



## DUNELAND SCHOOL CORPORATION

# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCS)

## A Consistent System for Teacher Collaboration

*By Dr. Chip Pettit, Superintendent, Duneland School Corporation  
and Donna Biggs, Director of Teaching & Learning, Duneland School Corporation*

*“When we conducted our search for a new superintendent in the Spring of 2019, we placed a high-level of importance on selecting a new leader that would successfully drive instructional initiatives to increase student performance. The Board knew we needed to select an instructional leader who would be able to identify and prioritize meaningful professional experiences and development while striving to help us stay relevant in a complex and rapidly changing educational environment. We were looking for a superintendent who would carefully balance a strong push for instructional growth while also helping district employees, parents and community members understand the importance of embracing instructional change in order for Duneland to stay competitive by today’s standards.”*

– Duneland School Board President Alayna Lightfoot-Pol



Dr. Chip Pettit  
Superintendent, Duneland School Corporation



Donna Biggs  
Director of Teaching & Learning, Duneland School Corporation

**D**uring the superintendent selection process in the Spring of 2019, the Duneland School Board made it very clear that a new superintendent would be asked to lead initiatives that resulted in improved student performance. There was a feeling amongst the Board that the district was underperforming on key accountability metrics (ILEARN, IREAD, college and career readiness, and high school graduation rate). During the first six months on the job, I did a lot of listening...district administration, principals, teachers, staff, parents and students. In addition, we conducted a comprehensive review of local, state, and federal student performance data that included analysis of school improvement plans and feedback from recently completed accreditation visits (AdvancED/Cognia). At the conclusion of this process, I landed in a similar

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the second article in a year-long series featuring Duneland School Corporation.

place as the School Board. We were doing well, but maybe not as well as we should be doing based on our community expectations.

### LEAGUE OF COMPARABLE SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Before taking tangible steps to improve student performance, we first had to develop a way to frame our internal discussions. Principals and teachers shared anecdotes pointing to being “above the state average” or alluded to dismissing accountability measures altogether as “one-time test scores” that “don’t tell us anything at all.”

One of the first steps we took was to establish a League of Comparable School Districts to create baselines and targets for student achievement and growth as well as determining programs and courses to keep us competitive with league offerings. This League of seventeen Indiana school districts would serve as our measuring stick for student performance, staffing ratios, salary comparison, and more. Our League is made-up of districts similar in size (large comprehensive high schools of 1,700+ students) and socio-economic status. Additionally, we also continued to track progress in relation to our county, region and high school athletic conference. This strategy is similar to one many districts use and certainly part of a new reality that has emerged since 2005 (passage of Public Law-221), where Indiana districts find themselves competing for students, teachers...and dollars with other public, private and charter schools.

### DUNELAND SCHOOL CORPORATION STRATEGIC PLAN

During the first six-months of the superintendency, everyone in the district wanted to talk about the things we were doing well



Elementary, intermediate and high school team members discuss curriculum alignment.

(there was a lot), and the things they would like to see changed. Our team absorbed that information and started to synthesize some of the common themes. For example:

- ▶ Numerous committees were collecting data but didn’t really know what to do with it - we were “data rich, information poor.”
- ▶ Each school was functioning as an island unto itself (known unofficially as “The 9 Islands of Duneland”).
- ▶ We lacked an established process to develop, evaluate, and make adjustments to curriculum and assessments to meet student needs.

The development of a Strategic Plan was crucial in establishing a roadmap for everyone (students, staff, parents) to get a sense of where we are going, how we are going to get there and how we



Solution Tree consultant, Natalie Vardabasso, leads a discussion activity with district leadership.

know if we are successful for our students. Four key initiatives to promote student performance were identified in the Strategic Plan:

1. Research and develop Birth to School programming
2. Develop, train, implement and monitor a consistent system for teacher collaboration
3. Develop, implement and monitor a guaranteed, standardized and viable curriculum in a blended learning environment.
4. Development of equitable academic programs for all students

### PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCS)

Since we were functioning as separate islands and lacked a meaningful reliance on data, district administration discerned that professional development was needed to help build leader and teacher capacity in the area of converting data into information that can be used to make better instructional decisions. Leveraging the background of a few members of the district leadership team who had positive experiences from their work in other districts with Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), we decided that PLCs could work for us in achieving our goal to improve student achievement and growth. The research around PLCs is strong, tying student performance to teachers' individual and

collective efficacy. Therefore, building capacity for teachers and leaders is critical and defined by a blend of motivation, skill, positive professional learning, organizational conditions and culture, as well as infrastructure support. Although PLC ideas had been explored in some of our schools, the reality was that we were going to have to start from scratch with our instructional leaders.

