

Geneva High School Memorandum

To: Dr. Mutchler and the Board of Education

From: Tom Rogers on behalf of the GHS Faculty

Date: January 18th, 2013

Re: Request to Implement Professional Learning Communities at GHS in Fall 2013

“As we grow in learning, we more justly appreciate our dependence upon each other. The sum-total of medical knowledge is now so great and wide-spreading that it would be futile for one man to attempt to acquire, or for any one man to assume that he has, even a good working knowledge of any large part of the whole. The very necessities of the case are driving practitioners into cooperation. The best interest of the patient is the only interest to be considered, and in order that the sick may have the benefit of advancing knowledge, union of forces is necessary.” (Dr. William Mayo, 1910)

"The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is building the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community. **The path to change in the classroom lies within and through professional learning communities.** Throughout our ten year study, whenever we found an effective school or an effective department within a school, **without exception** that school or department has been part of a collaborative professional learning community." (Milbrey and McLaughlin, 1995)

For the past 18 months, the Geneva High School faculty has been engaged in an in-depth collaborative study of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and the benefits this model can provide to our organization. After a thorough review of many options, we have developed a model that we believe will bring a multitude of benefits to student achievement in our school.

The GHS faculty has strongly endorsed the pursuit of Professional Learning Communities as outlined in this document. To most effectively facilitate this model in Fall 2013, we are seeking to modify our schedule once per week in order to allow Professional Learning Communities to be implemented at Geneva High School. The model that we are proposing is designed to improve the collective professional practice of our faculty, which in turn will assist all of our students as they strive to meet high expectations. In addition to our objective of focused staff collaboration, a variety of student interventions will be incorporated that serve our students directly. The model we are seeking to implement for both staff collaboration and student interventions is cost-neutral to the school district.

In this document, I will attempt to effectively summarize the philosophical and logistical implications of this significant shift in our school improvement work. I have broken down this report into the following sections:

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How did we come to this recommendation for Professional Learning Communities?

The concept of Professional Learning Communities at Geneva High School dates back to the 2010-11 school year. At the time, faculty were engaged in a number of initiatives including the development of common assessments, increasing the academic supports for struggling students, and broadening the range of social-emotional supports for students. Taking on each of these initiatives was a daunting task. Working diligently to support the district’s goal of “Success For All Students”, faculty made progress in all of these areas but at the same time became frustrated at the lack of a framework that unified these various initiatives.

Several faculty members had heard of the Professional Learning Communities model being successful in other high schools, and the conversation began rather organically at Geneva High School. By the end of the 2010-11 school year there were sufficient numbers of faculty interested in the topic of PLCs to warrant the creation of a summer research project. Over the summer months, faculty from all departments volunteered to participate in a book study of “Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap” by Rick DuFour -- one of the premiere texts on this subject. The group met throughout the summer with one goal – to learn enough about Professional Learning Communities to determine if this topic warranted further study on the part of the entire GHS faculty. By the end of the summer research project, the consensus of the research team was that the implementation of PLCs at Geneva High School held enormous promise and therefore needed staff-wide study.

During the 2011-12 school year, significant focus was given to the topic of Professional Learning Communities. A School Improvement Team was formed with the goal of focusing the study of Professional Learning Communities at Geneva High School. This team helped to direct the conversations and processes needed to more thoroughly develop what this would look like at GHS. We were very fortunate to have a presenter for our October Institute that was well-versed in how PLCs work specifically at the high school level. Multiple faculty visit teams were sent to other suburban high schools to study their implementation of Professional Learning Communities. Staff members from a variety of schools were contacted by members of the School Improvement Team to seek their perspectives on PLCs. The result of this in-depth study was a rough sketch of what many of the components of PLCs could look like at GHS.

In the fall of 2012, the draft components were blended together into a proposal for review by the School Improvement Team and other stakeholder groups including faculty, Geneva Education Association representatives, students, and parents.

