

PLC Model School Application

1. Tell us how you created a successful PLC. (Recommended word count is 250–750.)

The process of creating a successful Professional Learning Community (PLC) at Kenneth Cooper Middle School (KCMS) began in the fall of 2014 with a proactive commitment to create a building wide culture focused on learning for all.

“I had watched another school struggle to rebuild their culture after receiving failing scores from the state,” said KCMS Principal, Mark Lebsack. “I decided that we weren't going to wait - we needed to start now.”

The administrative team established the importance of the PLC process and provided resources such as a dedicated PLC room, a block of time, a full time Instructional Coach, and the “why” behind the process.

Another proactive step was to bring a school improvement coach, Dr. Sharon Kramer on board to help us navigate purposeful conversations regarding student achievement.

“I applaud our staff for being open to taking this step,” Lebsack added. “People were nervous and it was painful at times. However, they stayed open minded and over time, began to trust the system and realized it was best for kids.”

During our first grade level collaborative teams in 2014, we established norms for our meetings and wrote a social contract that demonstrated our commitment. The data conversations began with state test scores and soon each teacher knew their students’ needs. Once unit assessments were given, our Instructional Coach guided staff as they broke down that data and planned lessons for remediation or enrichment. Grade level collaborative teams met formally with their administrator and Instructional Coach twice a week and informally the remaining days.

Dr. Kramer stressed the importance of “staying ahead of the pitch count” so collaborative teams began taking the unit tests to clarify exactly which standards and skills the students would need to know before starting the unit. This information helped the collaborative teams create effective common formative assessments which were given approximately every 10 days. The CFA data was analyzed and teachers planned remediation or enrichment based on student needs. This instructional cycle allowed teachers to reflect on their own methods and share strategies in a non-threatening way because it was based on student performance and data, not personalities or teaching styles..

The 2015-2016 school year began with a strong PLC commitment already in place and continued with staffing decisions that ensured “the right people were in the right places.” The climate and culture of our school began to change as instructional staff trusted the process and adopted a growth mindset that was reflected in student growth. Teachers no longer labeled students as “my Pre-AP kids” or “your kids”, but began to refer to students as “our kids” which had a dramatic effect on the ongoing conversations about data and reflection on providing first best instruction.

Principal Lebsack reflects that, “I saw one of the most vocal ‘naysayers’ become a strong advocate for the process because, although painful at times, they had seen it work and began to trust the system.”

The work with Dr. Kramer and the collaboration within the building continued with fidelity as staff were purposeful in using data to make decisions about instruction and reflecting on best practices. This resulted in the mindset that all students can learn at a high level which is reflected in increased student achievement.

Not every change at KCMS is quantified in our testing data. The biggest change at our school has been in the culture of the teaching community. Our teachers were able to commit to the collaborative process, and through this we have become a school that supports each other across grade levels and content areas. Despite the constant changes facing education, including the moving target of cut scores, new Oklahoma standards, and the state budget deficit, KCMS has created a culture that is about growing our students and helping them achieve at high levels. A KCMS teacher, present from the beginning of this process, summed it up perfectly: “It’s hard to imagine doing this any other way now.”

2. Explain how you built high-performing, collaborative teams to focus efforts on improved student learning. (Recommended word count is 150–500.)

KCMS built our collaborative teams on the foundation of our culture change, starting with putting the right people in the right places. We know that there is no greater impact on student learning than the classroom teacher. Starting with the hiring process, the message was clear that we were changing the way we looked at students, data, and instruction. Like any new skill, building high functioning collaborative teams took practice and dedication from teachers and administrators. Some teams were able to hit the ground running, while others required frequent modeling and accountability as they learned what true collaboration looked like. KCMS brought Dr. Sharon Kramer on board and conversations began to focus on the four PLC questions. Teachers began not only looking at student data, but using it to drive instruction. They knew their classes by student, by standard.

Part of improving student learning at KCMS was learning to remove labels from our students. Our teachers used to talk about “my kids,” “the sped kids,” or “honors students.” Teachers were reluctant to share responsibility for their students, and were letting labels determine the level of instruction given. Now they are all “our students,” and our students can all learn at high levels. Learning is not an option, and to this end KCMS teachers share resources, instructional methods, and even students amongst the teams.

3. Describe the strategies used to monitor student learning on a timely basis. (Recommended word count is 150–500.)

To monitor student learning, teachers begin with the end in mind. As a collaborative team, they take the unit test and build calendars to map out the instructional cycle for that unit. The teams also build CFAs with predictive value of the unit assessment, and in turn the state assessment. CFAs are given a minimum of every two weeks, and after giving an assessment, teams analyze data to determine what needs to be retaught, which students need remediation, and plan enrichment opportunities. Data conversations give teachers the chance to reflect on different instructional strategies and to learn from each other to improve their instruction. Another

important aspect of monitoring is done by the students as they track their own progress towards mastery of a standard. This gives students immediate feedback, visual representation of their progress, and a high level of ownership of their learning. In addition to the formal common assessments, teachers use a variety of informal methods to determine the effectiveness of their daily instruction.

4. Share how you created systems of intervention to provide students with additional time and support for learning. (Recommended word count is 150–500.)

We have learned that the key to effective interventions is improving first best instruction. This results in fewer students needing remediation, allowing our teachers to be proactive instead of reactive. However, as additional systems of interventions are needed, collaborative teams at KCMS use the following to provide additional time and support for learning:

1. Classroom interventions within first best instruction
2. The KCMS master schedule has allowed us to build in a daily remediation period called WIN Time (What I Need); this provides each core teacher with thirty extra minutes per class each week. Students rotate through their core classes, which allows teachers to work with students in small groups or individually to support current learning. Teachers also use their plan time to bring in students for Focus Time, which is dedicated to help students with the “backfill” skills needed to bring them up to grade level.
3. During the spring push towards testing teachers voluntarily give up plan time to work with students that are nearing mastery.
4. Title 1 reading and math classes deliver direct instruction to students on foundational skills to bring them up to grade level.
5. Spiral review in all content areas help our students maintain mastery throughout the school year
6. Math and reading bootcamps at the beginning of the year refresh basic skills

While our system of interventions can be credited with helping our students learn and grow, a large part of our success is in the shift of student mindsets at KCMS. Before we committed to the PLC process, our students had very little buy-in for their learning. Most would not return assignments or work outside the classroom, and were not motivated to master any standards. Now, the majority of our students choose to work hard in and out of the classroom and are not satisfied until they have mastered everything presented to them. The culture shift at KCMS started with our administrators, transformed our faculty, and is now influencing our students to choose to learn at high levels.