Our first step was to define a PLC. We relied on Rick DuFour's definition as a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators.

Our focus would be on the Four Questions of a PLC as discussed by DuFour:

1. What do we want all students to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know if they learn it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

In order to get a clearer picture of successful PLC practices, a group from DSC set out to Brownsburg Community School Corporation whose PLC development has been under the leadership of Superintendent, Dr. Jim Snapp. Our middle school

principal, Mike Hamacher, sat in with a Brownsburg PLC and noted:

*They analyzed and compared data from a recent common formative assessment (CEA) and discussed strategies to reteach specific learning targets. They even decided to adjust a question on their assessment for future use because they all agreed that the question was not a good question based on their review. Every member of the PLC participated, seemed to be well-informed and worked well together... They all seemed to have an equal voice.*

We introduced principals and assistant principals to PLC language, concepts, ideas and articles in the spring of 2020, shortly before the Covid shutdowns began. The focus for this group was in laying the foundation for the PLC work that they would be leading within their buildings.

In March of 2020, when the pandemic took over, we haltingly continued our PLC journey often with two steps forward, one step back.

### NEXT STEPS

As principals considered the initial PLC exposure for their teachers, we realized the significant challenge of finding time. How would we ever find the time for this work when we are already so busy trying to meet the individual needs of our students? The first step was working with the teacher’s association to extend the workday to eight hours. This extension afforded buildings the ability to add PLC collaboration time to the beginning and end of the student school day.

As we planned for the 2020-21 school year, our team felt like we had an opportunity to tie together two strategic initiatives: teacher collaboration via PLCs and the development of a Guaranteed, Viable Curriculum (GVC). The GVC initiative is grounded in Robert Marzano’s research that “the number-one factor impacting highly effective schools is a curriculum that is guaranteed no matter which teacher is teaching it and that is viable - meaning teachers have enough time to effectively teach it.” During this Covid year, we read articles and talked about how to get our feet wet with PLCs. Some buildings started to work on analyzing priority standards and establishing grade level commonalities. Although we did not yet have a guaranteed, viable and aligned curriculum, our work was beginning in grade level and content area teams to

answer that first question of a PLC—What do we want students to know and be able to do?

### PLCS AFTER COVID

Although Covid set us back in our initial attempts, we used that time (and our ESSER funding) to discover a partnership that would help us become more intentional in our PLC work. With Solution Tree, a three-year plan was developed to begin the training and implementation of Professional Learning Community practices throughout the district. We moved from the “interested” phase to the “intentional” phase at this time.

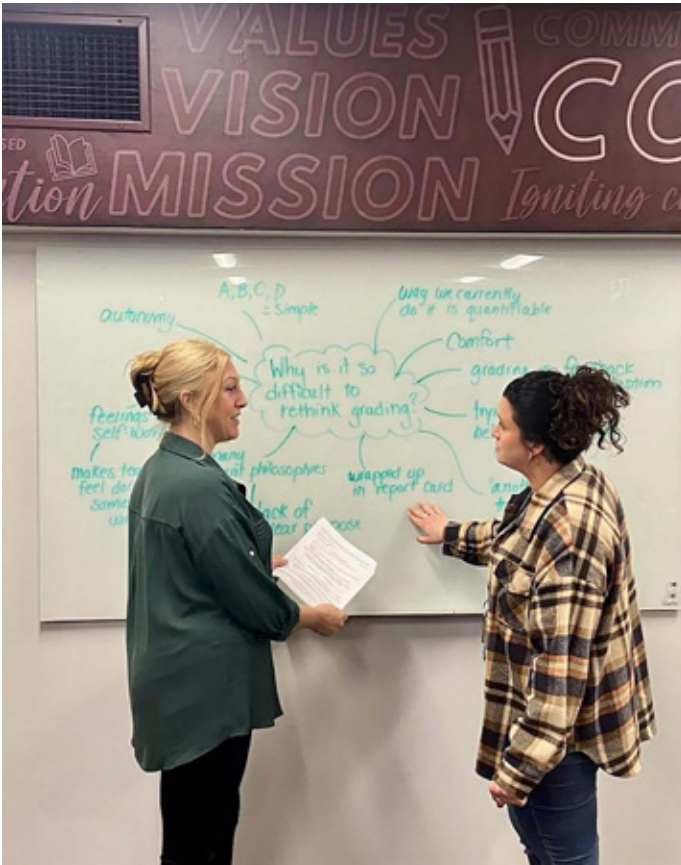
### Phase 1 – PLC Leadership Development