Parallel to this process, we were required to submit a school improvement plan to the Illinois State Board of Education in December 2012. If you recall, thirty-one (31) indicators were evaluated as part of this process. The evaluation of these indicators allowed us to reflect on the current practices and systems in place at Geneva High School. All six (6) of the indicators that rose to the top in this process related to the general theme of Instructional Teams – an analogous term for Professional Learning Communities. This proposal serves as an addendum to the official school improvement plan.

The Geneva High School staff should be commended on their thorough and open-minded approach to studying the potential for Professional Learning Communities. Rarely has such a lengthy and deep examination of a singular topic been done by the entire staff at one time, which I believe speaks to the importance of this initiative. In an organization as large as the high school, there will rarely be universal agreement on anything, but I believe that the professional discussion, debate, and dialogue that has occurred has been and will continue to be healthy for our professional organization.

Why is there a need to look at Professional Learning Communities at GHS?

Our number one priority as a school is student achievement, and there is abundant evidence that our students generally do very well in this area. Geneva High School ranks among the top high schools in Illinois based on test scores, and Geneva students are regularly recognized for excellence in any number of areas. We have great students, supportive parents, a devoted staff, and a community that values education. All of these groups have worked hard and have reaped the benefits of the improvements we have made. Because of our successes and our organizational assets noted above, however, it is sometimes difficult to feel an impetus to continually change, adapt, and improve in a proactive manner.

We recognize that there are students at Geneva High School who are not meeting academic standards and who struggle in a variety of areas. Additionally, we believe that we can help our top performing students achieve at even higher levels. To assist us in the continued need to improve student achievement for all students, we need to make sure that our courses always contain the essential elements for student learning. We need to develop common assessments, both summative and formative, that will allow us to use data in new ways to improve student learning. We also need to implement the mandated Response to Intervention (RtI)/Problem Solving components to assist students who struggle. The new Common Core State Standards and the accompanying PARCC assessments pose implementation challenges in multiple departments.

All of these areas are things we will be pursuing for the foreseeable future, regardless of whether or not we have a modified schedule, official PLCs operating, or other changes. The essential question is HOW we will facilitate these initiatives, not IF we facilitate them. In order to continually improve the achievement of all students, we need to focus on the development of an infrastructure that can support continuous and sustained improvement over a long period of time. The Professional Learning Communities model can be the necessary catalyst for this type of progress.

What Are Professional Learning Communities?

Using the ingenuity and the expertise of the staff to foster improvements shows the most potential for achieving sustainable results. The Professional Learning Community model provides a framework for this work. As a brief overview, PLCs offer:

- Highly collaborative, interdependent work on common goals
- A focus on the critical questions of student learning
- Collaborative inquiry and time built into the routine of the school

Professional Learning Communities are essentially high-performing work teams comprised of faculty members committed to excellence, accountability, and top performance for our students. Over the past twenty years, many organizations in the private sector have moved to the work team model. Although schools are relative newcomers to this type of structure, they are increasingly finding success with Professional Learning Communities.

There are some good examples of PLCs at work at GHS. For example, a focused effort was made during the creation of the master schedule to maximize common planning time among faculty. Unfortunately, out of the nearly 200 different courses offered at GHS, we were able to create common planning time for only 5 of them. Some of these teams have been able to meet regularly in a PLC-like format to collaboratively develop and refine curriculum, assessments, and student interventions by answering the following critical questions:

1. What is it that we want all students to learn – by grade level, by course, and by unit of instruction?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the intended knowledge and skill?
3. How will we respond when students experience initial difficulty so that we can improve upon current levels of learning?
4. How will we respond if students have already learned the material?

This small scale pilot has been successful and has resulted in benefits to students. For example, a group of English I teachers formed a PLC that met once a week during a common plan period. During this time the group collaborated and, taking the new Common Core Standards into consideration, created a common summative assessment for *The Odyssey*. During the coming spring semester, this group will be able to refine and improve the instruction they provide to students for *The Odyssey* based on the student achievement data gathered from the assessment. This cycle of improving effective teaching will result in more effective learning for their students.

However, the constraints of our schedule unfortunately prevent this from being implemented on the larger scale that is needed. Additionally, there have been some negative impacts on our overall student schedule as a result of these common planning times. However, the resulting collaboration, though limited in scope, has shown great promise.

