

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

April 19, 2007

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Update on Professional Learning Communities Institute

Executive Summary

The Professional Learning Communities Institute (PLCI) is an innovative professional development initiative designed to increase student achievement in selected elementary schools by building the school improvement capacity of each school's leadership team. Through participation in the PLCI, leadership team members, including administrators, teachers, supporting professionals, and parents develop the skills and knowledge that will enable them to create and sustain a high performing professional learning community (PLC) in their schools. PLCI participants review case studies, engage in reflective discussions, examine their own practices, and plan for school improvement. Teams are provided with structured professional development, ongoing support from the PLCI staff, and enhanced school improvement funding. As a result of these experiences, teams identify needs, plan strategies, and implement action plans to improve student achievement and eliminate the achievement gap. Implementing these action plans often involves modifying belief systems, changing school structures, and working in new ways to meet the needs of students. Review of PLCI implementation in the 11 Cohort I PLCI schools reveals that team members have learned the key PLC concepts and applied them with quality in their buildings. Analysis of 2006 Maryland School Assessment (MSA) scores shows that Cohort I PLCI schools as a group demonstrated one-year gains on MSA greater than state and county increases. Today's discussion focuses on the collaborative development of the PLCI, the continuing implementation of the program during the 2006–2007 school year, and the next steps for expanding the impact of the initiative.

Background

PLCI is a key component of efforts by the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to improve the ongoing professional development of staff throughout the system. Building the capacity of staff is important for ensuring that teachers, administrators, and support professionals

have the skills, strategies, practices, and beliefs to meet the learning needs of all students. Providing professional development and ongoing, job-embedded support for staff is a fundamental aspect of the school system's strategic plan, *Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence*. The focus on building professional learning communities is evident in key reform initiatives. At the elementary school level, for example, the comprehensive Early Success Performance Plan was designed to improve student learning results through a strong professional development plan focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Additionally, the Professional Growth Systems for teachers, administrators, and supporting services staff provided the processes for the necessary supports. Effective implementation of these reform efforts has produced important student learning results, including greater reading proficiency in kindergarten, improved reading performance across all grade levels, and record-setting performances on the MSA. Through the study of our successes, model schools have been identified and have become case studies for improvement efforts. The PLCI is designed to share these promising practices and to build collaboration and capacity at the local school level.

The PLCI was developed by a cross-functional team that included the deputy superintendent of schools, the deputy superintendent for information and organizational systems, the chief operating officer, the president of the Montgomery County Education Association, the president of the Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel, the president of SEIU Local 500, the associate superintendent for organizational development, the associate superintendent for special education and student services, the chief school performance officer, and the director of the department of shared accountability. The project team also included representatives from three successful schools—Broad Acres, Ronald McNair, and Viers Mill elementary schools. From the beginning, the development of the PLCI was a collaborative process that involved many stakeholder groups, especially the employee organizations, in creating a program that would benefit schools and students.

This project team began meeting in September 2004 with two purposes in mind—to facilitate the writing of case studies of three exemplary MCPS elementary schools and to formulate a professional development plan using the case studies as a tool to help schools improve. From September 2004 through June 2005, the project team met monthly and worked with staff in the Department of Shared Accountability (DSA) and the Office of the Superintendent of Schools to develop the case studies for Broad Acres, Ronald McNair, and Viers Mill elementary schools. These three schools were selected as the subjects for the case studies because they had achieved significant gains in student achievement and had sustained the gains over a period of three years or more. The case studies were based on visits to each of the schools and interviews with administrators, teachers, supporting services staff, parents, and central office personnel. The case studies reflect a detailed narrative about the reform efforts of each school. As the case studies were developed, the project team collaborated on the development of an innovative plan to use the case studies for the professional development of school leadership teams. Attachments A and B describe the overall structure and professional development cycle of the PLCI.

The PLCI was first introduced to all MCPS elementary principals at an Administrative and Supervisory staff meeting in May 2005. Individual schools were invited to have staff apply for

participation in the institute by submitting a letter of interest. The PLCI cross-functional team reviewed all of the submitted letters and selected 11 schools for participation in the PLCI—Ashburton, Damascus, Dr. Charles R. Drew, Fox Chapel, Gaithersburg, Glen Haven, Highland, S. Christa McAuliffe, Judith A. Resnik, Dr. Sally K. Ride, and Whetstone elementary schools.