In the summer of 2021, all principals, assistant principals and district leaders took part in an intensive four day leadership training in which we were paired with a facilitator from Solution Tree, based on the book Learning by Doing (DuFour, et al). During that 2021-22 school year, we were finally able to move away from the “PLC light” approach we had adopted during COVID. Everyone was ready to tighten up the process and practices that were in place. Guiding Coalitions (small teams of 4-8 teachers and principals at each school who would lead the work) were formed in each building, meeting calendars for each school were established and we started to build capacity in our teaching staff around the initiative.

This reboot (post Covid shutdowns) of our commitment to the PLC process added intensity to the concept of alignment across levels and content areas throughout the district. This happened at the school building level with grade level and team meetings, as well as across the district with grade level teams coming together to begin building courses in support of a guaranteed and viable curriculum throughout the corporation. (Note: the course build process will be discussed in detail in The Journal this summer.) As conversations began, we quickly realized that we were indeed data rich but information poor. There were several committees

<b>MONDAY</b> <b>7:10-7:40</b>	<b>TUESDAY</b> <b>7:10-7:40</b>	<b>WEDNESDAY</b> <b>7:10-7:40</b>	<b>THURSDAY</b> <b>7:10-7:40</b>	<b>FRIDAY</b> <b>7:10-7:40</b>
Staff Mtg	Department PLC	Team PLC	Department PLC	Team PLC
Staff PD	Department PLC	Team PLC	Department PLC	Team PLC

*Department PLC - Course-Based Teams Meeting Together*  
*Team PLC - Grade-Based Teams of 4-6 Teachers Meeting Together (all sharing same 110-125 students)*



Instructional coaches from elementary and middle schools share grading practice feedback.

that had been meeting over the years to discuss topics and collect information but without the critical steps necessary to create actionable change for student equity and accessibility.

To support this district initiative, instructional coaches were hired and trained in a student-centered coaching model to support each of our nine K-12 schools. Their initial focus was two-fold in supporting teachers by providing professional development through coaching and facilitating the beginning of the course build process. Coaches quickly realized they needed to organize their efforts and create a systematic approach to course building – identifying and outlining the build process and establishing what a course would contain for teachers and students as far as content, assignments and assessments and how it would function in a blended learning environment with course content housed in our Learning Management System (LMS).

It was a heavy lift to build district-wide capacity around this concept

while helping teachers understand this was more than just a grade level or departmental meeting. We went back to ground level with a renewed focus on **Question #1: What do we want students to know and be able to do?** Teachers would take another comprehensive look at their priority standards, figure out how to “let go” of curriculum pieces or projects that were not aligned with their standards and finally decide on their primary focus for all students in each grade level and/or content area.

The differences between a PLC and a grade level meeting quickly became clear. The PLC center point is learning rather than teaching. During PLC discussions teachers are sharing best practice strategies and lessons to support student learning. And when teachers need support in this area, the instructional coach is there to provide training to and examples of rigorous instruction with a growth mindset.

Using a combination of information from prioritized standards from the IDOE and our local assessment outcomes, teachers worked together to identify DSC’s priority standards for each subject K-12. After standards were identified, they then went on to establish learning targets (I-Can statements) and proficiency scales to guide student growth monitoring.

All of this work was done within PLCs to ensure teachers had a voice in identifying the priorities and the accountability in supporting student mastery.

### Phase 2 – Guiding Coalitions and Focusing on Learning

During the second phase of training in the 2021-2022 school year, Guiding Coalition teams were established in each school. The Guiding Coalitions consisted of the principal, counselor, dean, instructional coach and at least four team members from each of our 10 schools as well as the entire district admin team. Over 60 district and teacher leaders took part in professional development with our Solution Tree facilitator. The focus in this training began with building background knowledge around PLCs and

Focus on Keywords	
Priority Standard 3: <b>2.RL.2.3</b> Describe how characters [in a story] respond to major events and how characters affect the plot.	
Translate “I can” Statements to Learning Targets	Analyze the target Level of Thinking/DOK Level (1-4)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.</li> </ul>	Level 3 (analysis)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Describe how characters affect the plot</li> </ul>	Level 3 (analysis)

empowering the team members to bring the information back to their buildings to lead the learning process. Overall, the Guiding Coalitions were included in 6 full days of training from the fall of 2021 into the spring of 2022.

