Partner Schools - History

During 2003-04, the University of Wyoming (UW) College of Education (COE) undertook an effort to transition their field experiences for preservice teacher candidates from a traditional Professional Development School (PDS) model to a more collaborative model of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The challenges faced in Wyoming are unlike any other "rural" state given the geographic size of the state, the rural nature of most school districts, the small population distributed across the large area, and the reality that post-secondary higher education options (in-state) are limited to seven community colleges and one four-year university.

For many years the COE has been challenged by the expectation that field placements for preservice teacher candidates would be statewide. The PDSs, themselves, represent one era of evolution for our partnerships, as funded by a Teacher Quality Enhancement (TQE) federal grant from 1999-2003. The site-based delivery that characterized the PDSs was well-received by the respective PDS district sites, but unfortunately without continued grant funding, this model was not fiscally sustainable. Thus, the primary reasons for transitioning to the PLC model included: a need to continue to offer preservice field experiences in multiple geographic and cultural areas of the state, to meet student needs in this rural state, to honor the WSUP (Wyoming School University Partnership), and to address certain elements of our NCATE (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) and PTSB (Professional Teaching Standards Board) accreditation requirements related to monitoring program quality. Additionally, the college also had a need to concentrate those placements so that the quality of interaction, evaluation, and collaboration across university faculty, preservice teacher candidates, and mentor teachers could be improved and enhanced. Finally, the college was acting on a desire to focus our school partnerships more tightly on P-12 student learning and the contextualized realities of public school accountability in the 21st Century.

In 2003-2006 the College of Education worked with four active PLCs comprised of five Wyoming school districts: Sheridan County School District #2 (Sheridan), Fremont County School Districts #14 (Ethete) & #25 (Riverton), Laramie County School District #1 (Cheyenne), and Albany County School District #1 (Laramie). The Sheridan PLC served only the elementary education program. The other three PLCs worked with both elementary and secondary preservice programs. In 2003-04, we focused our efforts on the following goals for the PLCs:

- Collaborative decision-making among UW COE, districts, and mentor teachers (re: student teacher placements and other commitments of the Memorandum of Understanding)
- Improved relationships between UW COE and districts
- Increased contact between UW COE faculty and mentor teachers
- Increased contact and communication within and across elementary and
secondary teachers and administrators, and COE participants within the district

- Identification of mutual areas for renewal and improved access to K-12 education
- Expanded opportunities for inservice and preservice teacher professional development in Wyoming
- Professional development related to site needs and school improvement plans

There was widespread agreement that it would take several years to reach these seven goals. The literature and research about learning communities indicates that such cultural shifts are both evolutionary and context-specific. There is no right or wrong process or result from the development of a PLC. This is both a good news and bad news scenario: Good news because each PLC site team has the freedom to mature and adapt within its own context; Bad news because there is no blueprint to make the collaborative process any more efficient. Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) suggest that there are three themes that are evident in every PLC: "(1) a solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (2) collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals, and (3) a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement" (p. 3). Trust, time, and mutual commitment seem to be critical foundations of PLCs and much of the work accomplished in 2003-04 represented great progress toward increased trust among partners, mutual agreement that time is a precious commodity for all partners, and evidence of commitment to the themes identified in Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities.

In 2004-06 we continued to work toward the seven goals within the unique context of each PLC. We began to understand the long-term implications of the reality that PLCs are never "done"... they are forever "in progress." We set in motion feedback and evaluation opportunities for the various constituents as we implemented significant changes in the Wyoming Teacher Education Program and the assessment of our candidates. Evaluation responses in 2004-05 of the PDS/PLC work included these recommendations for our PLCs:

- Collaboration among organizations and individuals needs to continue so that decision-making and project responsibilities are shared.
- Contacts between UW COE faculty and district and school administrators and teachers are essential for sustaining the PLCs and should continue.
- District and school participants should be given more clarity about the nature and goals of PLCs and guidance on how to know whether a PLC has been established.
- Professional development should continue and be relevant to participants' needs. Participants value opportunities to study and acquire new knowledge and to discuss and share what they have learned.
- PLC site teams should obtain feedback from participants about PLC
professional development so they can better design trainings that will lead to changes in practice.

- Data indicate that perceptions of UW COE participants and district and school participants about PLC progress and achievements may differ. PLC site teams should obtain regular feedback from all site participants about PLC progress, and the results should be shared and discussed.
- Participant comments indicate that more teachers should be involved in PLC activities, particularly in professional development and in sharing opinions about improvements in teacher preparation.
- Professional development should continue and be relevant to participants' needs. Participants value opportunities to study and acquire new knowledge and to discuss and share actual classroom experiences.

Evaluation responses for 2005-06 from PLC partners included:
- Very high agreement that Mentors and Residency Candidates were using reflection and standards to monitor candidate performance and improve the mentoring relationships.
- High agreement across Mentors and Residency Candidates that there is room for improvement in mentoring candidates in the design of units that include strategies for the integration of multiple disciplines (e.g., science, reading, mathematics).
- There is growing confusion about the use of the term “Professional Learning Community” given professional development initiatives of the Wyoming Department of Education.
- Discrepancies in communication across mentor teachers, candidates, CoEd faculty, and the College are most severe for non-PLC placements.

The initial MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) agreements expired in May 2006. During the spring semester 2006, the COE engaged with district administrations and representatives to develop new agreements. For 2006-10, we partnered with these districts for the purposes of Phase III (methods, residency/student teaching):

- Albany #1 (Secondary & Elementary)
- Fremont #14 & #25 (Elementary Only)
- Natrona #1 (Secondary & Elementary for UW/CC Only)
- Sheridan #2 (Elementary Only)
- Sweetwater #1 & #2 (Elementary Only)

These agreements include this statement of goals:
The concept of a PLC is fundamentally grounded in the same principles as a professional development school (PDS), but with increased emphasis on collaboration, shared decision making, and identification of mutual goals and unique constraints. We expect that the PLC model will evolve within that structure of collaboration to be a partnership that allows for:
• Increased contact between teacher education faculty and mentor teachers (including professional development activities, testing new instructional strategies, shared inquiry efforts, etc.)
• High quality mentoring and evaluation of preservice students in the field
• Increased communication and articulation within and across elementary, secondary, administration, and university participants within the PLC district
• Identification of mutual areas for renewal and improved access to Education for all learners
• Development of a community focused on collaboration and learning at all levels for all partners
• All partners to address and meet their respective accountability and accrediting requirements

In 2006-07 the COE and partner districts moved forward with the implementation of the new MOU agreements, development of some new PLC partnerships, and residency field placements that were largely in PLC sites. Revised, collaborative placement procedures were implemented, and each PLC site (as of December, 2006) has a half-time Facilitator. The facilitators play critical roles as the local liaisons between COE faculty and district personnel. In 2006-07, work in the PLC sites expanded to include professional development opportunities and extended conversations focused on the Agenda for Education in a Democracy. These activities are the result of renewed efforts to incorporate the work of the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) and the Wyoming School-University Partnership (The Partnership) in our preparation of new teachers.

In February, 2007 the College Leadership Council approved the change of nomenclature from “PLCs” to “Partner Schools.” It is important to note that this change in name does not affect in any way the conceptual bases and the goals stated in the current MOU agreements.