Unlike elementary and middle schools that typically have collaborative structures built into the school day, high schools have historically been departmentalized and compartmentalized with little opportunity for teachers to work with their colleagues who teach the same courses. Outside of the few PLC-like staff groups described earlier, GHS doesn't have an imbedded structure that facilitates collaboration. Philosophically, however, it is clear that the staff desire such collaborative structures. On a recent survey, 97% of the staff indicated that collaborative teams were philosophically one of the most important

components for successful school improvement, yet only 42% of staff believed that collaborative teams currently exist at GHS.

To provide time for this type of collaboration, we have looked at using after-school time, institute days, and other existing professional development times. Although we are already maximizing the use of all of these times, none of the available options meet the need for timeliness and consistency. Perhaps more importantly, the existing structures do not meet the conditions for effective collaboration. Because of our commitment to students and the value placed on professional collaboration, a new structure is needed to accommodate the time demands of the collaboration process.

Logistics: How would Professional Learning Communities work at GHS?

As part of our research into PLCs, we gathered information from a number of suburban high schools that have implemented some type of PLC model. High schools in the suburban Chicago area with implemented PLC models include:

Addison Trail	Libertyville	Round Lake
Andrew	Lincoln Way	Shepard
Batavia	Lisle	St. Charles
Conant	Lyons Township	Stevenson
Downers Grove	Maine East	J. Sterling Morton
Elk Grove	Oswego	Vernon Hills
Evergreen Park	Palatine	Waubonsie Valley
Fremd	Prospect	West Chicago
Glenbard East/West	Riverside Brookfield	Wheeling
Hinsdale South	Rochelle	Willowbrook
Lemont	Rolling Meadows	York (Elmhurst)

In our research, we found numerous examples of high schools that have made tangible improvements to student achievement through their use of the PLC model. Among the common results:

- Increase of student scores on the PSAE, EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT Exams
- Increase in the percentage of students meeting College Readiness Benchmarks
- Reduction in course failure rates
- Increased graduation rates
- Increased numbers of students taking AP courses and exams
- Increased scores on AP exams
- Increased student registrations in upper level electives based on increased success in prerequisite courses

As part of our research, there were a number of variables that we wanted to consider, including PLC frequency, duration, day of the week, schedule for PLC time, and a number of other factors. These variables were discussed extensively among our staff. Many of the high schools we contacted have been utilizing Professional Learning Communities for several years and have worked out many of the “bugs” in that time and we learned much from their experiences. After examining different models at these schools, the School Improvement Team came to the following recommendations for Geneva High School:

Frequency of PLC time Some schools with PLC models have built in time on a weekly basis, while others do so every other week, or even once a month. Everyone we have talked to has indicated diminishing returns on PLC time if it is not done weekly. PLC teams we spoke with indicated that if not done weekly, much of the momentum and continuity is lost. Also noted was some confusion on the part of students, parents, and staff if PLC time were not held at a regular weekly time. We determined that weekly PLC sessions would be of the greatest benefit.

Duration of PLC sessions We found a range of session lengths for PLCs, from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Most schools have settled on a time period of about one hour per session. PLC participants have indicated that this is long enough to be productive and get things done, but that after an hour, productivity diminishes. We determined that PLC sessions of 50 minutes would be of greatest benefit to us.

Schedule for PLC time The School Improvement Team has generated a schedule that works very effectively. The schedule below reflects a 50-minute collaboration period for faculty at the beginning of each Thursday and 44-minute periods for the remainder of the day. This has been accomplished by repurposing our existing Homeroom time. In this model, the average decrease in instructional time per period is 4 ½ minutes per week. When class time currently lost to non-instructional activities is accounted for, no instructional time is lost compared to our current schedule. The start of the teacher’s contractual day is unchanged and would remain at 7:25 AM. School dismissal would remain at 2:45 PM. The proposed schedule is compared with our current Homeroom schedule below:

