FROM SOLO TO ENSEMBLE

Fine arts teachers find a harmonious solution to their isolation

Frequency of electronic learning community interactions

Theme	Announcements	Calendar events	Discussion posts	Folders	Files	Links
New teacher program	2	2	420	15	196	0
Fine arts — music	19	353	391	98	494	29
Integrating technology into instruction	7	12	298	3	1	7
Fine arts — art	10	292	266	9	6	6
Fine arts — theater	6	301	145	6	6	0
English PLC	2	28	62	55	296	2
Social studies	1	118	8	110	267	0

By Jeff Maher, Christina Burroughs, Laurel Dietz, and AnneMarie Karnbach

A teacher sits alone at her desk, yet she is working collaboratively with a team of two dozen educators in a professional learning community. Teachers who were once isolated by distance and the nature of their jobs are connecting across schools in online professional learning communities. While riding the wave of technology, St. Mary's County Public Schools in Leonardtown, Md., is providing a connection for teachers that extends beyond school walls.

Collaboration is at the core of professional learning in St. Mary's County Public Schools. When we began implementing professional learning communities, we established the expectation that every teacher would collaborate to foster professional learning and improved student learning. This expectation led to the need to find differentiated processes to ensure that every teacher, regardless of position or content area, had the opportunity to engage in high-quality, job-embedded learning. We found we can use electronic tools to achieve our purpose.

Collaborative professional development is focused on clarity of purpose and centered on student learning and results (DuFour, 2004; Hord, 2008). As we looked at models for professional learning, it was clear that collaborative, purposeful, and results-oriented professional development was necessary to ensure high levels of learning for both teachers and students. To get to these higher levels of learning, teachers needed to work together, plan together, and learn together. Expectations for collaborative planning and professional learning communities are even embedded in our teacher evaluation system through a unified effort with the education association.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT COLLABORATION

With the expectation for professional learning communities, the school system began implementing new technologies to advance professional learning. Through a partnership with Johns Hopkins University, St. Mary's County schools implemented the electronic learning community, an online platform to support collaboration, sharing, and just-in-time learning. The electronic learning community had features such as discussion forums and online resource sharing, but it also included opportunities for instant feedback and collaboration. These collaborative tools gave teachers their answer to the time challenge.

While more than 2,800 discussion threads were posted for all groups across the system, nearly one-fourth of all discussion threads were posted by fine arts teachers.

Despite the expectation for collaborative learning, some groups of teachers found it more difficult than others to get together. Fine arts teachers, for example, would meet a few times during the year, but the distance between schools made it difficult for them to support each other on an ongoing basis. AnneMarie Karnbach, one of the fine arts teacher leaders, made the importance of uniting clear: "Because most of the fine arts staff are singletons in their schools, we felt that the idea of improving the lines of communication would be a great place to start. As we started learning about different plans, we decided that expanding our professional learning community through the electronic learning community was the best way to allow us to communicate with each other." This communication led to an extension of the learning community that was created during the "live" sessions.

Using new technologies is not always easy. Before teachers could get to the point of use, we had to design

a differentiated learning plan for the teachers who would be involved. To facilitate collaboration, a group of teacher leaders formed the Fine Arts Support Teachers (FAST) Team. The FAST Team, led by the director of professional development, included former and current members of the superintendent's leadership development academy who launched the effort to further collaboration and communication among fine arts teachers across the system. This team worked together through the leadership academy and the follow-up professional development institute offered by the school system to design ongoing and job-embedded professional development. Together, they customized professional development and gave real-time examples and instruction. These teachers took the lead in supporting others' learning. In the professional development sessions, teachers were able to log into their electronic learning communities together, learn to post to discussion boards, and participate and run chat sessions. Initial workshops were designed for fine arts teachers in the summer professional development days before the school year started. Beyond the initial technical training, follow-up sessions involved more specific questioning and demonstration lessons, as well as real-time assistance for those who needed additional help. With the encouragement and support of the fine arts supervisor, the team successfully moved the program forward.

NSDC's definition of professional learning (2008) emphasizes the need to find time for job-embedded professional learning. We have learned that high-quality professional development needs to be relevant and meaningful, but also just-in-time. The school system built four additional early dismissal days to provide time for collaborative planning into the school calendar. These days, coupled with the online electronic learning community, provided a blended model for follow-up.

SUPPORTING ISOLATED TEACHERS

For fine arts teachers and other special areas teachers, collaborative online learning offers opportunities to connect and learn from one another outside school walls. "One setback to the work of the fine arts professional learning community is the fact that we are all located at many different buildings throughout the system. Meeting weekly, or even monthly, is almost impossible," said Laurel Dietz, a fine arts teacher leader. "The electronic learning community was crucial to keeping our work focused. The use of the electronic learning community allowed assessment teams to talk on a daily basis without having to be in the same place."

