

UNITED WE LEARN

TEAM EFFORT BUILDS A PATH
TO EQUITY AND ALIGNMENT



By Jill Kind

Sitting down to plan professional learning for the 2011-12 school year brought about fundamental and necessary changes for educators at Robbinsdale Cooper High School in New Hope, Minn., a suburb of Minneapolis.

Professional learning communities were in their infancy, conversations around data were about autopsies of annual standardized tests, and there was no description of what high-quality instruction should look like. To jump-start the planning, the staff examined Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

As staff members articulated their visions for the school, it became evident that they would need to focus on three of Learning Forward's standards: Leadership, Resources, and Implementation. With those standards to guide them, they would create an instructional framework

(see table on p. 47) built around one SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound) goal to improve instruction and the necessary supports for teachers to implement the framework with high levels of fidelity and success.

When creating the instructional framework, they defined best practices and what the essential elements would be in classrooms and how school leaders can support teachers and align resources systemically.

Ensuring that all students have equitable access to high-quality, rigorous instruction requires a collaborative approach between teachers and administrators to clearly identify the elements of instruction that need to be in place in every classroom.

At Robbinsdale Cooper High School, this work also required the development of a group of teacher leaders who could plan, facilitate, and evaluate the professional learning needed to support the implementation of the instructional framework.

BUILDING-LEVEL SMART GOAL 2013-14

RESULTS GOAL	INDICATORS	MEASURES	TARGETS	ACTIONS
By the end of the 2013-14 school year, we will decrease the percentage of students failing courses by 5%, from 34% to 29%.	Grades	Common formative assessment data	Professional learning communities will complete a minimum of two common formative assessments with data dialogues and action plans per quarter.	Develop data dialogues and action plans with instructional coach. Develop daily closing activities on learning targets. Monitor the use of WICOR strategies through the use of the learning walk. Monitor the performance of the students of color. Examine our data on students of color and compare it to the implementation of WICOR strategies.
		Weeks 5, 7, 9, and semester	At weeks 5, 7, and 9, the percentage of students failing courses is 5% lower than the previous year.	
	Engagement	Learning walks	By the end of the first quarter, we will collect baseline data on the percentage of students engaged.	
		Student engagement survey	By the end of the first quarter, we will develop a common Cooper definition of student engagement.	
Discipline	Classroom referrals	Monitor classroom referrals every month to look for patterns.		

If we implement the instructional framework with fidelity, then we can provide feedback, change instructional practices, and develop timely interventions.

CLARIFY IMPLEMENTATION

Creating the instructional framework came after years of administrative turnover and a multitude of initiatives that had left teachers with many areas of foci. The instructional framework that was created, in its most basic form, articulates what is expected in each classroom each class period.

The five main elements are learning targets, WICOR (writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading) strategies, closing, feedback, and common assessments that are all framed through the lens of equity (see diagram on p. 48). These five main elements then serve as the backbone for aligning all of the work and the school's professional learning plan.

One of the school's first tasks was to examine the structures that support instruction and professional learning. Out of this examination, the staff concluded that, while the school had structures, such as department chairs, it needed a broad-based representative body whose main goal would be school improvement.

From this came the learning and leadership team.

The learning and leadership team includes 15 licensed staff members, one equity liaison, and two administrators. The majority of members are elected by building staff per the teachers union contract. The instructional coach and equity liaison are standing members.

To begin, the learning and leadership team identified the major initiatives that supported the instructional framework. The team articulated each initiative's desired accomplishments. In addition, the team identified the current work, implementation work, and learning work for each initiative. These are defined as:

- **Current work:** These components of the initiative have been implemented in the past one or two years, and teachers have received significant professional learning and support. New teachers receive significant support in this area, and veteran teachers receive support on an as-needed basis.
- **Implementation work:** Teachers are working these

components of the initiative for the first time and need learning and ongoing support.

- **Learning work:** Various groups may be studying or exploring these components of the initiative to determine if the work fits with the instructional framework.