In April 2006, a second cohort of elementary schools was identified through the same process. Schools selected for participation in Cohort II of PLCI were Bel Pre, Burning Tree, Cashell, Clopper Mill, Lake Seneca, Monocacy, Montgomery Knolls, Summit Hall, Strathmore, and Woodlin elementary schools. During the 2006–2007 school year, leadership teams from 21 elementary schools participated in the PLCI. A total of 335 team members, including administrators, teachers, support professionals, and parents participated in ongoing PLCI professional development.

Up until February 2007, PLCI implementation was carried out by Mr. Jamie Virga, director of the PLCI and former principal of Viers Mill Elementary, one of the model schools for the institute, and Ms. Joan Mory, instructional specialist for the PLCI. Mr. Virga was appointed associate superintendent for organizational development on February 13, 2007. Plans are under way to select a new director for the PLCI.

In the 2007–2008 school year, the 11 Cohort I schools will exit formal participation in the PLCI. Though these schools will continue to receive informal consultative support, the leadership teams will not participate in structured professional development. The spaces vacated by the Cohort I schools will be filled by ten newly selected schools, hereafter referred to as Cohort III of the PLCI. This cohort will be the first to include middle school leadership teams. As part of the MCPS Middle School Reform Plan, leadership teams from the five Phase I middle schools will participate in the PLCI. The Phase I schools are Benjamin Banneker Middle School, Roberto Clemente Middle School, Montgomery Village Middle School, Sligo Middle School, and Earle B. Wood Middle School. Leadership teams from these five schools will begin their participation in the PLCI during the summer of 2007. The PLCI participation will assist and support these teams as they work to build the PLC in their schools through the process of implementing the components of the Middle School Reform Plan. To support implementation of the PLCI at the middle school level, the FY 2008 Operating Budget includes funding for an additional instructional specialist position for the PLCI. Addition of this instructional specialist will increase the capacity of the PLCI team to work effectively with middle school leadership teams.

In addition, five more elementary schools will be added to PLCI for the 2007–2008 school year. These schools will be identified through an application and selection process in May 2007. These new elementary school teams will begin their PLCI participation during the summer of 2007.

The Structure of the Professional Learning Communities Institute

Structured Professional Development

Six times during the school year, the leadership teams from the PLCI schools attend structured professional development sessions. These full-day sessions are designed to increase team understanding of the characteristics of effective professional learning communities, build team capacity to create changes in the PLCI schools, and provide teams with the time and guidance to produce specific action steps. The morning portion of each session (8:30 a.m.–12:00 p.m.) is a structured professional development experience. Most morning sessions involve the careful review of a case study of an effective business or school organization. The case study review includes small group discussion, a whole-group debrief, and reflection in school action teams. Guest presenters from the case study schools speak at each session offering their insights and answering questions. In the afternoon portion of each session, school teams are provided with time to apply their learning to their own school and student achievement goals. They review student data, monitor progress, and agree on action steps. PLCI staff members circulate to each team during this time to provide assistance and guidance.

Ongoing School Support

In between structured professional development sessions, the PLCI staff provides ongoing support to all schools, tailoring the support to each school's needs. The PLCI team visits the individual schools, meeting with the principal, the staff development teacher, and other school staff. PLCI staff members participate in leadership team meetings, school improvement plan sessions, data dialogues, and instructional team meetings. The PLCI team conducts presentations to staff and parent groups on a variety of topics, including building effective teams, using student data, using content maps to communicate curriculum, increasing parent involvement, pursuing national board certification for teachers, and providing effective intervention for struggling students. The PLCI team also has worked with entire PLCI elementary school staffs to review case studies, facilitating reflection, self-assessment, and action-planning. PLCI schools also have been connected with the case study schools through visits, observations, and sharing of effective practices. As a result of these efforts, PLCI schools are modifying their practices and processes to focus school efforts on increasing student achievement.

Additional Baldrige-guided School Improvement Plan Funding

Each PLCI school is eligible to apply for up to \$10,000 in additional Baldrige-guided School Improvement Plan funding. Schools must develop budget proposals following the same procedures in place for regular Baldrige-guided School Improvement Plan funds. Plans must be developed collaboratively with the school improvement team and must support school improvement plan goals. Draft plans must be approved by the director of the PLCI and the school's community superintendent. School staff are encouraged to use the additional funding to support academic interventions for students, facilitate collaboration among teachers, enhance

instructional quality, and expand parent and community outreach. PLCI Cohort I schools have used additional Baldrige-guided School Improvement Plan funds to support a variety of strategies, including the implementation of before and after school reading clubs, expansion of time for instructional team analysis of student work, the purchase of instructional materials to enhance mathematics acceleration, and parent curriculum nights.

