

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: Weston Public Schools

6. Applicable Grade Levels: PreK-12

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

The vision of Weston Public Schools underscores a commitment "to excellence in learning for further education and work, for civic responsibility, and for the love of learning". Weston's overall vision statement sets the stage for nurturing a strong school culture and is the basis for all decisions that impact student learning.

8. Goals of This Practice:

- 1.) Provide students with the knowledge and experiences to leave Weston as empowered learners and productive participants in society
- 2.) Provide a model for students on how to collaborate, reflect, build consensus and become full participants in their learning
- 3.) Empower teachers to own and lead the learning

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

Clear hallmarks of the strong professional culture that exists in Weston are teacher leadership and collaboration. Both of these cultural factors have been in place in Weston for decades, are manifested in a plethora of ways, and continually overlap as they play out within the district on a daily basis.

Leadership is viewed as intertwined circles rather than as a more hierarchical model in Weston, and there are a variety of ways teachers can assume leadership roles in the district, beginning in their classrooms and extending to more specific roles.

Teachers are leaders in their classrooms and have the latitude to make critical decisions around learning goals and materials that best meet the needs of their students. This may be significantly different from what someone new in the district has experienced, in that teachers who come to Weston expecting a prescribed set of expectations may be uncomfortable with the latitude they are

afforded within the larger parameters of learning goals, expectations and follow up conversations. If new teachers are used to expectations that all teachers are on the same page in a text on any given day, is it likely that Weston is not a good match for them.

Some of the key committees in the district that teachers can step-up to participate in are Professional Development, Diversity, Mindfulness and Evaluation. These district-wide committees include representation from all five schools and are either co-chaired by the Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent and a teacher.

While assuming a leadership role on one of these various district-wide committees is voluntary, teachers are at the center of these committees and have a critical voice in the decision making process. In fact, it is the expectation in Weston that teachers are active decision-makers, and are expected to share those decisions, debate those decisions and come to consensus when deciding what is best for their students.

The Professional Development Committee has also been functioning in Weston for many years. This group meets routinely with the Assistant Superintendent to lay out plans for the following year based on the Long Range Plan, communicate these plans at the building level, and seek out and organize feedback via surveys or informal meetings with the building reps. This committee has been key in creating a 5 year plan based on teacher feedback, and teacher voices are recognized by administration as being crucial in determining pace, topics to be addressed and use of consultants from within and outside of the district.

The Diversity and Mindfulness committees evolved from the Superintendent's vision, which has inspired and validated the importance of these critical social and emotional areas for all staff. For instance, the goals of the Mindfulness Committee are more powerfully heard when the Superintendent of Schools can speak to and support the existence of stress and how to deal with it in such a high-powered community. Acknowledging that this stress comes from outside as well as from the high expectations staff place upon themselves, is just another reason why Weston teachers feel empowered and affirmed.

While the Diversity Committee originated from the district's efforts to increase the percentage of staff of color in Weston many years ago, it has evolved and moved in a variety of directions since. The group is currently focused on bridging communication between Boston and Weston parents, and has modeled their meetings after an exercise done with administrators, teacher leaders and the entire faculty, centered around the book "What If?" by Steve Robbins.

The Superintendent leads the monthly Mindfulness Committee meetings, which also include a representative from each building. This group comprised of faculty and staff, plans events and opportunities around ways for a high-powered district to counter the anxieties of teaching, all the while aware that with latitude and freedom come high expectations.

Other vital leadership positions involve grade level leaders at the K through 5 level and department heads in grades 6 through 12. Curriculum Specialists are also greatly valued and play key leadership roles in the district. At the K–5 level these positions are focused on Math, ELA and Science/Social Studies, and while these specialists are responsible for leading teachers in their specific content areas, they work closely together to provide continuity, content integration and support. Department Chairs at the middle and high school levels are also their highly valued counterparts who continually collaborate to articulate the curriculum both horizontally and vertically from kindergarten to grade twelve. A district Leadership Academy is also planned each summer, and this group of leaders is charged with evaluating the work of the previous year and strategizing ways to be supportive of their teams for the upcoming year.

The strong culture that exists in Weston is also based on its long history of collaboration. While PLCs are not the formalized title used to frame their work around setting measurable goals, making data driven decisions, and working together in teams, Weston's culture is in essence, the best practice of teachers who come together and are empowered to focus on student learning.