Next, the team worked with components listed as implementation work, identifying the knowledge and skills that teachers need to successfully implement each component. In its first iteration, team members brainstormed individually and then worked with two partners to combine, categorize, and sort the knowledge and skills identified. Then the small groups shared with a large group, which sorted, combined, and categorized again. This was overly time-consuming, so a change was necessary.

Now, the learning and leadership team divides into small groups, assigning each group an initiative. Each small group identifies the knowledge and skills necessary for teachers to be successful. Groups post their list of knowledge and skills on the wall (see photo on p. 49), then the whole team takes a gallery walk, adding clarifying questions, missing pieces, and other ideas on each group’s poster. Groups also identify how their initiative connects to other initiatives. Then each small group responds to the feedback on its poster and makes a final draft to share with the whole group.

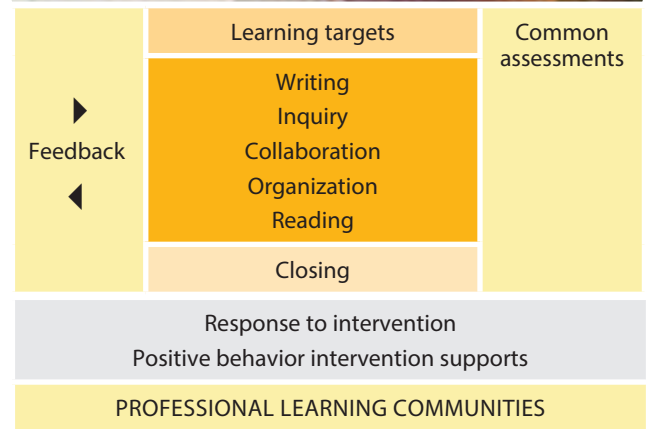
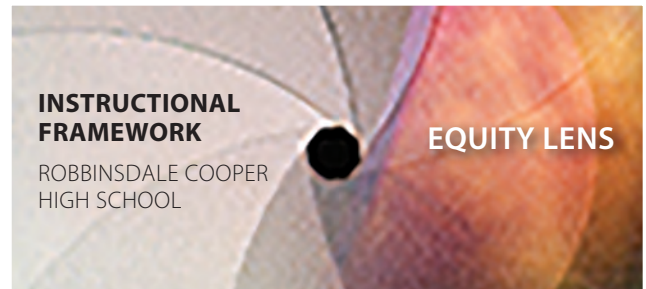
Once the team identifies the knowledge and skills teachers need, it can look deeper to identify the professional learning needs associated with each piece of knowledge and skill and then determine the

structure, product, and logistics of the professional learning.

ALIGN RESOURCES

As the learning and leadership team planned the professional learning that teachers need to implement the instructional framework, the administrative team looked at how to align resources to support the work. The largest constraint the administrative team faced was to do this without additional financial resources.

The administrative team changed the school’s master schedule to allow some professional learning communities to meet during the contract day. In the first and second year, the math professional learning communities met every day and the 9th- and 10th-grade social studies, English, and science teachers met



twice a week in their professional learning communities. During these two years, the school used a federal Smaller Learning Communities grant to pay for other professional learning communities to meet.

Since then, the school has embedded professional learning community time into the day for most of the professional learning communities, giving 67 out of 77 regular education teachers time built into their day a minimum of once a week.

The school also added a full-time instructional coach. The coach’s responsibilities include:

- Facilitating data dialogues and other protocols with professional learning communities;
- Working with professional learning communities to articulate student learning, writing assessments, and rubrics;
- Conducting learning walks (see sidebar on p. 50) to collect data on implementation of the instructional framework;
- Facilitating large-group professional learning;
- Coaching teachers who are struggling with implementing the instructional framework; and
- Co-facilitating the learning and leadership team.

This alignment has reinforced implementation of the instructional framework.

TAKE LEADING DEEPER

All of this preparation is critical to developing a coherent professional learning plan. The next step is to develop the capacity of the learning and leadership team.