Period	Current Homeroom Schedule	Period Length (in minutes)	Proposed PLC Schedule	Period Length (in minutes)
PLC Time	N/A	0	7:35-8:25	50
1	7:40-8:25	45	8:30-9:14	44
2	8:30-9:15	45	9:19-10:03	44
Homeroom	9:20-9:35	15	N/A	0
3	9:40-10:25	45	10:08-10:52	44
4	10:30-10:55	25	10:57-11:19	22
5	11:00-11:25	25	11:24-11:46	22
6	11:30-11:55	25	11:51-12:13	22
7	12:00-12:25	25	12:18-12:40	22
8	12:30-12:55	25	12:45-1:07	22
9	1:00-1:50	50	1:12-1:56	44
10	1:55-2:45	50	2:01-2:45	44

Day of the week Evaluating at the needs of our schedule, we determined that Thursdays would be the preferred day of the week for a modified schedule. This is already the day we utilize an alternate schedule for our existing Homeroom structure. PLC days would not be rescheduled to a different day in the event of a snow day or school cancellation, nor would they exist on scheduled half days. Early bird classes could remain as scheduled Monday-Friday or could increase their class time by 13 minutes on the other four days of the week and not meet on Thursdays.

Building Collaborative PLC Teams that Focus on Learning and Results

Organization of PLC time by staff is a most critical aspect of successful professional learning communities.

PLC Teams of 3-5 faculty members will most often form around common courses. Specific groupings would be determined by the department based on an examination of the available data and the agreed-upon goals. Some groups would form around common courses (i.e. Geometry), while other groups would form around course level (i.e. Core, Regular, Honors, Advanced Placement). For example, a team of English teachers may work on improving student writing or a team of math teachers may work on improving instruction in the course sequence leading to Advanced Placement Calculus. Interdisciplinary PLC teams are also a possibility (i.e., teachers from multiple departments working to draft common criteria for effective student presentations, levels of desired student technology use by grade level, incorporating technical writing into non-English courses, etc.)

In the schools studied, the departmental staff self-selected into workable PLCs, with department chairs shifting some staff to ensure that all courses are covered in a balanced manner. Every staff member will be primarily part of one PLC, but may have secondary PLC team affiliation so that they receive updates from another team (as most staff teach more than one course). Singleton teachers will usually work with cross discipline PLCs (intradepartmental or interdepartmental), but opportunities also exist for collaboration with teachers who teach similar courses in other high schools.

Each PLC will have a team facilitator (usually not a Department Chair) who will be responsible for running each of the PLC meetings and submitting brief written updates to the Department Chair on progress made. These positions will rotate over time so that this professional responsibility is shared. Additionally, Department Chairs will submit periodic written progress reports to the building administration summarizing the work of the various PLC teams working in their departments.

The specific goals of each PLC group will be determined by the group members based on alignment with the goals of the department, school, and district. Despite the fact that some components of each PLC stage may already exist, all PLC teams will begin with Stage 1 to ensure that all teams have a solid foundation of collaborative norms and effective goals. Because different departments and teams are not at the same level of development, departments will generally progress through the fundamental stages of the PLC continuous improvement model at varying paces:

- Stage 1
 - Survey available data sources
 - Establish PLC structure and collaborative norms
 - Establish essential outcomes
 - Propose SMART Goals (Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely)
- Stage 2
 - Develop and implement common summative assessments
 - Develop and implement common formative assessments
 - Collect benchmark/baseline data
- Stage 3
 - Refine a SMART goal for department and/or PLC group
 - Design interventions to achieve SMART goal(s) and measure progress
- Stage 4
 - Implement interventions and continue to collect data
- Stage 5
 - Continue to collect data and collaboratively adjust interventions as needed

It is hoped that all departments will be into Stage 2 by the end of the first year of implementation.

To be most effective, faculty need to utilize the PLC time to collaboratively focus on the goals of their team. PLC time is not intended to be used for parent conferences, athletic practices, whole-faculty meetings, etc. Exceptions to this should be exceedingly rare and only in unusual circumstances, particularly once PLCs have become part of our culture.

Plan for Spring 2013

To harness the “collective intelligence of the staff” as DuFour puts it, a number of foundational pieces need to be in place beginning this spring.

