriculum development in all content areas including Spanish, Music, Media, Arts, P.E.;
2. Assessment development, evaluation, planning, and training;
3. Using data and assessments to improve instruction and student outcomes;
4. Differentiated Instruction instruction/exploration/advancement;
5. Improve instructional strategies when working with advanced students;
6. Improve instructional strategies when working with students in need of remediation;
7. Language arts framework for writing skills improvement, teaching of reading, spelling, etc., through local Hamline University workshops, IRA conferences, etc.;
8. Improve instructional strategies in math (for example, "Everyday Learning" teacher workshops for teachers).
9. Technology skills improvement (i.e., SmartBoard implementation) –transfer skills to students;
10. Classroom management & student behavioral issues, including social skills, bullying, and ADHD;
11. Student mental health – teacher training, as well as specific instructional materials to use (in order to fulfill new MN licensure requirements);
12. Continued implementation of a Professional Learning Community model;

13. Attaining advanced degrees by all faculty; improve expertise in specific teaching assignments.

Most of this plan can be carried out through professional development with in-state travel. Out-of-state travel will only be approved for those that may need extensive training, or the conference quality is not offered locally. Upon availability, consultants will be brought in to do ongoing work with our teachers. Some on-site training will occur during non-duty time (for example, after school or on non-instructional days).

- 4. Please describe any criteria you use to focus your professional development requests, especially for out-of-state travel and tuition reimbursement. *If you plan to use Title IIA funds to support academic courses for credit, you must establish criteria for selecting teachers and prioritizing their impact that is tied to meeting needs you have identified in questions 1 and 2.***

I regularly share conference and workshop opportunities with teachers and encourage teachers to attend who are interested in further professional development or are in need of additional training to improve the quality of their teaching. Conferences and workshops that our teachers are encouraged to attend align with the needs of our students and curriculum. Teachers are also encouraged to attend conferences and workshops they discover. They simply have to submit an overview of the conference and how it aligns with our professional development plan in order to be approved to attend.

Tuition reimbursement is granted only to those who are advancing their degrees or licensure in the areas in which they are assigned to teach or that align with the needs of our school.

- 5. How will you evaluate the impact of the Title II, Part A professional development activities upon student achievement?**

- Standardized test results will be reviewed and used for general measure against local and national percentiles.
- Other forms of assessment, including, but not limited to: classroom work, classroom tests, teachers' observational assessments, and students' self-assessments, will also be reviewed and used for measure.
- Faculty will continue to actively participate in a Professional Learning Communities model by sharing with the larger staff what they learned from attending a workshop, conference, or class and providing ideas on how colleagues can apply one example of best practice within their classrooms.

APPENDIX B



SAINT THOMAS MORE
CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Professional Development Survey- May 2010

Your name _____ Grade level(s) taught: _____

This survey will help guide the planning of professional development opportunities offered over the next year at STM. Please take a few minutes and provide some input about what you would like to see offered next year. Please return this survey to Dyann by Monday, May 17th. Thank you!

1. Please indicate the year your teaching license expires: _____
2. Please check if you need to complete the following requirements for teacher licensure in the state of Minnesota: _____ Mental Health _____ Reading
3. Would you like to have Linda Pruden present again next year for additional professional development related to: _____ Listening Skills _____ ADHD
4. Would you be interested in a "Case Study" time where teachers bring student concerns to the faculty and we then discuss ideas/solutions for the situation? _____ Yes _____ No
5. Please rank order these professional development topics in order of importance/need.
(1=most important & 8 = least important)
_____ Differentiated Instruction _____ Needs of 21st Century Learners
_____ Technology Integration _____ Classroom/Behavioral Management
_____ Assessment _____ Bullying
_____ Listening Skills _____ ADHD
6. Besides continuing discussion about curriculum gaps and redundancies in social studies, as well as revision of our code of student conduct, are there other topics you would like learn about through professional development during the 2010-2011 school year?
7. Please indicate any topics you are willing to present to the faculty next year.

APPENDIX C



SAINT THOMAS MORE
CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Professional Development Feedback on *(Insert PLC Topic)*

	Ineffective	Somewhat Ineffective	Effective	Very Effective	Highly Effective
How would you rate the overall effectiveness of the session?	1	2	3	4	5
How would you rate the quality of the presenter?	1	2	3	4	5
Did you find the content of this session interesting?	1	2	3	4	5
How would you rate the effectiveness of the visual aids that were used?	1	2	3	4	5
How would you rate the relevance of the content of this presentation to your job?	1	2	3	4	5

What knowledge, skills, and/or abilities did you take away with you from this presentation?

What would you like to learn more about this particular topic?

If this presentation were to be given to another group, what would you suggest be done differently?

Additional comments...