

Promising Practices and Implementation Tools

1. Names & Positions:

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3. **Lever Addressed:** Professional Culture

4. **Title of Promising Practice:** Creating and Sustaining A Strong Professional Culture

5. **District(s) Where Implemented:** Natick Public Schools

6. **Applicable Grade Levels:** PreK-12

7. How This Practice Reflects District's Mission & Core Values:

The mission of the Natick Public Schools is to educate all the students we serve to high levels through high-quality instruction. This mission permeates Natick's professional culture and is the basis for all educational programs and decisions made within the district.

8. Goals of This Practice:

- 1.) Create and sustain a professional learning culture within the district.
- 2.) Continue to conduct formative and summative assessments that drive instruction.
- 3.) Implement a Bully Prevention/Intervention program that involves all stakeholders within the Natick community.

9. Description of This Practice and How it Addresses Criteria for Professional Culture:

Approximately 5 years ago, the district moved from professional development, assessment and instructional practices that were somewhat disjointed, to a highly collaborative learning environment through the development of Professional Learning Communities within all K-12 schools. Keys to the successful creation of Natick's PLC's, including negotiations around schedule, were administrative vision and commitment, staff training, and teacher leadership.

A hallmark of the professional culture established in Natick is the over-arching structure from which best practices in curriculum, assessment, instruction, professional development and collaborative planning are all effectively implemented. While the commitment to scheduling collaborative planning and professional development time is the same throughout the district, the make-up of the teams varies by instructional level. Specifically:

K-4 - At Natick's five elementary schools, teachers meet in grade level/building based teams twice a week for 30 minutes, and once a month in cross-district

grade level teams.

5–8 – Similarly, at both middle schools, teachers meet by grade level discipline (i.e. 5th grade math), by building, and then again once a month in district wide subject area teams.

9–12– At the high school level, the schedule also allows teams to collaborate twice a week with those who teach the same course content, i.e. Biology, and again as an entire department on a weekly basis (i.e. Science Department). As a result, there is continuity within each school based learning community, as well as consistency throughout the entire district, where goals and outcomes are uniform and inter-connected. Additionally the PLCs serve as the mechanism to collect common, formative assessment data. Most importantly, students at all levels K –12, experience similar learning opportunities and benefit from the high quality instruction that emerges from teacher collaboration.

Vital to the success, accountability and productivity of these common meeting times is the shared leadership provided by teachers and administration. For example, at the elementary level, there are two Teacher Leaders per grade level. Their responsibilities include leading the district wide PLC teams on a monthly basis. At the 3rd grade level, the two Grade 3 Teacher Leaders plan agendas and work with administrators to lead meetings with the 22 grade 3 district wide teachers. At the middle and high school levels, Teacher Leaders are department based.

Approximately 3 years ago, each teacher leader and building administrator attended out of district PLC trainings conducted by the DuFours; highly respected leaders in this field. In addition, when new leaders are hired within the district, they are also required to attend this same basic PLC training. Along with the Skillful Teacher course all Natick teachers are required to take, administrators complete the Supervision and Evaluation training, and the PLC trainings. With both teachers and administrators participating in these courses Natick has created a level playing field and common vernacular around best practices of which they are especially proud.

The Assistant Superintendent describes the expectations around the work teachers and administrators engage in during their PLC time as both "loose and tight". The tight areas being the targets the district is heading for using common assessments at each grade level and subject area. During this shared time, the focus is on crafting the assessments, gathering the data and then responding to the data by making adjustments in groupings and instructional strategies; and sharing common writing, literature and math experiences that have met with positive results. It is the shared belief among administrators that building a tight infrastructure actually frees teachers to do what professional educators do best: match instructional practices to the needs of their students. This "tight" expectation throughout the district is also the reason that responding to District Determined Measures as mandated by the state, has been a relatively seamless process in Natick. Specific examples of how both early release and building based PLC time is utilized are:

1.) At the elementary level, the recent focus has been on math practices and the shift in the Common Core Standards. Since curriculum is articulated and shared through common assessments, professional development during early release days often zeros in on instructional approaches and best practices. Last year, the entire focus at the K-4 level was on writing workshop.

2.) At the middle school level, PLC time has been devoted to working on articulating the Common Core through updating ELA curriculum maps and moving from genre based units to creating thematic units and project based learning experiences for students. Within the last two years, a new set of math textbooks has also been adopted that more directly correlate to the Common Core. During the previous year, the 5-8 PD focus on math involved training on making thinking visible and rigorous math accessible to students of all abilities.

3.) Technology has been an ongoing focus at the secondary level, with the district moving to a 1:1 ratio, or one computer for every child, in grades 8 through 12. Additional PD has focused on taking some of the best instructional practices in traditional education and meshing them with best practices of 1:1 in blended education. In addition, the district is implementing 5 iPads in each elementary classroom.

4.) Since Natick is a writing intensive district, there is coordinated writing training embedded into district wide professional development planning at all levels each year.

Another indicator of Natick's strong professional culture is the respect and responsibility that permeates the district's social and emotional goals through programs such as Bully Prevention and Intervention. Two significant aspects of Natick's program that distinguish it from bully prevention plans commonly adopted by other school districts are 1) student leadership and 2.) an organized and visible partnership with parents and the community at large.

The district recognizes that students are key in interrupting the cycle of bullying and believe that if students are trained to strengthen their level of courage, ability and leadership skills to intervene in a variety of situations, positive results will follow. To this end the district has trained over 300 students at both middle and high school levels who have become members of each respective school's Student Leadership Team. This large number of students in three of Natick's secondary schools are empowered and given the responsibility and skills to intervene if they witness an act of harassment or bullying. Skills are cultivated through role-play and case study discussions and include other areas such as how to help the victim and when an adult such as a parent, teacher or principal needed to be informed.

