

Professional Learning Current Reality and GAPSS Review

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Vision

At Westside Elementary School (WES) the primary goals in the School Improvement Plan (SIP) are all related to one topic, student achievement and how to improve it. Laura Little, Principal of WES stated, “At Westside technology is a vital part of each and every classroom. I know that I can walk into any classroom in this school and see teachers effectively integrating technology into most any lesson they are doing. Technology is part of who we are and what we do at Westside”(L. Little, personal interview, 2016). According to the SIP the vision of WES is “The vision of Westside Elementary School is to provide the opportunity for all students to receive a quality education. By adhering to the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards, our students are held to high academic, career, and social expectations. They are encouraged to make learning a life-long commitment, become culturally aware, enforce self-discipline, develop ethical work habits, demonstrate personal responsibility, exhibit leadership skills, explore future careers, become conscientious citizens, and achieve their highest potential.” (WES School Improvement Plan, 2015). Westside’s mission statement says “Our mission is to provide quality instruction that adheres to high standards and high expectations in order to produce students who take ownership of their learning and that are college and career ready to successfully participate in the 21st century.” (WES School Improvement Plan, 2015). At Westside, teachers are expected to use every digital tool and resource that is available to them to transform learning.

Needs Assessment

Administrators at Westside Elementary School give every opportunity for teachers to tell what they need in terms of professional development. Teachers begin the year by taking a needs assessment to help administrators and the technology coach know where they need to focus with each teacher. Administrators also give recommendations for each teacher to the technology coach for areas that they believe each teacher could use development. Administrators also pull

data from TKES such as self evaluations, walk-through evaluations, formative, and summative evaluations to help identify other areas of possible needs. Teachers also know that they can recommend a particular Professional Development (PD) opportunity if they feel it may help meet their needs. Laura Little, principal said, “I know my teachers, period. I am in their classrooms. I see their lessons. I can tell you their strengths and weaknesses. I listen to my teachers also. I want them [the teachers] to know that I care about how they are doing day in and day out” (L. Little, personal interview, 2016).

Professional Learning

Professional Learning at Westside Elementary School is provided on a continuous basis through weekly Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). They are provided to each grade level during their planning period. The topics vary based on the diverse needs of individual professional learning needs and alignment with the School Improvement Plan. Needs are identified by using data that is gathered from TKES (self evaluations, walk-through evaluations, formative and summative evaluations), needs assessments conducted yearly, data that has been collected previously, and teacher input. Administrators consult district and state consultants to ensure that all PD opportunities are taken advantage of to the fullest. Teachers also have three collaborative planning days with their grade level/ subject area yearly. This time is laser focused on the individual needs of each grade level/subject area. Many of the PLCs and PD that is offered at WES focuses on strategies and digital tools that teachers can use with their students to help them meet or exceed the Georgia Milestones Assessment in the sections of Math and English Language Arts. Those are two of the goals listed in the SIP. For the grade levels that do not have to take the Georgia Milestones Assessment (K-2), the PLC’s still focus on student achievement and digital tools, they are differentiated for the appropriated grade level. Each year Polk School District has a Mobile Minds University (MMU) that is offered for three days in July. MMU is a technology conference that is hosted and facilitated by Polk School

District teachers and administrators. Teachers are not required to participate in MMU, but are strongly encouraged. Teachers can get PD on a wide variety of topics to meet their needs. Once teachers complete PLCs and other PD that is offered teachers can rely on our Instructional Technology Coach for any help they need. From teaching to modeling, facilitating and listening, the coach makes a huge impact on how far the information delivered goes. The technology coach also uses surveys and discussions to make sure that the PLCs and PD opportunities are well received and helpful.

Alignment to School Improvement Goals

“At Westside Elementary School, professional development is crucial,” according to the principal Laura Little. Professional development is a specific goal in the 2015-2016 SIP. Goal three of the School Improvement Plan (2015) says that “Professional Development will focus on increasing student achievement.” The goal will be measured by student improvement on the Georgia Milestones Assessment. All teachers will go the Common Core Institutes Black Belt Certification which provides training on foundational understanding for the common core. The SIP also lists several activities that will aid in the process of meeting this goal. The SIP says that teachers at Westside Elementary School will have weekly PLCs, online classrooms, iPad and iWorks training, and MyOn Reader Training. The SIP also says “100% of the staff will participate in at least one high quality professional learning activity for the 2015-2016 school year.” The SIP designates differentiation in math, a literacy program, and iTunes U collaborative planning as the high quality professional learning activities. These PD activities were chosen “based on a careful analysis of the data” (WES School Improvement Plan, 2015).