In the initial meetings of this group, the co-facilitators

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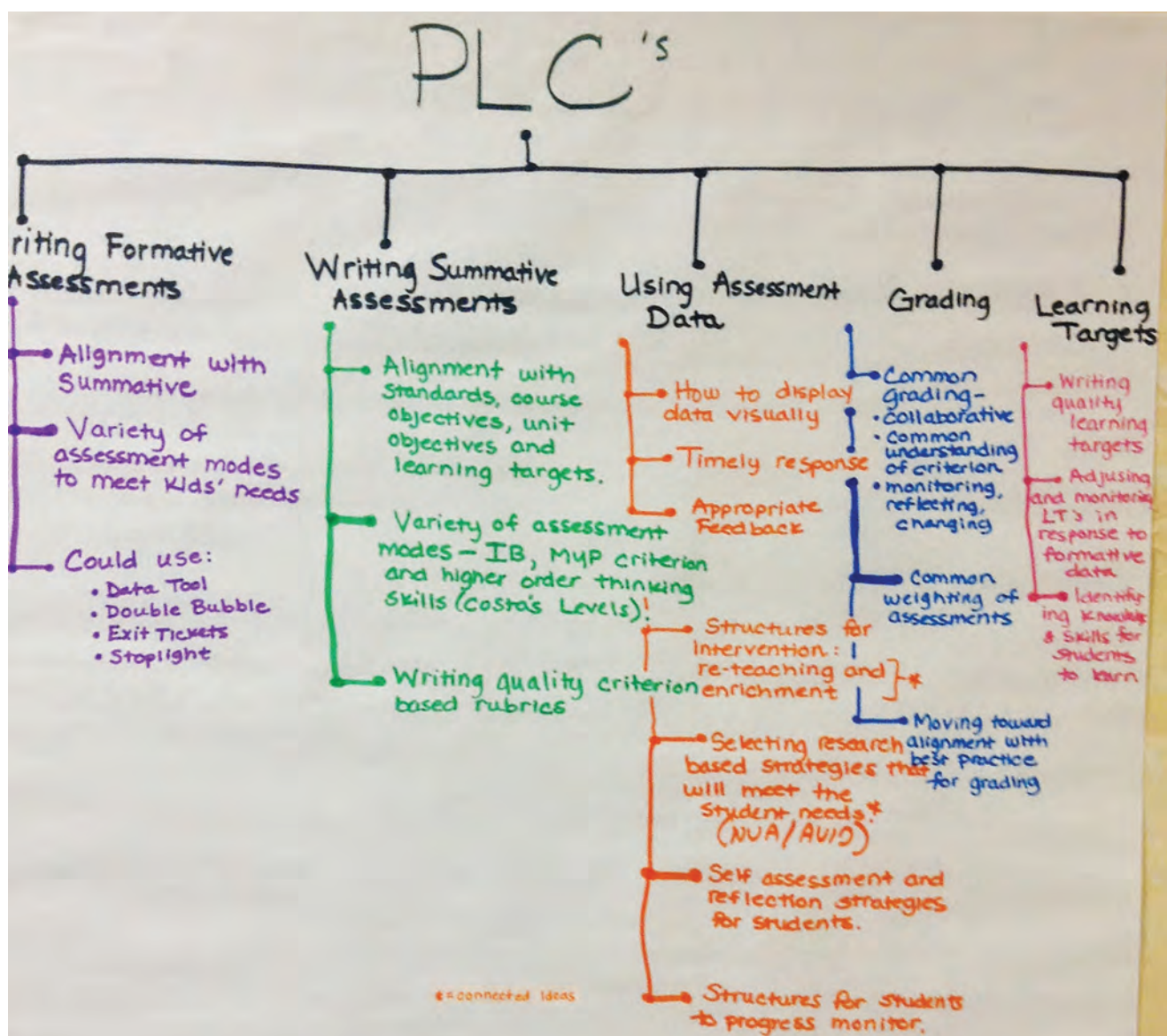
Grades: **9-12**
Enrollment: **1,762**
Staff: **122**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	36.15%
Black:	39.9%
Hispanic:	10.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	11.29%
Native American:	2.16%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: **4.1%**
Languages spoken: **Spanish, Hmong, Somali, Creolized English**

Free/reduced lunch: **56.8%**
Special education: **15.32%**
Contact: **Christina Hester**, principal
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Members of the learning and leadership team work in small groups to identify and list the knowledge and skills necessary for teachers to be successful. Here is one example.

stressed the importance of team members taking a systemic view of the work, rather than advocating for his or her own department or role.

