

Virtual Professional Learning Communities: Connecting Music Teachers in Small Schools to Meaningful, Content-Specific Professional Development

The 77th Midwest Clinic, December 20-22, 2023

David Rolandson, PhD - Minot State University: david.rolandson@minotstateu.edu

Lana Ross-Hekkel - Sidney Public Schools: lhekkel@sidneyps.com

Music teachers are often dissatisfied with available professional development (e.g., district-sanctioned in-services, professional workshops and conferences, observations/feedback from administrators, and continuing education courses). They are seeking opportunities in which they can:

- Communicate with other music teachers
- Interact with mentors and mentees
- Seek advice on specific problems
- Observe colleagues actively teaching in the field
- Learn over extended periods of time
- Have opportunities to integrate what they learn into their teaching and classrooms through hands-on experiences

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

The label PLC has been used in recent years to describe a wide variety of education stakeholder groups including:

- grade-level teaching teams
- high school departments
- school committees
- entire school districts

Regardless of the design, the foundational principle that guides PLCs is **collaboration between teachers** through dialogue, review of student work, and shared practices. The goal of PLCs should be to improve classroom instruction and ensure that robust student learning occurs.

If approached correctly, Music Educator PLCs can:

- Provide focussed, content-specific (musical) learning opportunities
- Can reduce feelings of professional isolation as they build rapport and receive professional support from their colleagues
- Result in increased teacher retention
- Allow music teachers to brainstorm and exchange ideas, review teaching strategies and student performance, and explore new approaches to music teaching
- Allows for mentor/mentee relationships, collegial relationships, and peer connections to develop.

Creating a VPLC

VPLC Professional Development is Available to Every Music Teacher! You will need:

- A computer and internet access

- Video-conferencing capabilities (e.g., Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams)
- A small group of teachers (as few as two or three) with similar teaching interests, similar teaching discipline, and similar desire to learn and grow
- An openness to be vulnerable and share your teaching and students' work with colleagues

VPLC Helpful Hints and Recommendations

- The first step is to connect with (at least one, ideally 3-5) other music teachers who are interested in growing and improving as educators
- Select a topic or focus of your initial work together. "Improving as music teachers" or "helping music students improve" are too broad. Pick one aspect of teaching or learning to focus on. Remember, the topic/focus can change any time the group wants to move on!
- Sample topics could include:
 - Assessment, assorted technical/musical topics or issues, connecting music to history or culture, portfolios, composition, CMP, etc.
- Select VPLC activities and ways to share student work. Activities could include:
 - Discussions of assigned readings
 - Analysis of student work (audio/video recordings, written assessments, etc.)
 - Peer feedback on teaching observations
 - Sharing and discussing lesson plans and assessment strategies
- Some of the most effective growth in music specific PLCs has been linked to viewing videos of group members in the classroom, because videos:
 - Can provide accurate visual and aural records of events
 - Allow teachers to review teaching examples multiple times
 - Capture interactions between students and teachers
 - Hold teachers accountable to the other members of the PLC.
- Identify, nominate, or appoint a group facilitator to help guide activities, organize meetings, and send out reminders to group members. The facilitator could lead activities for an extended period of time, or the facilitator role can rotate among members of the group.
- Choose a common meeting time (likely before/after school). Meetings should be semi-frequent (maybe every week or every other week). This will allow work and growth to continue. Longer periods of time between meetings creates longer periods of inactivity. The most effective professional development is ongoing and embedded in the work we do in our classrooms.
- Finally, remember PLCs were originally designed to, and are most effective when, teachers actively share, discuss, and evaluate the work we do in classrooms (both teacher and student work). Sharing wisdom and engaging in "shop-talk" can be an important part of VPLC time, but the most meaningful and effective growth comes from evaluating student work and watching each other teach in the classroom. This can be the spark that ignites focussed discussion in VPLCs!

Visit our website for additional information: bit.ly/VPLCsite