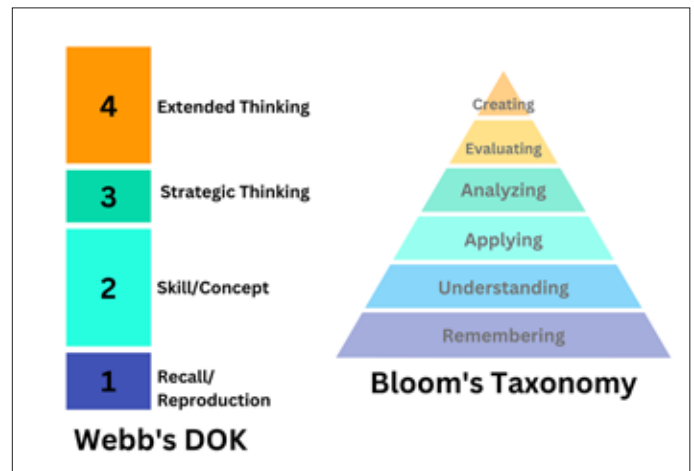
Additional professional development has been provided to support teachers through in-house training, as well as through monthly after school offerings in our Duneland Learning Academy (DLA). DLA is led by teachers, for teachers. A wide range of professional development is offered to support district initiatives. Teachers attend on a voluntary basis (and are compensated through a monetary point system) and can choose which sessions they would like to attend to enhance their instructional pedagogy. Like DuFour, we believe that “... if students are to learn at high levels, processes must be in place to ensure the ongoing, job-embedded learning of the adults who serve them.” Since there was such a broad range of teacher capacity throughout the district, it was important that we aligned our training to meet individuals and teaching teams where they were. This mirrored what differentiated instruction looks like in a classroom.

It also became apparent that as we prioritized the PLC meeting time within our building calendars, there was a shift in how we placed value on our time. Teams were starting to coalesce around the understanding that this shift in prioritization of time and their PLC conversations about priority standards mastery were actually making the job easier. Guiding Coalition team member at one of our intermediate schools, Cara Ellerthorpe, put it this way:

*Our departments now have a clearer focus on student outcomes in regards to priority standards. Together, we are constantly looking at our instruction and reflecting on changes that are necessary to respond to student needs. PLCs analyze data and decide how to instruct the individual child to meet their needs.*

Our instructional coaches played a major role in identifying and supporting the needs of our PLCs as they evolved at each of the building levels. Their support centered around curriculum alignment, data analysis, and creating consistent practices. To avoid high anxiety and unnecessary teacher stress, we noted that we needed to maintain a balance of moving forward with the PLC movement, while honoring the values of staff and community and supporting a positive school and district culture.

During this time there was also a shift in principal engagement and leadership skills. Building leaders were elevating their instructional leadership capacity and stepping out of the



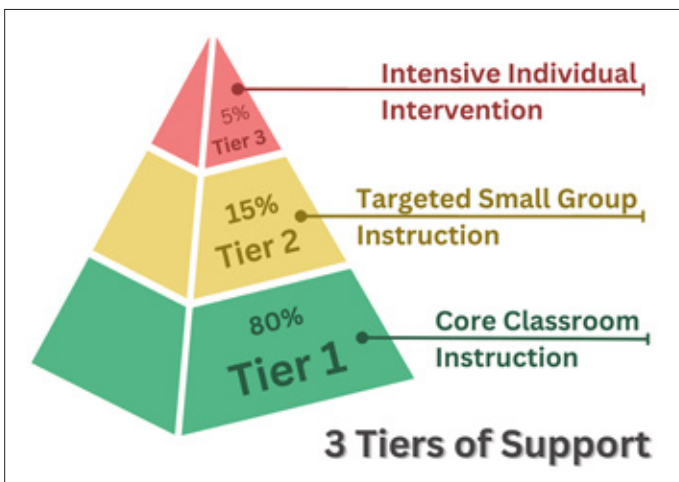
operational and management role to support and learn alongside their staff members. As our PLC work evolves, the importance of the impact of each principal (as an instructional leader) cannot be understated. They are crucial to the success, or lack of success, within their schools.