Measuring Success

It is the goal of the PLCI to increase academic achievement for all students in the PLCI schools. Research indicates that schools characterized by highly functioning professional learning communities are able to realize and sustain student achievement gains. Accordingly, the PLCI will measure effectiveness by monitoring student achievement gains and examining evidence of professional learning community characteristics and products.

Cohort I schools spent their first year of the PLCI examining their school culture, belief systems, strategies, and processes. Teams began to make changes in how they organized their school staff for instruction, how they communicated high expectations to students, how they responded when students did not learn, how they supported collaboration among staff members, and how they reached out to empower parents. These efforts resulted in the creation and implementation of many effective strategies. Staff in PLCI schools have designed and implemented targeted academic intervention for identified students. Staff also has created new structures for collecting, analyzing, and using student data; established clear processes and expectations for collaborative planning; and implemented innovative parent outreach efforts.

As the Cohort I PLCI leadership teams have worked to implement new beliefs and processes, input from the teams regarding the status of the professional learning community in each school has periodically been gathered. Survey results indicate that PLCI team members are seeing steady growth in the key characteristics of professional learning communities in their buildings. These key characteristics include a focus on student learning as the fundamental purpose at the school, high expectations for all students, a school culture that supports collaborative teams, and a schoolwide system for responding when students are having difficulty learning.

Results from the 2006 MSA indicate that PLCI Cohort I schools, as a group, are making progress in student achievement.

- Combined performance in Grades 3–5 mathematics: The percentage of students in Cohort I PLCI schools demonstrating proficiency on the Mathematics MSA increased from 75.7 percent in 2005 to 80 percent in 2006, a gain of 4.3 percent. This improvement exceeded the Maryland state average growth of 4 percent.
- Combined performance in Grades 3–5 reading: The percentage of students in Cohort I PLCI schools demonstrating proficiency on the Reading MSA increased from 76.1 percent in 2005 to 78.4 percent in 2006, a gain of 2.3 percent. This growth exceeded the Maryland state average growth of 1.8 percent.

- Analysis of combined MSA scores for PLCI Cohort I schools indicates that the gap between African American and Hispanic students compared with their Asian and White counterparts narrowed from 2005 to 2006 (Attachments C and D).

Assessment/Group	Maryland One-Year Gain	MCPS One-Year Gain	PLCI Cohort I One-Year Gain
Grade 3 Reading/ All students	2.4%	1.4%	3.0%
Grade 3 Reading/ Hispanic students	5.8%	7.0%	10.1%
Grade 3 Math/ Students receiving special education services	3.0%	2.2%	14.2%
Grade 5 Math/ All students	4.2%	2.3%	6.9%
Grade 5 Math/ African American students	6.2%	3.9%	10.5%
Grade 5 Math/ Limited English Proficient students	10.2%	16.3%	27.4%

The second year of PLCI implementation is providing Cohort I school leadership teams the opportunity to fully integrate their newfound knowledge about professional learning communities into the processes involved in planning for a new school year—master scheduling, staffing, use of space, outreach to parents, the function of teams, and monitoring student performance. Ongoing implementation of PLC beliefs, strategies, and processes at a deeper level will facilitate continued gains in student achievement at these schools.

Next Steps

Next steps for the PLCI include the following:

- Complete year two of the PLCI for the first cohort of schools through facilitating reflection, review, and celebration. Plan strategies for providing Cohort I schools with continuing consultative support, as needed, following graduation from the PLCI.
- Continue implementation of the PLCI with Cohort II schools. Sessions are planned for April and May 2007. Gather PLCI participant feedback to plan professional development for year two with Cohort II.

- Conduct the process to select five additional elementary schools for participation in Cohort III of the PLCI, to begin with the 2007–2008 school year.
- Plan implementation of the PLCI for the five Phase I middle schools. PLCI participation is a key component of the Middle School Reform Plan. Leadership teams from the five Phase I schools will participate in the PLCI through the 2007–2008 school year.

Conclusion

The PLCI is a promising approach for providing high quality ongoing professional development for school leadership teams. We believe that continuing implementation and expansion of the PLCI will help build the capacity of our teachers, administrators, and supporting professionals resulting in increased student achievement.

Present at the Board table for today's discussion are Mr. Jamie Virga, associate superintendent, Office of Organizational Development; Ms. Joan Mory, instructional specialist, Professional Learning Communities Institute; Mrs. Sharon Jones, principal, Gaithersburg Elementary School; Mrs. Laura Hankins, staff development teacher, Gaithersburg Elementary School; Mrs. Zoraida Brown, Grade 1 teacher, Gaithersburg Elementary School.

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Attachments