Pending a green light from the Board of Education, our plan is to provide in-house professional development to all certified staff at GHS on the norms of collaboration, the use of data, SMART goals, effective group teaming, and team leadership/facilitation. Our purpose is not only to train group leaders, but also to establish a staff-wide understanding of how these groups will operate. Over time, it is envisioned that the responsibility of PLC Team Leader will rotate among many staff members, and training everyone now should help to develop a foundation for shared leadership.

PLC teams will be formed in the fall; the members of each team will then select their team leader. Following this, additional training will be provided to these individuals. Ongoing support will be provided to team leaders via job-embedded coaching and periodic team leader meetings over the course of the year.

Finally, we have sought additional information on other training opportunities for PLC Team Leaders. At a minimum, we hope to send a core group of staff to this training so that they can help with PLC training in the future.

Serving Students Directly During PLC Time

While the teaching faculty members are busy collaborating during PLC time, there is enormous opportunity to provide more resources and support to all of our students: those that would benefit from further challenge and enrichment in addition to those that require additional assistance. There are so many examples of things that we have wanted to implement over the years, “if only we had a way to do it.” We now have a way to get it done in what we refer to as Personal Learning Choices (what students will call PLC time).

Each Thursday as part of our modified schedule, the buses for the high school would run at the same time as they do on normal days. For example, buses would still drop off students at GHS between 7:05 and 7:25. A variety of options would exist for all students, such as these mostly student-generated ideas:

Examples of Academic Opportunities for Students:

- Tutoring centers providing academic assistance in multiple subjects
- Library and/or computer lab time for research, homework, and projects
- Advanced Placement (AP) test prep/review sessions
- Acceleration and Enrichment student meetings (A & E)
- Making up tests/quizzes in a Testing Center (in lieu of missing class for test make up)

- ACT test prep sessions
- Group work areas for student projects
- Study hall
- Technology training sessions and tutorials
- Book club/Reading Circles
- Current events discussion
- Mini-courses/workshops/speakers on a variety of topics (i.e., effective study habits, time management, goal setting, etc.)

Examples of Social-Emotional Opportunities for Students:

- The GHS faculty and administration have concluded that the current method of offering social-emotional material to students through occasional homeroom periods is inadequate. The Personal Learning Choices time will serve as the framework for the development of a high quality, articulated social-emotional curriculum at GHS. Appropriate topics for each grade level would be selected and workshops developed to target specific grade levels developmentally. Topics to be addressed would include:
 - Anxiety and depression
 - Bullying prevention
 - Suicide awareness/prevention
 - Internet safety
 - Substance abuse
 - Motivation
 - Freshman transition to high school
 - Senior transition to college

Examples of Other Opportunities for Students:

- College search and application information/assistance sessions
- College application essay writing assistance
- College representative meetings
- Course selection and scheduling meetings
- Mini-courses/workshops/speakers on a variety of topics
- Club meetings (run by club officers) for groups such as Student Council, NHS, and others
- Students serving disciplinary consequences in lieu of missing class
- Open gym/PE absence makeup sessions
- Vocal/Instrumental music practice (individuals or small ensembles)
- Career exploration activities, speakers, career fair
- CPR/First Aid training/certification
- Student government interaction with the student body
- Community service opportunities

Many of the above activities currently occur at GHS, but at the expense of instructional class time. By utilizing the Personal Learning Choices time for these activities, instructional time is preserved uninterrupted.

There are a number of adults who would be available to supervise all of the areas in which students would be present. Administrators, student services staff, paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, and PRIDE

volunteers are among the adults who could be working in a supervisory capacity during our modified Thursday schedule. Additionally, a portion of the teaching staff (on a rotating basis) would be available to assist in the supervision of support areas requiring specific academic expertise (i.e., writing center, math tutoring center, etc.). The concept of a rotation has been collaboratively developed with the faculty (i.e. a PLC team meets for 3 consecutive weeks and then helps to supervise a student intervention on the fourth week). As subject-specific student activities will be developed collaboratively with the faculty, so too will the rotation needed to successfully operate the activity. This initiative will not require hiring any additional staff.