As principals, instructional coaches and teachers became more comfortable with Question #1 of the PLC concept of identifying what they wanted students to know and understand, they moved into **Question #2: How will we know if they have learned it?** This big idea moved teachers into professional development to build capacity around common formative and summative assessments. Again, we found ourselves immersed in learning and collecting data, but the data held little value with regard to impacting student learning. We had to take a collective pause at this point and help teachers see that assessment results are a reflection of the lesson's effectiveness more so than the students ability to pass the test.

Courtney Commers, 4th grade teacher, explained the impact on her school: ...Teachers of all experience levels are having conversations about next instructional steps, or responsive teaching, based on data instead of moving on to what's always been done in the past.

Our goal became skill development leading to mastery of priority standards and how we use assessment outcomes to tell us if students are acquiring the knowledge as outlined in the prioritized standards. Teachers spent time learning about Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) and how they design lessons that included higher order thinking using Bloom's Taxonomy (revised) and then assessing students in the same manner using DOK to ensure students are at the application stage of learning. Little by little, teachers began to see the importance of alignment when evaluating assessment outcomes.

This naturally led us to our next step in identifying students who needed intervention based on falling short of the proficiency scale for mastery of a given standard. It was time to consider the PLC **Question #3: What do we do when they haven't learned it?** In response to this question and amid efforts to align and solidify our MTSS/RtI (Multi Tiered System of Support/Response to Instruction) processes, teachers have taken a closer look at their instructional outcomes and practices to identify if student results are reflective of a Tier I, II, or III challenge. As a general rule, we asked teachers to set a goal of 80% mastery of Tier I instruction as a guide. If they did not reach that 80% mark in their common formative assessment, they would circle back and reteach the group. If they did reach their mark, they would provide intervention for Tier II and III students accordingly. Additionally teachers had to look at student pre-assessment results and be responsive to those who already demonstrate mastery of the standard.



We had to then ask ourselves, the next challenging PLC Question: **Question #4 What do we do when they have learned it?** The answer here was to provide students with a combination of acceleration and enrichment as deemed most appropriate for the content area. We stretch student learning as much as possible. For students demonstrating this need, we really focused on DOK level 4 instruction and assessment. All the while, ensuring that questions three and four were addressed in our professional development and GVC as courses were built.

Although there were challenges during this more intensive phase, the blossoming successes have far outweighed any difficulties we faced. The principals, in a solutions-driven mindset, worked closely with their Guiding Coalition members, many

of whom were early adopters of the PLC work, to bring the message home to their teaching team members. This allowed the opportunity for principals to rely on a trusted group of teachers who recognized the empowerment of the PLC movement.

*Prior to the formation of our PLCs, I would sometimes become frustrated by the lack of opportunities to collaborate with my colleagues in a meaningful, purpose-driven and systematic manner. Unlike departmental meetings and casual on-campus encounters, the PLCs afforded us the time, space and framework to engage in moderated, intentional discussions to help us better facilitate our students' growth. – Steve Lombardo, high school teacher*

