

Professional Learning Current Reality (Part A of GAPSS)

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Abstract

Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPSS) is a tool developed by the State of Georgia to help schools focus on what is needed to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress mandated by No Child Left Behind. This narrative essay focuses its analysis on technology and professional learning at North Paulding High School in Dallas, GA. An interview with its principal, Dr. Mark Crowe, illuminated many strengths and weaknesses in the professional learning current reality at NPHS.

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Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPSS) analysis is a method employed by the Georgia Dept. of Education to assist schools in designing their school improvement plans, meeting No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress goals, monitoring progress toward reaching those goals and improving instruction and therefore student performance. As a future technology coach, it is imperative that I familiarize myself with the GAPSS process and how technology fits into its structure. To this end, I have applied GAPSS analysis to my current school, North Paulding High School (NPHS), part of the Paulding County School System.

Technology support is integrated throughout the GAPSS review process. It appears in these categories: Instruction, Professional Learning, Leadership, Building Capacity, Group Processes, Communication, and Resources. GAPSS analysis includes data gathered from surveys of all members of the school community, classroom observations, and interviews with the principal, teachers, students, counselors, and other key parties if needed. Schools are evaluated for curriculum, assessment, instruction, planning and organization, student, family, and community involvement and support, professional learning, leadership, and school culture.

I began my GAPSS professional learning evaluation by interviewing the principal at NPHS, Dr. Mark Crowe in his office on September 18, 2013, at 2:30 p.m. We began with the technology vision. I had been unable to find a technology vision statement in our school policies or School Improvement Plan. When I asked Dr. Crowe (2013) about it, he responded, "I don't know that there is a stated vision/mission of what technology county-wise is trying to accomplish. Each school kind of tries to do what it is they feel like they need to do to accomplish their academic goals." He went on to say that his vision is to give students the tools

and the technology they need to be successful. During his tenure 20 SMART Boards have been purchased for classrooms. Over the past year many teachers have been trained in SMART Boards, OnCourse and our school website management, and have received rudimentary training on Thinkgate, a data analysis software that promises to be crucial to future school improvement plans. Crowe's (2013) future plans include creating wireless hubs throughout the school to enable students, teachers and guest educators to take advantage of their own personal technology. These technological improvements directly address the GAPSS PL 1.6 criteria for technology support in the classroom (Barge, 2012).

Funding for professional learning at NPHS comes from the system, but I was unable to obtain a figure for these funds. This money has been used in the past to pay for teacher workshops, their substitutes, and resources for book studies. Other types of professional learning at NPHS include math/science partnerships, GLISI learning communities, co-teaching best practices, and strategies favored by the Teachers of History (TOH) Grant. Some of these incentives are funded locally and others through the system or through grants. Of special interest at NPHS is the diversity training offered there which. Each year our English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher provides a workshop to our teachers to teach them strategies for working with ESOL students who face language and cultural barriers. NPHS co-teachers are now in their third year of coaching by a contracted professional learning provider. Dr. Crowe (2013) wants these teachers "to truly be a co-teaching model, fully utilizing two completely certified teachers in the classroom instead of one becoming a subordinate parapro pointing and making sure everyone is on task."

Follow-up on the implementation of professional learning focuses varies among the training offered. For instance, teachers involved in the TOH Grant are evaluated periodically by

the grant administrators. NPHS co-teachers have been trained the past 2 years by an outside consulting agency. Their representatives come to NPHS three times a year to observe the co-teachers and make sure they are implementing the training they have received and coaching them toward mastery. Those teachers who attend outside workshops frequently have no follow-up to see if they are incorporating and mastering the new techniques. Dr. Crowe (2013) sees the lack of follow-up as “probably a downfall of professional learning. Everything you go to, there is no clear check to see if you mastered that. So if there is an improvement needed I would say that is probably it.” The administration at NPHS is working on improving monitoring professional learning techniques by employing the assistance of Bill McCown, Coordinator, Leadership and Learning/Principals' Center at Northwest Georgia Regional Educational Service Agency. McCown trains teachers as instructional coaches and regularly brings them to observe teachers at NPHS and give them feedback on their instruction.

This year NPHS has created a Professional Learning Committee with the goal of helping “identify in the school what we need and the kind of work to answer our own professional learning questions and do our own training in-house” (Crowe, 2013). Teachers on this committee were selected for their interest in professional learning and for their leadership abilities. This committee meets regularly with Dr. Crowe and The Georgia Leader Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) representative to discuss the status of our professional learning and to form plans to address our current needs and to include monitoring the effectiveness of professional learning on student achievement. This kind of job-embedded professional learning focus is what is needed to comply with the national standards for professional development (Standards).

Perusal of the Paulding County School System professional learning webpage and the NPHS School Improvement Plan revealed a strategy that is responsive to data. All of the county and school improvement goals are related to student achievement which is based on test scores, passing rates, graduation rates, and other such information. The word “data” is mentioned eleven times in our School Improvement Plan. Professional learning is designed to address weaknesses revealed by the data and align improvement to the system goals. For instance, the county goal, “Increase achievement in content areas” (North Paulding High School) became “Increase student achievement in all content areas by implementing writing in all courses including varied levels of depth of knowledge (DOK)” (North Paulding High School). This alignment and data analysis is key to implementing the standards for professional learning laid out in our text book Standards for Professional Learning by Learning Forward.

Overall, NPHS is working hard to provide the professional learning their teachers need to improve instruction. There is a lack of resources for dedicated coaching staff and for continuous monitoring and evaluation. The institution of a committee of administrative and teacher leaders dedicated to improving professional learning, the use of data for planning professional learning and the alignment of school improvement goals with the system goals are all important steps toward meeting the criteria specified in *Standards for Professional Learning*.

References

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