Teacher teams across the district met monthly to work collaboratively designing common formative as-

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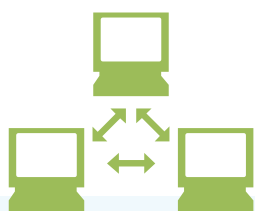
SAMPLE DISCUSSION THREAD

**3rd-grade indicator 4.1.a –
Question 7
Laurel Dietz
03/15/2009 9:52 a.m.**
You are composing music for the car chase scene of a movie. Your music would most likely have a tempo of _____.
a. high
b. low
c. adagio (slow)
d. allegro (fast)

**Re: 3rd-grade indicator 4.1.a –
Question 7
Christina Burroughs
03/17/2009 4:07 p.m.**
I really like question 7. ... Giving the kids a scenario seems like a great way to assess their understanding of these indicators.

**Re: 3rd-grade indicator 4.1.a –
Question 7
Sara Zylak
03/18/2009 2:06 p.m.**
I think all the questions so far are fine. However, I am slightly

concerned about 7. ... Are we being too easy by putting the definitions of musical terms they should know in parenthesis?

**Re: 3rd-grade indicator 4.1.a –
Question 7
Laurel Dietz
03/18/2009 2:12 p.m.**
Christina and I thought of that, too. The question is not testing their understanding of the terms, but rather whether or not they know the appropriate use of each term. I feel if the definitions weren't there, we wouldn't know why a student missed the answer. Was it because they don't know the appropriate use of the term or because they don't know the definition of the term? When students are going to be asked to recall the definition while testing indicator 1.0, they will not be given the English translation. Good point, though! Thanks for taking the time to give such excellent feedback!

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sessments. The electronic learning community provided an avenue for the teams to share ideas and continue the collaboration between those monthly meetings. Leaders from the FAST Team served as facilitators who set team goals and action items for the team's collaborative work.

The online collaboration in developing common formative assessments was a success. Teachers uploaded questions devised by members of the professional learning community for all members to view at their convenience. These discussions have allowed teachers to use their collective knowledge of the learner and their learning to revise and create effective questions that will accurately assess students' content knowledge. Because community members can view items in the discussion threads at their leisure, they are not bound by the limits of our buildings.

As a teacher leader observed, "Without the electronic learning community, we would have had to work in a much less convenient and inefficient way to complete our goal of a common assessment. In this time of

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developing a culture of staff collaboration and professional development, it has been wonderful to be given such an effective tool with which to work to make a collaborative culture happen."

While the electronic learning community was used across the system for several learning communities, the model worked especially well for fine arts teachers. For example, while more than 2,800 discussion threads were posted for all groups across the system, nearly one-fourth of all discussion threads were posted by fine arts teachers. As one participant reflected, "Our discussion boards were used for connecting and relating to our professional learning communities and assessments, but this

area also includes items needed by teachers (such as instruments, rare supplies, music, etc.), recycling materials (teacher's manuals, books, music), and general questions (solo & ensemble, assessment festival, all-county ensembles). One of the best attributes to this area is that all fine arts staff can see it! There is no need to answer the same question multiple times. It is posted for all to see and learn from."

The online collaboration included more than just static postings. Since teachers in special areas are spread so far apart across schools, one of the areas used frequently is synchronous chats. These are real-time and allow questions to be addressed immediately. Many of our fine arts learning communities have scheduled chats where all members log in at a specific time. Teachers were given support in implementing a professional learning community. This included guidance in establishing goals for meeting, methods for creating common formative assessments, and asking the right questions (Reason & Reason, 2007) to stay focused on student learning targets. This background in effective learning communities was especially useful as the electronic communities matured. The more focused, the more relevant, and the more student-centered the work became, the more critical it was to stay focused. As Christina Burroughs, a FAST Team leader, put it: "We have learned that there must be protocols for these chats, involving staying strictly on topic and not getting carried away with the amusing smile icons."

BUILDING ON VALUABLE LESSONS

The lessons from this experience are shaping the future of collaborative learning teams in St. Mary's County. These lessons include:

1. **Believe in everyone's success.** Every teacher approaches learning from a different perspective and a different set of experiences. When this experience is valued, and learning is differentiated, the results are powerful.
   • For example, we expected an elementary general music teacher with more than 30 years of experience to have a tough time with this collaboration. To our surprise, she has made numerous and frequent contributions to the learning community. She has also come to outwardly celebrate her own successes with the new technology.