Funding and Incentives

Westside Elementary School is a Title 1 school, therefore the majority of its funding comes from Title 1 funds. Some of the activities in the SIP are funded from other sources such as Title 2 Part D or district funding. Many of the activities that aid in reaching the goals set fourth in the SIO do

not require any funding. Goal three of the School Improvement Plan says that “Professional Development will focus on increasing student achievement.” The first two activities under the professional development goal in the WES SIP are Weekly PLCs and Online Classroom, each of which require no funding. The iPad and iWorks training was paid for with Title 2 Part D (\$5000) according to the SIP. The last activity under the professional development goal is MyOn Reader Training that was paid for with district funding (\$5000). There are many other activities that do not deal with professional development that receive funds from Title 1, Title 1 Part A, Title 3, and the District. There is no incentive program for teachers to participate in professional learning. It is a requirement. However, there is a time for recognition at the yearly district wide meeting. The recognition is for teachers whose students have shown a certain amount of growth from the previous year. The teacher is awarded an “apple”. An “apple” is a little trophy that says excellent educator and the year. “With funding for professional learning, school improvement, and other reform initiatives coming from multiple sources and for multiple purposes, ensuring alignment and effectiveness in resource use is paramount to ensuring success” (Standards for Professional Learning, 2015). Westside and Polk School District both know the importance in aligning resources for professional development. According to Westside’s Principal, “we make sure all resources are used to furthering staff development, and being sure we ultimately reach our end goal which is student achievement “ (L. Little, personal interview, 2016).

Diversity

Westside Elementary School identified the following subgroups that are not yet achieving on the state assessments African Americans, Hispanics, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students according to the SIP. Teachers will work with the Instructional Technology Coach to focus on all components of the instructional process, “including learning how to better meet the needs of special education students and culturally diverse backgrounds” (L.Little, personal interview, 2016). Teachers were also provided iPad accessibility

training in order to help them meet the needs of their students with disabilities. Since students with disabilities are an identified subgroup that is not yet achieving on state assessments, this is a crucial area for improvement at Westside. In the subgroups, the data revealed that the major areas of needs are “differentiated math instruction, weakness in numbers and operations, weakness in informational texts” (WES School Improvement Plan, 2016). Programs and resources that specifically address diverse students are a school translator, highly qualified special education teachers, EIP teachers, and ESL teachers. According to the SIP Westside will continue to maintain these programs and resources to provide the highest quality education possible.

Collaboration

At WES collaboration takes place mainly in grade level teams. The majority of the teamwork happens during the weekly PLC and the grade level shared planning time. “Professional learning that occurs within learning communities provides an ongoing system of support for continuous improvement and implementation of school and systemwide initiatives” (Standards of Professional Learning, 2015). The SIP specifically designates a goal for PD. One of the activities that fosters the goal is the weekly PLC. Non-homeroom teachers such as special education teachers, early intervention program (EIP) teachers, and activity (P.E., music, art etc.) teachers go to a weekly PLC with the grade level that has the same planning time. This allows for all teachers to be involved in collaboration. The technology specialist, in coordination with the administrators, uses the information gained from the needs survey, TKES information, and any weaknesses that is asked by each group to work with each PLC to make sure the PD they receive is beneficial for them. The PLCs allow teachers to collaborate and connect in ways that they were not previously able to.

Evaluation

At WES teachers are evaluated using both formal and informal evaluation tools. Administrators use the TKES walk-throughs, formative and summative assessments as an opportunity to share with teachers where their strengths are and where they have room for growth. Administrators also have teachers document through the TKES platform what they have been learning in the PLCs. For example, one week in a PLC we learned how to create leveled book sets on a digital reading program we use called MyOn. Before the next PLC, we had to create a new leveled booklet and teach a lesson with it. While completing the lesson we have to take pictures or videos of students completing the leveled books and then upload them onto the platform. Once uploaded we had to reflect about our experience. This process allowed the administrator to see that we could apply what we had learned in the PLC. It also allowed the teachers to give feedback on the PLC. However, this does not happen for every PLC and every topic covered. It is not a consistent process.

References

Standards for Professional Learning. (2015). Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

Westside Elementary School: School Improvement Plan 2015-2016. (2015). Cedartown, GA:

Polk School District