GAPSS Part A – Professional Learning Current Reality

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**Mission & Vision for Technology Use**

The Madison County School District and Madison County Middle School share the same mission and vision for technology use in the classroom for administrators, teachers, and students. Mr. Doug Wood (House 1200 Principal) stated that he believes that educational technology, when used relevantly, helps connect our students to ideas and endless possibilities that are unobtainable within the classroom walls themselves. He continues to state that if students are going to be independent, successful citizens that are going to be the positive change in the world, they must be able to communicate within that world, and the technology is not just the key, but the necessity for our students to improve their own learning and achievement. The following is taken from the district website which lays out the district and school’s mission and vision for technology use and aligns with what Mr. Wood previously stated:

“Madison County Schools will use technology to help identify student needs, assess student performance, evaluate progress toward goals, enhance the curriculum, and provide students with experience necessary in our technological society. Madison County School District recognizes the community’s commitment to progressive excellence in education. We are committed to:

• Identifying and providing for the individualized learning needs and techniques of all students

• Developing curriculum with the assistance and use of technology

• Providing Internet and computer access for students with rigorous academic resources including but not limited to Georgia Virtual School, MediaCast video streaming, and other web content

• Conducting research on and implementing best practices within the scope of teaching, learning, and administrative functions

• Using technology to provide for enhanced professional learning and training

• Utilizing technology for the purposes of data analysis and record keeping within schools as well as system-wide, including advanced record keeping for utilization by administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and students

• Providing resources for staff, teachers, and administrators to have continued access to the most current research and resources available to aid in the educational advancement of all students within the Madison County School District

• Enhancing communications between stake holders, including providing parents and the community with additional resources for learning and communicating” (MCSD Technology Plan, 2012)

**Professional Learning Needs Identified**

At the end of each school year, a district technology survey is sent to each school asking for insight into what the teachers need in regards to professional learning opportunities. In some cases, due to circumstances outside the districts/schools control, specific professional learning is required to meet the requirements from previous SACS and other state level evaluations of the district or school. For instance, our district was recently told that we needed professional learning in regards to our English Language Learners (L). The district made this a priority and brought in experts to train the teachers throughout the district last year with follow up sessions this year. These sessions, this year, are combined with school level professional learning opportunities when it comes to Ruby Payne and socio-economic students. The need for this training was brought to the district level administrators through surveys the previous year. The teachers asked, and the district level administrators listened and followed through with the request.

As Knight states about professional development in today’s schools, “The old model of an expert talking to a room full of strangers is in some cases literally worse than nothing, leaving teachers frustrated, disappointed, insulted, and feeling worse off than before the session started” (Knight, 2007). My school, Madison County Middle School, offers professional learning opportunities by utilizing the professionals already inside the building. Teachers that are considered experts in a specific field (technology, literature in all content areas, and data teams) professional learning sessions throughout the year. The sessions were decided upon by the administration after speaking with teachers in an informal setting. The lead teachers agreed that these sessions were of interest to many and warranted extra time after school hours, to those sincerely interested. These sessions are optional and the teachers leading these sessions, although were asked to lead, are doing so on their own time after school hours. “We have teachers who have all earned a degree from a University. We need to tap into their hidden knowledge these professionals have and spread the wealth” (D. Wood, personal communication, September 2015). For the most part, each teacher has the opportunity to seek out their own professional learning opportunities from other teachers within the school. There is some funding available, but not much. Each year the funding for professional learning drops as the overall funds from the state and federal level drop. This is just the reality our district finds itself in.

**Forms of Professional Learning**

The amount of actual professional learning is very impressive, when it really comes down to what teachers have time for and what is actually possible throughout the week. First, it is important to know that throughout the year, each day has a specific learning opportunity assigned to it. Also, each Wednesday also has a specific learning opportunities during after school meetings or training sessions. Each session is two hours and ten minutes in length. According to the Teacher Handbook (2015), the weekly meetings are as follows:

* [Monday] Grade Level Meeting – All teachers in a grade level meet to discuss students, the curriculum for cross-curricular opportunities, and school related testing and grade level information that is on the horizon.
* [Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday] Content Level Meeting – All teachers meet in their content and grade level teams. This allows for common planning time, sharing of best practices, and most importantly, collaboration.
* [T, W, R – Data Teams] Content Level Data Team Meeting – All teachers meet in their content and grade level teams to discuss data collected by students through the data team process. Each team decides which day of the week (Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday) that the Data Team meetings will meet for the year.
* [Friday] Personal Day – This day allows teachers to “catch-up” with grading, contacting parents, completing the “other duties as assigned” category of the job description, and for the interested, a chance to research topics of interest that they would like to improve or learn more about to challenge students in their own classroom.