St. Mary's County Public Schools
Leonardtown, Md.

Number of schools: **27** (**17** elementary, **4** middle, **3** high, **2** centers)

Enrollment: **17,217**

Staff: **2,407** (**1,449** professional staff, **761** classified, **197** temporary)

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	**70.47%**
Black:	**21.83%**
Hispanic:	**4.08%**
Asian/Pacific Islander:	**2.94%**
Native American:	**0.69%**
Other:	**0%**

Limited English proficient: **0.73%**

Languages spoken: **22**, including English, Spanish, Russian, and Tagalog.

Free/reduced lunch: **28.88%**

Special education: **11.11%**

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> **Be sure not to leave anyone hanging and waiting for your reply. When someone knows others are listening and interacting, they are more likely to share.**

2. **Take time to prepare and support everyone.** Some teachers need a more individualized approach and one-on-one coaching.
   • We saw a good example of this with a self-proclaimed "computer illiterate" teacher, who really struggled with getting the concepts of the electronic learning community. Knowing that the FAST Team would take the time to answer her questions, she is now a fully contributing member of the electronic learning community.

3. **Make it personal.** Help people connect to their role, their position, and their content area.
   • When planning, we broke down our presentation by content area and grade level. This kept participants in a small and familiar setting and allowed them to brainstorm collectively their intended use of the electronic learning community. Participants were willing to take risks because they knew they were among colleagues.

4. **Set expectations.** Make sure everyone knows what should result from his or her participation. Model this expectation by consistently following through.
   • In our first year of implementation, the FAST Team and supervisors provided the intended goal for our elementary general music group. As a team, we guided our learning community in developing common assessment questions. During our meetings and planning sessions, we asked members to use specific features of the electronic learning community to develop questions. During one session and between meetings, we used the discussion thread feature to help members conceptualize the organization of our assessment. Later, we asked members to use the chat room to develop assessment questions. Finally, the team encouraged teachers to share resources throughout the development of our assessment questions.

5. **Stay involved.** Be sure not to leave anyone hanging and waiting for your reply. When someone knows others are listening and interacting, they are more likely to share.
   • When a specific question about an upcoming community performance was posted to the electronic learn-

ing community, FAST Team facilitators contacted those teachers involved with the performance and requested their response so all could benefit. Once those involved responded, others were compelled to respond as well, ultimately contributing to a high attendance rate at the community performance.

6. **Celebrate successes.** Take time to reflect on what the group created, shared, and used.

• For the first year of implementation, facilitators sent e-mails noting specific topics of interest that had been posted to the electronic learning community. This kept everyone updated and highlighted user contributions.

7. **Take the next step.** When common assessments are developed, share the results. Refine your work, and make plans for furthering your work together.

• Now that common assessment questions are posted on the electronic learning community, participants are discussing revisions to the questions. Members of the learning communities are taking their learning, and their students' learning, to the next level. The fine arts department is looking at ways to streamline the organization of our curriculum using the assessment questions to help create unit and lesson plans.

Collaborative teams are continuing in St. Mary's County, and the electronic learning community is growing. The perception of professional development has changed. Teachers are coming to sessions with a renewed sense of purpose, knowing that work is meaningful and applicable. Each teacher knows that the common assessments, the instructional units, and the shared resources are all going directly into their classrooms. The students benefit directly from this work. The teachers are accountable to each other and own the process.

The electronic learning community has become a beacon of collective learning for teachers, guiding collaboration and extending learning beyond the traditional setting for professional development.

The success of the fine arts learning community is a microcosm of the system's efforts to integrate professional learning communities, and it is having a profound effect on teacher learning and student learning. In the past five years, as teachers have worked more collaboratively in differentiated learning communities, student learning is at the center, and achievement has increased. The fine arts program has joined other content areas in implementing formative assessments that are part of the system's online data warehouse allowing for collective analysis of student progress. St. Mary's County Public Schools has moved from being ranked below state aver-

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ages to as high as No. 1 on state assessments, and is in the top 10 in every measure (among 24 school districts). All elementary schools made Adequate Yearly Progress, and 100% of students at five schools reached proficient levels on at least one measure. The achievement gap continues to close. Since 2005, the gap in achievement between black and white students has closed by nearly 10 percentage points in reading and math, while achievement for all students continues to rise.

To keep up the momentum, we are tapping into the next layer of leadership. This process was started by a small group of teacher leaders. However, we know that to institutionalize and sustain the efforts, others must be brought in as teacher leaders. The FAST Team continues the work by bringing in teachers to lead and support the effort. This process of building learning communities has been successful because of the involvement of teacher leaders. For its success to continue, it must involve everyone.

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