Leadership training for both teachers and students was spearheaded by the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent (formerly one of the Middle School principals), who garnered other staff members such as counselors, social studies teachers and principals to develop and implement training for the student leadership program, teachers and administration.

An offshoot of these efforts that ultimately strengthened the overall program was the invitation to partner with the parent organization, Natick Parents Against Bullying (now called the Natick Coalition Against Bullying) This key collaboration resulted in a series of programs that brought together student athletes, student musicians, drama groups, cub scouts, clergy, coaches, law enforcement and religious groups to experience similar training and discussions about preventing and intervening in bullying situations. These efforts have expanded the capacity for students to feel safe both in and outside of the school environment, such as at Boy Scout, church, town sponsored sports events etc. and have created a powerful synergy between Natick Public Schools, the parent community and the community of Natick as a whole.

To reinforce the on-going commitment to decrease bullying incidents within the community the school district and the Coalition sponsor an open forum once a year to elicit feedback from the community on program effectiveness and how efforts can be improved. Recent results of the Metro West Community Health Care Foundation survey, that students participate in every other year, show a precipitous drop in incidents of bullying at the middle and high school levels. The Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent attribute the student leadership program and the powerful partnership that has developed within the community as key contributors to these positive results, but also understand that the commitment to this work must be ongoing.

Overall, this promising practice exemplifies the criteria necessary for successful school improvement in the area of Professional Culture as detailed below:

The Superintendent at the district level and the principal at the school level ensure there is an articulated set of core values that drive behavior and decisions as well as an organizational culture that supports open and honest communication, continuous professional improvement, data-based decision-making, and joint responsibility for student learning and achievement.

District and schools actively involve teachers, families, and other stakeholders (as appropriate) in decision-making.

Teachers regularly engage in instructional conversations, peer observations, collaborative planning, and ongoing collegial support.

District and schools are characterized by a climate of shared responsibility for continuous improvement.

Data are continuously examined and analyzed to guide instructional decision-making.

District and school culture is characterized by trust and willingness to discuss “undiscussable” issues.

Superintendents and principals are evaluated on their ability to build a workplace culture of non-defensive examination of teaching practice and leadership practice in relation to student results.

Superintendents and principals receive professional development to enhance this capacity.

10. How This Practice Was Implemented So It Was More Successful Than Others:

- During the past five years teachers and administrators have been able to collaborate in an environment that promotes innovation and risk taking, while providing a high level of support. As data collected at every level unfolds, the district norm is to motivate, share and provide professional development around instructional strategies that result in improved student achievement.
- The ongoing development and implementation of common goals and assessments has created a greater sense of accountability and a more in depth focus on the work of teaching and learning.
- Student leadership, parents and community all working together at a much higher level have contributed to the success of Natick Public Schools Bully Prevention and Intervention plan.
- The ability to successfully implement the Common Core through a series of professional development opportunities, all funneled back to establishing a safe, non-threatening professional learning community where Natick educators can effectively work, grow in their practice and thrive.

11. How This Practice Changed The District or School:

The overall environment within Natick Public Schools has become more collaborative and student centered in its approach to teaching and learning. In addition, opportunities for teacher leadership have greatly expanded, creating greater teacher and administrative communication and collaboration. All of Natick's principals have also been linked to a specific grade level, so they are informed, supportive and invested in achieving common goals beyond their particular building.

The model created as a result of Natick's commitment to building a strong

professional culture has provided the opportunity to seamlessly accomplish all of the district and building based school improvement goals, which in turn, stem back to addressing the district's mission of providing high quality instruction for all students. Whether the need be to provide professional development on differentiating instruction at a particular grade level and content area, extending the learning for gifted students, or implementing RTI, this established structure, combined with teacher leaders and administrators working together, has made this model a highly effective one. Furthermore, the Superintendent believes that this model is so valued by staff, teachers and administrators that no one would give up efforts to sustain this model any time soon.

Teachers have a much louder and accepted voice. Knowing that there is a reliable vehicle for direct communication and sharing of ideas with colleagues, Teacher Leaders, Natick Teachers Union, Principals and Administration via the PLC structure has also created a greater sense of trust and realization that everyone involved has the same goal in mind: helping all students achieve to their fullest.

As the Assistant Superintendent transitioned into this new position this year, she became keenly aware of the huge pride that permeates the workplace about what the district has achieved in recent years as a leading edge district in areas that matter most. She has also seen the level of teaching capabilities rise. For instance, if a teacher doesn't measure up to the rigor in instruction expected in Natick, the culture either supports them so they rise to that level, or a teacher may have to make a decision that maybe Natick isn't the best fit for them.

12. Resources (time, money, materials etc.) Required For Successful Implementation:

- Funding for PLC training, materials and new teacher leadership positions at the elementary level and professional development needs based on the task/district focus, i.e. writing workshop, Common Core, math texts, common assessments etc.
- Time created for teacher and administrative collaboration at all levels. All available professional development time has been devoted to PLC work.

13. Tools You Used To Implement or Advance This Practice:

See separate attachments:

- K-12 Common Writing Assessments–Grade 4 Sample
- K-4 Teacher Leader Job Description
- PLC Evaluation Template
- Link: District Resources and Parent Anti Bullying Coalition Information: <http://www.natickps.org/districtinfo/bullying/resources.cfm>