While not all students would be required to attend on every PLC Thursday, there would be certain students expected to attend on specific Thursdays. These dates would be communicated in advance to students and parents on a PLC calendar for the year. For example, we would want:

- all freshmen on the first PLC day to conduct freshman orientation (currently done in a format that pulls them out of class)
- all sophomores sometime in the fall for a bullying presentation (currently done in an assembly format pulling them out of class).
- all juniors in attendance on a specific date in early April to complete their pre-PSAE paperwork (which is currently completed in time taken from their English class).
- all seniors in early fall to discuss the college application process (currently squeezed into a very brief 20 minute homeroom format)
- students could be recommended for certain interventions (subject-specific tutoring, etc.) and their attendance tracked to ensure that they are getting the extra assistance they need.
- Students enrolled in first-session courses at the Fox Valley Career Center may be required to attend their class sessions as normal as part of their commitment to participating in these special programs. The bus to the Career Center would depart from GHS at the normal time each day.

Although some students would be required to attend, most students would not be required to be in the building during the PLC time. In most high schools utilizing PLCs, a high percentage of freshmen and sophomores are present given their reliance on bus transportation, while lower numbers of juniors and seniors are present. We currently have sufficient infrastructure of staff to provide supervision for the interventions/activities.

Evaluating Effectiveness

The formation of Professional Learning Communities at GHS is a long term investment in the success of our students. As such, it will likely take 3-5 years to fully implement this model to the point where it becomes part of our culture. Therefore, we need to put in place both short and long term evaluation protocols.

The faculty and administration are committed to the successful implementation of Professional Learning Communities at GHS. As such, the faculty and administration will continue to collaborate as we evaluate the success of PLCs and help to guide the process to full and effective implementation for the benefit of our students.

All departments at the high school will participate in a PLC Continuum Assessment in order to gather baseline data. This is a group self-assessment tool that will provided data on how departments are

developing on the continuum of the essential elements of PLCs. This assessment will be given annually to monitor progress and help to guide future professional development.

We also plan to have bi-annual status reports from each department regarding the PLCs operating in their area. These status reports will include each PLC's SMART goals, progress, student achievement results, and next steps.

Data will also be collected regarding the interventions that we are able to run during the modified schedule time frame. Finally, stakeholder feedback will be solicited not only from staff, but also from students and parents as well.

Conclusion

After studying this initiative for nearly two years, our faculty is convinced that Professional Learning Communities should play a significant role in meeting the needs of our school. Teachers in schools we have visited have nearly universally referred to the implementation of PLCs as “the gift of time” and “the best thing we’ve ever done as a school”.

The motivation to implement Professional Learning Communities at Geneva High School is not being driven by the need to fix something that is broken. Rather, we are trying to strengthen our collective professional expertise proactively so that we can best meet the needs of all of our students. We believe that Professional Learning Communities can be the necessary catalyst for this type of progress.

We strongly value collaboration about student achievement and feel that we need to make it a high priority by implementing a weekly modified schedule this coming fall. This proposal is structured in such a way that it does not require additional funding for staff, transportation, or operation. Any professional development and staff training expenses would come from the existing budget.

If the Board provides a green light to this model, we will continue to collaboratively work with staff this spring to develop and refine the PLC parameters and processes that will help us hit the ground running with PLC implementation in the fall. We will also develop parent communication protocols so that all stakeholders are aware of this initiative well in advance.

Finally, it is vital to realize that should this measure not be approved, we will need to go back to the drawing board and recommend another way to accomplish the essential tasks of developing essential course outcomes, summative and formative assessments, Common Core State Standards, and RtI/Problem Solving components.

We are excited about what this proposal will bring to our students, staff, and community. More information can be found by examining some of the resources listed on the following page.

Please let me know if you have any questions about this important initiative.

APPENDIX: How can I find out more about PLCs?

The following websites offer additional information that you may find useful:

1. All Things PLC: Research, articles, tools, resources
www.allthingsplc.info/
2. Professional Learning Communities – Annenberg Institute for School Reform
www.annenberginstitute.org/pdf/proflearning.pdf
3. PLC – Fairfax County Public Schools
www.fcps.edu/plt/plc.htm