Professional Learning Current Reality and GAPPS Review

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**Vision**

Lakeside Middle School’s vision is engaging educational experiences in an ever changing world. The school mission is to prepare all students to excel in a rapidly changing global community. The beliefs underlying this mission are a “faculty [that} cares about their students, communicates, collaborates, and establishes high expectations to ensure academic achievement while teaching responsibility and accountability. Also, an “effective classroom is one that provides an engaging and challenging environment.”

**School Improvement**

All schools in Forsyth County operate under the 2013-2016 Strategic Plan. Under this centralized, district wide umbrella, individual School Improvement Plans are created to align with the three year Strategic Plan. Individual School Improvement Plans are directly linked to AdvancED Standards and the district's Strategic Plan. AdvanceED is an accrediting agency that evaluates schools in the following categories: 1) Purpose and Direction 2) Governance and Leadership 3) Teaching and Assessing for Learning 4) Resources and Support Systems and 5) Using Results for Continuous Improvement.

Lakeside’s specific school improvement goals fall under category 3 and 5. Improvement goals in category 3 are:

* Monitor curriculum, instruction and assessment and adjust systematically in response to data from multiple assessments of student learning and an examination of professional practice.
* Participate in collaborative learning communities to improve instruction and student learning.
* Engage students in their learning through instructional strategies that ensure achievement of learning expectations.

Improvement goals that fall under category 5 are:

* Establish and maintain a clearly defined and comprehensive student assessment system.
* Train professional and support staff in the evaluation, interpretation, and use of data

Technology plays a central role in ensuring the goals set forth in the School Improvement Plan are met. As Debbie Sarver (Principal of Lakeside Middle School) stated, “Our district seeks to maximize technology to positively impact student achievement and system level initiatives. Our [district’s] intent is to leverage technology toward a blended learning environment that utilizes 21st century technologies to support student learning.” (D. Sarver, personal communication, August 29, 2014)

Lakeside is a technologically advanced school in a wealthy district. In 2010, the school system won a $4.7 million Investing in Innovation (I3) grant. Underpinnings of this initiative were to create technology based infrastructure that would allow each student to receive individualized instruction based on his or her current need. The technology staff in the district office has been working diligently for the last four years. The promise of their work is now being seen in the classroom. As Ms. Sarver indicated, “The system is on line now. The next step is to provide training to teachers to ensure that the system becomes fully operational.”

Much of Lakeside’s professional learning has been geared toward just that. The school’s Learning Management System, Its Learning, is the platform on which this promise of individualized learning will be delivered. When asked about the professional learning involved, Ms. Sarver indicated that a fair amount of time for teacher collaboration and planning has been usurped with teacher training for the new LMS. “Depending on how you look at it, we’re either guinea pigs or the trail blazers. Between our BYOT tours and our goals for individualized learning, teachers have had a lot of technology training. Maybe it’s not the technology training they felt they needed. We are in the midst of a district wide initiative that will pay huge dividends in the long run. The focus at this stage is training teachers to deliver lessons based on a student’s preferred learning style.” (D. Sarver, personal communication, September 9, 2014)

Teachers are now learning how to use this particular feature of our LMS. When the system is fully integrated students will receive individualized, standards based assignments and assessments matched to their learning preference. The general assumption is that any challenges or struggles teachers may be feeling will be assuaged when this system is embedded in daily practice. As school administrator and Technology Specialist Tom Burks points out, “The power this system affords teachers to differentiate will make the growing pains of learning the new system worthwhile.” (T .Burks, personal communication, August 29, 2014)

In addition to the federal funding received through the I3 Grant, the stakeholders in the community also approved local sales tax increase to fund and equip schools with advanced equipment. Each school is equipped with smart boards/projectors, mobile laptop computer labs, and desktop computers in every classroom. Additionally, the school created a wireless network with enough bandwidth to support a BYOT initiative. Students at Lakeside are encouraged to bring their own electronic devices to school to use in the classroom at their teacher’s discretion. The district provides access to a variety of web based tools such as Safari Montage, Discovery Education, Wikispaces, Voice Thread, Netrekker, and Google Apps. New teachers receive introductory training for each of these resources.

**Professional Development**

Lakeside’s faculty also has access to non-technology related professional learning directed toward the achievement of school improvement goals. School administrators keep teachers informed of upcoming district staff development opportunities. In selecting the types of professional learning, teachers’ individual professional learning needs are identified. This occurs through administrator evaluations, teacher self-assessments, and prior year(s) data. Teachers voluntarily attend workshops and district sponsored professional learning in their content area. Lakeside’s district offers an array of professional learning classes including classes on teaching special populations. Among these is The Exceptional Child and Youth class. This is a four session course available at no cost to each teacher in my district. This course addresses student needs of a broad range of learners including ESOL, Gifted, At-Risk, Exceptionalities, major trends and issues in special education with an emphasis on collaboration and inclusion, service delivery models, roles of general and special education class teachers, individual education programs, and family and community involvement. Some of these courses offer a stipend for attendance, which is further incentive for teachers to attend.

Funding for professional development is provided at the district level. Each school is allotted a certain amount of money based on need and faculty size. The fees are covered through a line item in the budget called Improvement of Instruction and accounts for 1.44% of the total expenditures in our district. For the fiscal year 2015, the budget for improvement of instruction is $3,732,995.

**School Improvement**

A target area of improvement in Lakeside’s School Improvement Plan is to ensure that the curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices guide and improve teacher effectiveness and student learning. Teachers have attended professional development workshops aligned directly to these goals. During pre-planning this year, teachers attended workshops on how to incorporate performance based tasks and use research-based instructional strategies. Data teams are also a core component in improving instruction. Teachers have received training and support about the Data Team process and about how to use student data wisely so that it may be used to inform instruction. Pre and post tests are now common practice among Lakeside teachers. And grade level content area teams are given adequate collaboration time to create their content area AIM goals.

**GAPPS Analysis**

Two areas within instructional design where Lakeside has much room for improvement are an emphasis on higher order thinking skills and differentiation. In the 2013 GAPPS analysis it was revealed that some teachers emphasize and encourage higher order thinking skills and processes, but taken as a whole, Lakeside students would benefit from the use of authentic projects and student investigations. Regarding differentiation, the GAPPS analysis suggested that Lakeside’s efforts were sporadic, and that the majority of instruction “tends to be teacher-centered and a whole-group approach.” (GAPPS analysis, Lakeside Middle School, 2013)

Professional learning is another area where Lakeside shows inconsistent results. According to the most recent GAPPS analysis “[school leaders] align a variety of professional development designs with expected adult learning outcomes (e.g., collaborative lesson design, professional networks, analyzing student work, problem solving sessions, curriculum development, coursework, action research, and coaching with feedback). The professional learning is long-term and in-depth with extensive school-based support for the implementation of new practices.” However, the same evaluation reports that “More work is needed to clearly communicate the expectations for implementation by providing rubrics that describe the desired classroom practices and communicate how those practices connect to the school improvement goals.” (Lakeside Middle School, 2013 GAPPS Analysis) Lakeside’s professional development is aligned with its’ school improvement objectives. What are lacking are specific, individual teacher expectations for implementation. The GAPPS analysis also revealed that “there is limited professional development devoted to helping teachers use technology to enhance student learning.” Lamenting this finding, Ms. Sarver reiterated that the district wide initiative to create a blended environment where all students can receive individualized instruction geared toward their specific learning preferences will eventually trump any professional learning on how to train teachers to use the newest educational app on their iPad.

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