Teachers and administrators did participate in numerous professional development opportunities provided by the DuFours and other experts in this field, and used this training to reenergize, affirm and refine much of what has been in place in the district for some time. As a result of this examination of practice and learning about what was out there in the literature, the district integrated what worked best for them and created a more personal way of working closely together around student data. The administration believes that their approach of bringing teachers together to talk about their learning goals, talk about student progress and student work, and refine their practice based on how students are meeting these goals, is more organic and genuinely owned. All of which is focused on students and teacher empowerment, as teachers are expected to have a voice and opinion within each classroom and within each team.

Teachers are involved in every aspect of student learning, from developing learning standards, creating District Determined Measures and serving on interview committees during the hiring process. In addition, the Superintendent and Union President meet monthly to seek input and collaborate around district initiatives and any other key teaching and learning topics that may arise.

Focused collaboration and sharing occurs regularly as the result of two 8–hour teacher days. At the elementary level, teachers meet in their teams every Tuesday and Thursday for an hour after students are dismissed. This time is considered sacred and used exclusively for this purpose. Although the middle and high schools have similar 8 hour days, the additional time is often taken up by meeting with student groups. Therefore the grade 6–12 principals and department heads work together to ensure that teachers teaching the same course have routine scheduled times to meet in order to do the same type of collaborative work described at the elementary level. A great example of the results of this team work is a teacher fair that recently took place where

teachers shared student data they had collected and talked about what they learned from that data.

In terms of curriculum and best instructional practices, teachers are well aware of the experts and resources in the field, and through grade level and content area collaboration, are able to decide on the most effective ways to work with students to learn the most important things about whatever concept they are teaching. Because the district views teachers as thinkers, and expects them to take advantage of the latitude they have, teachers generally don't limit themselves to straight textbook materials and are continually researching other complimentary tools to enhance learning for a wide range of students. Recent innovation in technology is one example of this. Forward thinking teachers are encouraged to adapt social media, such as Twitter into their instructional repertoire or work towards providing a 1:1 ratio of iPads to students at the middle school level. In the case of the latter, volunteers were asked to be early adopters of this technology for a pilot group of 7th grade students. These teachers were supported throughout the pilot process and then asked to use their experience and in-put in planning the PD to support the entire grade. This teacher as leaders and innovators model is repeated over and over again in Weston.

Another important factor that provides time for much of the teaming and teacher empowerment that exists is the generous summer workshop program that offers teachers paid meeting days. These are generally days that teachers can use to complete or revise what they have been working on throughout the year or they may be utilized to create and produce new lessons or documents based on an approved proposal in a particular content area. In addition, summer sessions are used for the Professional Development, Diversity and Mindfulness Committees to engage in ongoing collaboration and planning. The Administrative Council made up of the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, five Principals and the Director of Technology review proposals and allocate these days.

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:

- Teaming has long been in existence in Weston, and the district commitment to empower and perpetuate these teams has been unwavering.
- The reflective nature of the district in the form of program reviews and examining practices, pedagogy and professional development. Continually seeking input from students, parents, teachers and administrators so that if changes or modifications are needed they are thoughtfully made.
- The balance that exists between urgency and recognizing that it make take time to get things done so that kids can have quality instruction. For example, rather than buying into a packaged curriculum, a teacher created course or unit of study may take more time, but the end product may be of higher quality and the ownership more profound.

11. How This Practice Changed The District or School:

- Because the culture in Weston values continual reflection on practice, change is part and parcel of the whole process of building and sustaining a strong school culture where all strive to be comfortable discussing “undiscussables.”
- When change originates from outside of the district, such as the New Educator Evaluation System and the mandate to produce District Determined Measures, there are collaborative structures in place to effectively identify them in a way that doesn't change the culture. Teacher empowerment has helped to view such changes in the context of the work they are already doing to improve their practice. Additionally, when initiatives are mandated externally, the team structure has also helped to foster the attitude that no one needs to tackle them alone, and together the work can be accomplished.

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

- Funding for teacher leaders, summer workshop, professional development speakers
- Education Foundation Grant monies
- Time created for teacher & administrator collaboration, including two 8-hour days
- Established traditions/cultural practice
- Sense of humor and the occasional mixing of fun with learning

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

- Weston Public Schools Vision Statement
- District Long Range Plan
- Specialist Job Description