The Teacher Handbook (2015) also references sessions that occur on each Wednesday as:

* [1st Wednesday] Faculty Meeting – This is the typical meeting where the entire school shows up at the faculty meeting. I am including this meeting in the ‘Professional Learning’ section as in each meeting, some type of professional learning is presented by the administration or faculty members.
* [2nd Wednesday] Team Leader Meeting – This is where each grade level team has one representative present at this meeting with the school administrators. There are four team leaders per grade totaling twelve teachers. Connections and other various teacher groups are also represented making this meeting total around twenty people in each meeting. The administration asks for ideas on how to better improve staff morale, student achievement, and they also use this opportunity to push down information to the team leaders to discuss with their teams.
* [3rd Wednesday] House Meeting – The middle school is broken up into three small “houses” which hold each grade level (6-8), a school counselor, secretary, and assistant principal. This is just to make sure all are on the same page and to share positive moments and celebrations throughout the month.
* [4th Wednesday] Subject/Department Are Meeting – Teachers meet, regardless of grade level, with all other teachers in their content area. Discussions about the curriculum, what each grade is doing well and could improve upon, and other information that could help teachers connect with their current students with knowledge of their supposed knowledge from the curriculum the year before.

“Throughout the year, there are other various opportunities available for teachers in regards to professional learning” (D. Wood, personal communication, September, 2015). A small sample of those opportunities are:

* Study groups – Ruby Payne | Students with socio-economic concerns
* Data Teams – Looking at Pre-Post Test scores and instructional learning opportunities for students
* Workshops – Technology related for the most part (Google and School App)
* Peer Observations – Teachers have the opportunity to observe other teachers in other grades throughout the year due to common planning time.

Most of the professional learning opportunities, if not all, are collaborative in nature. Our school prides itself in utilizing the time teachers have so that true collaboration can occur. If a professional learning opportunity presents itself for an individual, typically the individual will be require to present their findings at the next faculty meeting or content level meeting, depending on which is more relevant.

**Technology-Related Professional Learning**

Our school does not have a Technology Specialist position that would be the one who presents technology training session. This position is a shared responsibility amongst a few teachers (Media Specialist, Computer Lab Teacher, me) that work with teachers during our planning times or after school in specific sessions with a specific purpose. The following are training sessions that occurred last year and are occurring this year:

* SMART Board Training / SMART Document Camera Training
* MCMS School App – How to use the school app in the classroom and at home
* Data Team Program – How to use the district’s data team program
* Websites for Content Areas – Best uses for specific websites
* Google Apps for Education – Teacher & Student accounts
* District Websites for Teachers – Uploading and adding content and information
* AllInLearning.com – Benchmark testing website (using QR codes)
* Remind.com – Stakeholder communication for teachers

When it comes to technology-related training, many teachers are fearful of the inevitable that technology is here and is not going anywhere anytime soon. Teachers, in general, can take offense when confronted with a new technology-related training that they do not understand or believe they need to use even though the teacher thinks it is just a novelty or unnecessary. “The challenge is to allow the teachers, who resist change, to understand the reasons for technology trainings and the overall needs to implement new teaching strategies utilizing educational technologies for our students” (D. Wood, personal communication, September 2015).

