

Cross-Curricular Collaboration: #1Word.1Goal.1Team.

By: Brian Disney, Mooresville High School

Team Members Names: Joyce Gilly, Kristin Robinson

Contact: brian.disney@mooresvilleschools.org

Background That Led to Your Team's Inquiry:

The Mooresville High School teachers expressed a desire to work more with teachers in other departments because they felt like they primarily only knew teachers in their own departments. The teachers had focused the previous three years on content-based Professional Learning Communities to implement new state standards and common assessments. The PLC's used the DuFour model and coincided with the implementation of a new teacher evaluation system including the use of student data. In addition to being segregated by department during professional development time, nearly half of the teachers had been hired over a four-year period. Because of this, the teachers did not feel like a cohesive family.

In addition to the separation by department, the MHS staff was also facing the reality that our students did not perform well on the new ISTEP+ exams in the spring of 2016. The English pass rate dropped nearly 20% from the ECA scores in 2015 and the math pass rate dropped all the way to 26%. Additionally, our students really struggled with the constructed response problems with many students leaving them blank. With the increased emphasis on reading and writing on the new state-mandated assessments, we knew we needed to make some changes. Therefore, we knew we needed additional professional development and it would take our entire staff working together.

Another factor indicating a need for interdisciplinary professional development activities was the results of an instructional audit conducted in August. The audit indicated a lack of consistency in the implementation of the MHS Instructional Framework between classrooms. The audit indicated that most of the components of the framework were visible in each classroom but the level and quality of implementation varied from room to room. Therefore, the purpose of our action inquiry was:

- MHS staff members interact with and get to know teachers in other departments.
- MHS staff members share best practices and learn from each other.
- Increase cross-curricular collaboration.
- Improve classroom and school culture.
- Improve classroom instruction focusing on student learning.

Statement of Your Team's Wondering:

With this purpose, we wondered in what ways can professional development in cross-curricular teams improve classroom culture and instruction.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into our wondering, we developed an interdisciplinary professional development plan. The first step of the plan was for the MHS Leadership Cabinet (principal, assistant principals, attendance officer, guidance director, and athletic director) to become a cohesive team who worked toward the same goal. Our

first project in aligning our Leadership Cabinet was setting a vision and goal for the year. We developed the motto #1Word.1Goal.1Team. to emphasize that each staff member was a member of our team and within that team we would each have a goal that could be described with one word. This became our theme for our year which we revisited regularly. With the assistance of teacher leaders, we also began planning a staff retreat, a book study, and professional development activities during staff meetings.

Our first cross-curricular activity was our staff retreat to kick off the 2016-17 school year. The retreat was voluntary and our first-ever attempt at a retreat. We were excited to have about 75% of our teachers attend. We introduced staff members, played games, reviewed our MHS Instructional Framework, and began a book study on “What Great Teachers Do Differently: 17 Things That Matter Most” by Todd Whitaker (2013). During the fall semester, we conducted a book study on “What Great Teachers Do Differently” and, in the spring, we studied “The Fundamental 5: The Formula for Quality Instruction” by Sean Cain and Mike Laird (2011). For these book studies, teachers were broken into groups of 6-8 teachers from multiple departments and each group was led by a department chair. The groups met about once per month and discussed questions related to the books and their classroom culture, procedures, and instruction.

In response to our students’ performance on constructed-response questions, we developed a school-wide response framework called RAPS (Restate, Answer, Prove, So what?). This was shared during a staff member to introduce it staff members. A couple of teachers provided additional support during prep periods one day and our book study groups discussed implementation ideas, successes, and challenges. At our next staff meeting, three teachers (English, social studies, science) shared exemplary ideas that they used in their classrooms. Using our interdisciplinary book study groups, we continued to review implementation ideas, successes, and challenges throughout the semester.

Additionally, department chairs conducted short observations related to our instructional audit. First, they observed members of their own departments and provided feedback. Later in the year, they observed teachers in other departments. Finally, we allowed teachers to voluntarily participate in a peer-to-peer observation initiative. We collected data on these cross-curricular collaboration activities by soliciting feedback from teachers, collecting notes from the book studies, taking pictures, collecting activity sheets and exit slips at staff meetings, and conducting a staff survey.

Stating Your Team’s Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing our data, three important things we learned include:

- The Staff Retreat was a fantastic way to start the year and to increase cross-curricular collaboration before the school year officially began.
- The book studies provided opportunities for teachers to learn from each other and improve classroom culture and instruction.
- The RAPS constructed response initiative united the staff around a common goal and provided more opportunities for teachers to learn together.

The Staff Retreat was a great way to start the school year and kick off the cross-curricular collaboration theme. The environment of the staff retreat was very relaxed and one could hear lots of laughter and sharing throughout the morning. When surveyed, over 90% of the teachers in attendance indicated that they enjoyed the cross-curricular collaboration and that they were able to share some of their best practices. One new teacher stated that she enjoyed meeting other teachers before the year began. Another teacher stated, “I enjoyed the longer amount of time allotted for brainstorming and general discussion about education. Other

teachers shared that the best part of the retreat was “having more a ‘team’ feeling when we finished” and that they “enjoyed the friendship.” One veteran teacher even indicated that she dreaded going to the retreat but enjoyed herself so much that she definitely will not miss another one. The feedback on the retreat was extremely positive.

The book studies provided opportunities for teachers to learn from each other and improve classroom culture and instruction. Feedback from the book studies was overwhelmingly positive though the staff did like the “Great Teachers” book study better. Teachers shared that their favorite part was getting to know different people better and the conversations the teachers had. They appreciated the short books with concise chapters since they are so busy. They enjoyed the quality conversations about teaching and tried some new things in their classrooms. They believed that the books reinforced what they were doing and should be doing as educators and kept these ideas at the forefront of their daily instruction. Over 75% of survey respondents indicated that they were “able to learn best practices from other MHS teachers.” The book studies were enjoyable and led teachers to improved instruction.

The RAPS constructed response initiative united the staff around a common goal and provided more opportunities for teachers to learn together. Feedback from teachers about the initiative included “being a school-wide effort – kinds knew we were all on board.” Teachers also stated that enjoyed “getting inspiration from other teachers” and “seeing how other teachers have used them in their classrooms.” Teachers enjoyed this professional development activities including the presentation of ideas and dialogue about learning opportunities.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

Our action inquiry was very successful and provided numerous insights into the ways in which professional development in interdisciplinary teams can improve classroom culture and instruction. We discovered throughout this year that our school culture is more collaborative and our staff enjoyed working with and getting to know teachers in other departments. By organizing in interdisciplinary teams and providing common resources, the MHS teachers participated in dialogue about classroom/school culture and instructional practices. Teachers were sharing their best practices, learning best practices from their colleagues, and making changes to their classroom procedures and instruction. We had greater teacher buy-in with our RAPS initiative than for previous school-wide activities. Many teachers were interested in and did observe other teachers’ classrooms. During the 2016-17 school year, the MHS staff learned and grew together as a part of our interdisciplinary activities.

Looking ahead to next year, we cannot wait for the 2nd annual MHS Staff Retreat. We will also continue to learn together through additional book studies. Teachers will be given a choice of books to study related to education, leadership, poverty, or relationships. At the end of the semester, book study groups will share their learning with other staff members. Additionally, each member of the MHS Leadership Cabinet will conduct their own action inquiry to continue to grow professionally. We hope to expand action inquiry to staff-wide professional growth in the near future.

References:

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