GAPSS Analysis in Schools: A Guide for Professional Learning

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February 13, 2013

Spring 2013
The GAPPS Analysis is performed in schools in order for them to gain a better understanding of their current level of implementation of the School Keys and steps they need to take toward full implementation. A GAPPS Analysis is required by law for schools in need of improvement by year six but any school can request a review of this type at any time. Since all schools are accountable under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, they are constantly evaluating their programs using data and research-proven methods. The GAPPS Analysis is one such type of review that offers direction for schools toward success using eight strands: (1) curriculum, (2) instruction, (3) assessment, (4) planning and organization, (5) student, family, and community support, (6) professional learning, (7) leadership, and (8) school culture. (GaDOE, 2012) This analysis accomplishes this by data collection over a period of two or three days by a six to eight-person team of certified district staff members. The process includes introduction of the team to the school faculty, classroom observations by the team throughout the school, interviews with school staff members such as principals, teachers, parents, leadership teams, other staff members, students, and various stakeholders who have a vested interest in the school. The team then collaborates to analyze and synthesize the data and produce an analysis with target areas for improvement that are correlated to the Georgia School Keys and Implementation Resource Guide. The school is notified ahead of time that the GAPPS Analysis will be conducted so that artifacts can be collected that will give the GAPPS team a clear picture of the school environment (schedules, map of school, lesson plans, and notice that survey will be required of staff members) and so that predetermined locations for interviews, data analysis, etc. can be prepared.

Technology support and training is addressed in several strands and by the team during the interview process as well as in observations. Under the instruction strand during the interview process,
one of the questions involves whether or not technology is used to maximize student learning. Under the planning and organization and leadership strands, effective selection and use of human, technological, and material resources is addressed. Also under the professional learning strand, the participation of teachers and administration in job-embedded professional learning and collaboration in regards to curriculum, instruction and technology is examined. During the GAPSS review of 2012 at Whitlow Elementary School in Forsyth County, where I currently work as media specialist, according to Principal Dr. Lynne Castleberry and Assistant Principal Katye Carlson, technology use being used to maximize student learning was a key area of weakness. Specifically, Ms. Carlson quoted from the target areas for improvement document provided by the GAPSS review team: “although the team is highly impressed with the innovative technology in the media center, it is recommended to increase teacher and student use of technology in classrooms.” Since then, we have requested a BYOT (Bring Your Own Technology) walk-through tour to get feedback from instructional technology experts in our county as on type of job-embedded professional learning. Since that tour and using the feedback from it, tremendous efforts have been made to increase the technology use throughout the school, of which both Dr. Castleberry, Mrs. Carlson, Karen Daughtery (our instructional technologist) and I are particularly proud. We still have much progress to be made, but as a result of the GAPSS review, “the need to get everyone on board with technology, ITS Learning and BYOT was critical”, according to Dr. Castleberry.

Data for a GAPSS Analysis consists of classroom observations, interviews, surveys, focus groups, and assessment documents, according to the Georgia Department of Education (Barge, 2013) At Whitlow, the Impact Leadership Team members worked with a partner to gather artifacts and evidence within each of the eight strands aforementioned in this paper before the actual GAPSS analysis team arrived on campus. The Impact Leadership Team looked for pictures, student work samples, and all kinds of examples that would illustrate what types of activities and programs that we, as a school, currently had in place to meet this strand. These
artifacts and evidence were submitted to the GAPSS team for review and feedback during the visit.

Over the course of the three years she has been in the ITS position, the instructional technology specialist at our school has provided trainings to teachers on a variety of technology. Our biggest professional trainings this school year have been with our new learning management system, **ITS Learning**. She has met with grade levels as a whole for trainings as well as with individual teachers to help them develop an online environment for the students and parents. In addition to the trainings for staff and students, the instructional technology specialist and media specialist have collaboratively provided ITS Learning trainings for parents, split into two groups: one for kindergarten and first grade parents and another for the parents of second through fifth grade students. The instructional technology specialist has also held professional learning opportunities for teachers on **GIZMOS**, online, interactive simulations for math and science. Our teachers in grades 3-5 use **GIZMOS** with their students on a regular basis. Another professional learning the instructional technology specialist has held for staff was on **Moby Max**. Moby Max is a completely integrated curriculum and teacher tools system. **MobyMax** combines curriculum resources like placement tests, adaptive lessons, progress monitoring, and Individualized Educational Plan reporting with teacher tools. Other trainings have included Brain Pop, WIXIE and Moviemaker. Most of the follow-up for technology professional learning trainings are offered on a monthly basis during planning blocks for all grade levels based on the requests of the staff to be used with and by students. The media specialist holds training on innovative web tools to teachers that are engaging for students, especially with the **BYOT** initiative becoming more and more a seamless part of each and every day. Usually, these types of activities are introduced and modeled in media center lessons for first time use (such as Prezi,
Glogster, Voki, Storybird, Lino It, and others), and teachers continue to use them with their class in future lessons.

Follow-up with professional learning about curriculum and instruction is done through our impact team and grade level meetings. After a professional learning session, the grade level meets in Vertical Impact meetings and/or grade level meetings and plan how they are going to carry out the new strategies and learning. As Dr. Castleberry states, “We try to take small steps and work backwards from the initial goal to make certain that our teachers have the opportunity to practice, ask questions and to develop understanding of the new concept.”

All professional learning at Whitlow Elementary School, whether it is concerning curriculum, instruction or assessment, is always aligned to school improvement goals. Ours is a data-driven, three-year plan that focuses on a continuous improvement goal specifically stating the following:

“All students will experience inquiry-based, rigorous, high-level, learning opportunities through the integration and exploration of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) infused with literacy every day in every classroom and will demonstrate their understanding through a variety of formal and informal assessments.” (Forsyth County Schools, 2013)

The key word in our goal is continuous. It is ongoing, continual monitoring of student data and achievement on an individualized basis for each and every student.

Funding for professional learning comes from various strategies, each carefully considered by the school’s administration under the district-adopted IE-squared program, in which funds are allocated according to each school’s needs as determined by administration.

A tremendous amount of job-embedded professional learning is conducted throughout our district and school through the sharing of research-proven instructional strategies and methods by teacher and technology (sometimes in the form of one person) leaders. Forsyth County is very
good at learning from each other’s successes and expertise. Modeling and sharing is a common and thriving method of professional learning that is often shared through communicative efforts such as Twitter, Facebook, Wikispaces, blogs, and ITS Learning (our online learning management system), each of which almost every school in our district possesses and maintains. Out-of-district professional conferences that require extra funding, however, are often sponsored and supported at the school level by our principal and she often funds these types of professional learning opportunities with local school funds, which are obtained by various sources, such as book fair, ice cream sales in the lunchroom, PTA, etc.

As far as incentives for teachers to participate in professional learning, there are no concrete ones. However, the benefit comes in the form of higher achievement, engagement and truly authentic learning for their students, which should be enough incentive for a great teacher.

Professional learning is not an option at our school. It simply is a way of working as a team to achieve common goals for the best we can be as a school. My principal, Dr. Lynne Castleberry, has a saying that sums it up: “Our goal is simple: we are always going to do what’s best for kids. If we strive to do what’s best for kids as we plan and make decisions about teaching and learning here at Whitlow, we’re meeting that goal.” Strong, sound professional learning is ultimately, “what’s best for kids”.

References


Castleberry, Dr. L. and Carlson, K., personal communication, February 10, 2014.