**Follow-Up Support**

This is one area in which Madison County Middle School can improve upon. As of right now, the only true follow-up support is when the individual teacher reaches out for additional support in whatever that initial particular need was. Although this is true for most professional learning sessions, there is one professional learning session that is revisited each month by the entire faculty. This is the Ruby Payne work on students in socio-economic situations that entail generation poverty and the homeless. Each month, specific teams present their findings from her book in the faculty meeting. It is a nice reminder from the initial session that was presented to the entire district at the beginning of the year. We were all moved and when each team presents each month, the reminder of what some of our students struggle with each day hits home, yet again. Without these monthly follow up session by the faculty to the faculty, I suspect certain students might fall through the crack. Knight states that, “Modeling, observation, and feedback are essential for learning” (Knight, 2007). With feedback and a plan for improvement, teachers utilizing professional learning opportunities are improving their craft to improve student learning and achievement, and teacher preparedness, for years to come.

**Professional Learning Aligned to School Improvement Goals**

All aspects of the school improvement plan (SIP) are directly aligned to improving student learning and achievement. If there is a statement or decision that went into the SIP, student learning and achievement led that decision making process. The same is true when it comes to all professional learning opportunities. If the professional learning opportunity will improve student learning and achievement, it affects a large grouping of students and teachers, and the school can afford it, that opportunity will in more instances than not, get approved. By following this manner of thinking, it is easy to align all decisions made to the SIP and PL. If “it” will help improve student learning and achievement, “it” will be discussed.

**Funding of Professional Learning**

The school has a specific fund set aside for PL called, “Professional Learning Funds.” This budget has been shrinking for the last few years due to a decrease of funds coming from the state and federal agencies, and although they have been shrinking, some of those funds do go towards professional learning. Along with the Professional Learning Funds, we are also fortunate for the additional funds that can be used, in part, for certain professional learning opportunities. They are: Title IIA, Title I, and IDEA funds and resources, along with other grants the district and school receives (MCMS School Improvement Plan, 2015). If we don’t have funds to provide professional learning opportunities on specifically requested topics, the school will pull teachers to present this information, and in some instances, pay for a substitute to cover that teacher’s classes while they provide the professional learning opportunities for the other staff.

**Teacher Incentives to Participate in Professional Learning**

Part of the TKES process includes the words “continual” to earn the score of “4” in that particular TKES standard. The teachers have been told that if they want to earn a score of “4”, and this is specifically in the Professional Learning section, they must seek out professional learning opportunities on their own and document the process along the way. There are some teachers who value the idea of self-improvement who seek out their own professional development opportunities not for the score, but for themselves and their students. These teachers are recognized for their “continual” efforts through documentation in the TLE TKES process.

**Professional Learning on Students with Special Needs & Diverse Backgrounds**

As stated previously, the professional learning opportunity with Ruby Payne and students in socio-economic, challenging backgrounds, was presented to the entire district faculty at the beginning of this school year. Our middle school staff will continue to revisit this PL each month by redelivering a section from her book to the entire faculty. This type of professional learning covers students with diverse backgrounds.

For students with special needs, we have scheduled trainings throughout the year where the lead teacher and collaborative teacher each work together to better their team teaching to best reach the student(s) with special needs that is in their classroom. These sessions occur at the Board of Education and at our school’s media center. Not all teachers attend this training session as not all teachers have a collaborative teacher and/or have students with special needs in their classroom.

**Collaborative School-Wide Professional Learning Teams**

In the section, “Forms of Professional Learning,” the teams that the teachers participate in are covered in great length. Every teacher is on at least five teacher teams just by being a classroom teacher. They are: Content level, Grade Level, Data Teams, House Teams, and Whole School Initiatives.

**Impact of Professional Learning on Teacher Practice & Evaluation**

For every professional learning opportunity, each teacher (or team) must submit documentation of the time spent and information discussed within that session. Part of this documentation prompts the teacher to include how the information from the professional learning is going to translate into action within the classroom. Teachers are required to include this as part of the documentation process, however, it is rarely revisited by the administration to check and see if it is actually being implemented. When it is checked by the administration, it is to get a better overall picture of what the teacher is attempting to do and compare it to what is actually being observed. Teachers on a specific plan for improvement usually are the ones who get checked on, which I am guessing, once again, goes back to providing enough documentation in case any decisions in the future need to be made by the administration. “If we don’t hold some type of evaluation process on the professional learning sessions for our teachers, we are doing a disservice to our teachers, our students, and our school culture” (D. Wood, personal communication, September 2015).

References

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