To build capacity, the co-facilitators led the group in writing this purpose statement: The purpose of the learning and leadership team is to work collaboratively with other members of the team as well as staff from other departments based around the building-level goals. The learning and leadership team will work with building administration to improve student learning by facilitating professional development and aligning continuous improvement planning in the areas of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and other continuous improvement planning activities.

Learning and leadership team roles include:

- Facilitating building-level processes and procedures related to professional development design and delivery as related to building-level goals;
- Facilitating the work of professional learning communities; and
- Facilitating curriculum and instructional alignment, assessments, and school improvement.

Using the purpose statement, the group developed five outcomes. These outcomes are:

- Analyze data to develop the school improvement plan;
- Design professional learning to support the school improvement plan and teacher needs;



LEARNING WALKS

Learning walks are one method that Robbinsdale Cooper High School uses to monitor the implementation of its instructional framework. Administrators, district office staff, and the instructional coach conduct learning walks weekly using a rubric written by the building's learning and leadership team that articulates what each element looks like in practice.

Learning walks are short time periods — 15 minutes in a classroom to gather data. Learning walks that take place during the first 15 minutes of class focus on the learning target and link to daily instruction; ones that take place during the second 15 minutes of class look for the use of instructional strategies; and learning walks that occur in the last 15 minutes of class look at instruction and how it relates to teachers checking for understanding on the daily lesson or the closing.

Learning walks provide feedback to teachers on their implementation of the instructional framework. This data is then shared with the learning and leadership team to plan further professional learning. By gathering this data from the learning walks, the school has been able to target its professional learning on specific areas for growth. The next step is to differentiate the learning for teachers based on this data.

- Plan and execute professional learning related to major school initiatives;
- Monitor and evaluate implementation of the school improvement plan and major school initiatives; and
- Eliminate the achievement gap.

LEARN ABOUT DATA

The team's next step was to learn about data. The group examined student performance on state standardized tests, the ACT, graduation rates, course failures, and behavior referrals. This conversation led to the creation of one goal for the building: To decrease the percentage of students failing courses. This goal remains central to all conversations and work.

While examining student data, the learning and leadership team also engaged in book study on *The Will to Lead, the Skill to Teach* (Muhammad & Hollie, 2012). The book prompted discussions about school culture and the role it plays in student success.

While these conversations have been difficult due to long-held beliefs about the role of teacher leaders and issues of race and entitlement, they have strengthened the group and empowered a few members to have difficult but critical conversations with peers.

Members of the learning and leadership team are also learning to be facilitators of adult learning, modeling protocols and effective group facilitation skills.

Central to all conversations and work is the goal of decreasing the percentage of students failing courses.

STUDENT RESULTS

Clarifying implementation and aligning resources and learning has led to improvements in student achievement. Since 2011, 11th graders increased their performance on the state math test by 11%, 10th graders increased their performance on the state science test by 7%, and the percent of students failing courses decreased by 3%.

While the work has been hard, these changes have created a quick win for staff members in those departments and allowed staff members who may have been questioning the work to see results.

Next, the team will use common formative assessment data to respond to instruction and become more intentional about which research-based instructional strategies are used in classrooms. In addition, a task force will evaluate and develop recommendations to improve secondary student progress reporting and grading practices. Through each step, an aligned instructional framework will help the school keep a steady focus on its goals.

REFERENCES

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.

Muhammad, A. & Hollie, S. (2012). *The will to lead, the skill to teach: Transforming schools at every level*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

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