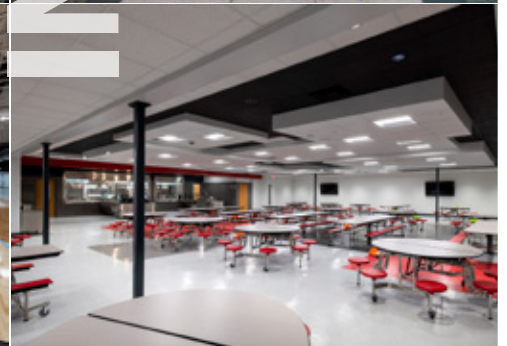
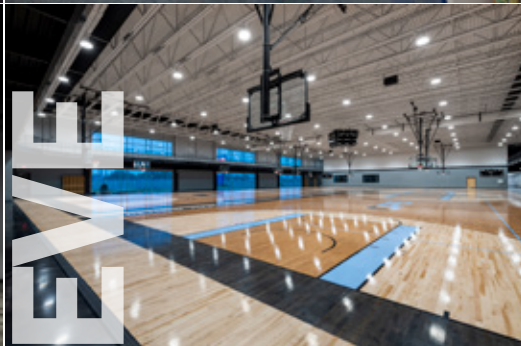
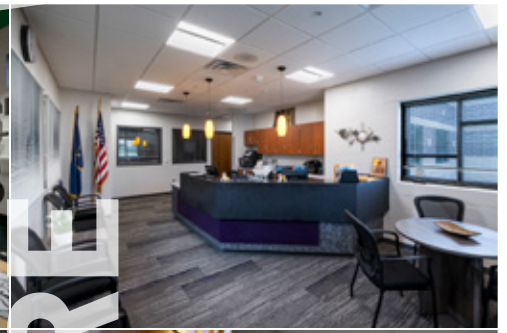
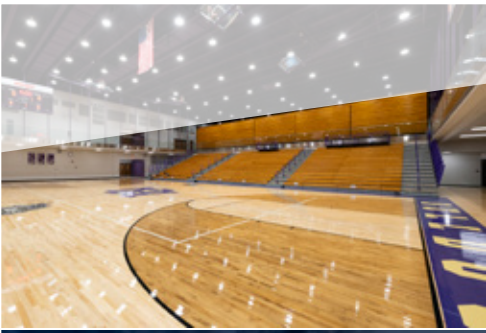
The prioritization of standards, alignment of curriculum, and building common assessments are each big steps and take time. In our district, all of this work is evolving and growing every day.

### Phase 3 – Embedded Coaching

This year we began our third year of intensive training with on-site embedded coaching for our PLC teams at every grade-level. We worked with an elementary, intermediate/middle, and high school professional coach (provided by Solution Tree) to observe our PLCs in action and provide feedback to ensure our teams were on the right path to supporting student needs. The on-site model tailored goals towards each team's needs based on grade level or content area.

- **Elementary PLCs** are focusing on MTSS practices and how to best look at data outcomes to support student learning at Tier I, Tier II and Tier III. They are also streamlining the collection and synthesis of data.
- **Intermediate/Middle PLCs** are zeroing in on PLC best practices while strengthening communication and aligning content expectations, assessments, and grading practices. Bringing the two intermediate schools together to build alignment across buildings has been valuable work towards equity for all intermediate students.
- **High School PLCs** have been centered on PLC best practices and working collectively in content areas. They are identifying how different courses work together and looking at the bigger picture of curriculum design and grading practices.

These embedded coaching cycles took place strategically at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year following assessment checkpoints to ensure that data review was part of the



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Chesterton High School Principal Brent Martinson, center, works with his guiding coalition to build leadership capacity.

process. Carey Storm, principal at Bailly Elementary, sums up her thoughts on the embedded coaching at her building:

*Through embedded coaching, our staff has received individualized support specific to the needs of our teams. We've gained constructive feedback, resources to study, and real-time action items to move our PLC work forward. While learning about the rationale - or the "why" of PLCs - was important for our growth, the addition of embedded coaching has given us the "how" to make a much faster, stronger impact on our students' growth.*

### CONCLUSION – IT'S WORTH IT!

Establishing PLCs throughout the district has been a rewarding experience. Although there were some growing pains along the way, by pacing the rollout and pausing to build capacity when needed, we have a strong philosophical foundation built within the corporation. This is now how we "do school" and conversations in the hallways and teacher's lounge have shifted from, "What are we teaching next week?" to "What did students learn this week?" Teams and entire building staff can work together to address the needs of ALL students. Amber Jakel, reading specialist, puts it like this:

*Through the development of the PLC process in Duneland, I have observed teams of teachers embrace the concept of collective*

*commitment, deepen their conversations about and examination of data, as well as refine professional practices to ensure instruction is both rigorous and purposeful. The PLC format highlights the immense depth of Duneland teachers' knowledge of student, instructional, and curricular needs...[and serves as a] powerful tool to facilitate the collaboration between teaching teams and learning support specialists; allowing intervention and enrichment to be targeted and impactful.*

What future work is there for PLCs? As a natural next step in this process, now that we have done the work to establish priority standards as well as built instruction and assessment to support those standards, we are discussing and reviewing our grading practices. This will be our next piece to tackle. We are also looking for new and creative ways to capture more "time" for teachers to meet and discuss student learning and achievement.

Additionally, in conjunction with building a Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum and instructional coaches leading the course build work, it will now become the work of the PLCs to take on the evolution of the courses. Both the PLC process and the GVC work are ongoing as we continually revisit the four questions centered around student learning. This work is the right work and it is never done. 🏹