

Centennial Place Elementary School
GAPSS Part A – Professional Learning Current Reality

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Vision

Centennial Place Elementary School is envisioned as a school where all children will be encouraged to develop intellectually, emotionally, and socially while being prepared for a global society. The school provides active learning experiences that immerse students in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics while strengthening problem solving, critical thinking and effective communications skills (CPES, Continuous School Improvement Plan, 2013). Teachers are expected and encouraged to use technology as a tool for instruction, communication and professional learning. Students are provided with technology tools and skills that allow them to use personal or classroom technology to complete projects and create products that demonstrate their understanding of core concepts. Technology allows teachers to differentiate and personalize learning activities so that each student can be successful while giving students access to a world of interactive resources. As this school year has progressed, we have made more progress toward student collaboration using technology while they practice using new Web 2.0 tools for communications.

Needs Assessment

Professional learning needs are data-driven at Centennial Place Elementary School and identified through several avenues. In developing our School Improvement Plan the committee analyzed student achievement data in core mathematics and reading gathered through *STAR Early Literacy*, *STAR Math*, *STAR Reading*, *Woodcock Assessments* and *Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing*, quarterly pre- and post-testing, and *Infinite Campus*, our student information management system. Comprehensive needs analysis of the entire school was completed by reviewing data and brainstorming actions for improvement (CPES, CSIP, 2013). Academic performance of students who attended school in 2012-13 as well as performance of students entering school in 2013-14 was also considered in the data analysis and specific strategies

for professional learning have been described in our Continuous School Improvement Plan (2013).

We have also attempted additional needs assessments for teachers' learning needs using the *SurveyMonkey* program, asking teachers what professional learning they would find helpful that we could offer at school. These surveys have been created by the principal, assistant principal, and media specialist for specific topics. However, one of the challenges in needs assessment is that although we have been able to identify areas of interest, it has proven more difficult to follow through with professional learning that meets teachers' needs, as scheduling and training topics are often imposed upon us by the school district (A. Shelton, personal communication, January 22, 2014).

In addition, grade level teams review student data relative to common core curriculum in their weekly common planning times, and often use that information to suggest training needs. For example, teachers across grades noted that students struggle with reading longer passages, and with remembering simple facts they should know or have recently read. When this same concern was raised to the Instructional Leadership Team by teachers representing other grades, it was decided that our January 6th professional learning day would include training in strategies to help build reading stamina and improve memory. Teachers have been implementing these strategies they feel are most helpful to their students and have seen some improvement. Relative to technology, teachers have completed LoTI assessments required by our district, and have used that information to request specific training.

Professional Learning

At Centennial Place teachers participate in a variety of professional learning activities. Some of these activities are provided for the entire staff, but teachers are also encouraged to seek out and participate in individual professional learning they feel will enhance their professional practice. The primary mode of professional development at Centennial Place is still group presentations in faculty

meetings or during faculty workdays, as well as workshops off-site led by APS district staff. Other on-site workshops are often led by Centennial Place teachers or administrators, and staff members are encouraged to develop professional learning activities to deliver to their colleagues. Podcasts with follow-up quizzes and evaluations are made available to teachers through the Atlanta Public Schools faculty portal for select topics such as workplace ethics, and the district requires all staff in the system, including maintenance, custodial and food service, to complete these activities. In addition, teachers participate in small group collaborative professional learning during their weekly grade level common planning. During these meetings teachers analyze student data, either in grade level groups, vertical teams or cross-discipline groups, participate in book review study groups and enjoy hands-on technology training intended to target specific student learning needs. Individual teachers also attend sessions at professional conferences and complete district-sponsored interactive online training, pursue endorsements or certifications offered in the district, and with other colleagues attend workshops off-site at Regional Educational Service Centers (RESA), workshops at nearby university campuses and often share this new learning with colleagues. Centennial Place teachers also take advantage of opportunities to visit other schools with similar demographics to observe their instructional practices.

Technology-related professional learning, like many other professional learning opportunities, are mostly whole-group presentations, often during faculty meetings or on teacher work days, with the assumption being that teachers will then implement this learning in the classroom. These presentations are usually provided by our instructional technology specialist, one of fourteen district-level employees who acts as a technology coach and instructional support for our cluster of seven elementary, middle and high schools. Often the instructional technology specialist is charged with delivering instruction on some new tool or initiative identified and implemented by the district. For example, this school year we have received hands-on training in our student information system, *Infinite Campus*, as well as *MyBackpack*,

a cloud-based service that allows students and teachers to access resources and tools including document creation, e-mail and library resources provided by the district in a safe, controlled environment.

Unfortunately, these trainings are usually provided months in advance of our actually receiving the technology, or weeks after the technology has been “done to us” and we have faced significant frustrations with the implementation (A. Shelton, personal communication, January 22, 2014), neither of which contributes to effective use of the new technology.

Use of iPods was modeled in Second grade classrooms in October 2012. Staff involved in the district’s Computer Adaptive Testing program participated in off-site training in the system prior to the first testing window in fall 2013. One-on-one support has also been provided this year by the school’s media specialist throughout the school year in use of *Edmodo* and *Renaissance Place (Accelerated Reader)* products.

Several opportunities for technology professional learning were held in December 2013. Each grade-level team participated in hands-on training provided by our instructional technology specialist in using ActiVote and ActivExpression response devices and slates with classroom Promethean Boards. This training was provided during their Tuesday common planning times. Other technology professional learning offered in December 2013 included “Using iPads and Highly Effective Apps to Strengthen Literacy Learning,” and “Making the Best Use of Technology in Your School Library Program to Support Instruction and Enrich Student Learning” (CPES, SIP, 2013).

Follow-Up

After most professional learning sessions there is limited follow up. It often seems we are in a crisis-management mode careening from one activity and goal to the next. We expect to have better control over professional learning planning and follow-through next year, as we transition to a charter school model (A. Shelton, personal communication, January 22, 2014).

Centennial Place has had more success with activities in which we review student data as teams to identify possible learning needs. For example, our Instructional Leadership Team early in the year identified key areas in which we need to improve student learning that would be supported by professional development. Because the Instructional Leadership Team meets biweekly, we are able to review data frequently to determine whether and which activities have had an effect. Also, when grade level groups are coached and trained by our instructional technology specialist, on her next visit she will often ask whether teachers were able to repeat the activity with students.

Alignment to School Improvement

Professional learning is aligned to school improvement goals at Centennial Place Elementary. In order to ensure consistency of instruction across grade levels, teachers utilize a four-part lesson framework and receive regular professional learning in planning lessons using this framework. Additionally, teachers and paraprofessionals attend off-site training and additional professional learning focused on differentiation, technology, co-teaching strategies and “Teaching with the Brain in Mind.” Utilizing co-teaching strategies in all classrooms allows teachers to collaborate and build expertise in new strategies in a team environment while meeting the wide range of student learning needs (CPES, SIP, 2013).

Centennial Place teachers have participated in job-embedded training as well as off-site training focused on implementation of the Common Core Curriculum. This training includes learning activities designed to explain ways to use information text or text exemplars across disciplines. These professional learning sessions have included all teachers, not just classroom or subject area teachers and reflect the school’s commitment to continuous improvement, consistent with the principles expressed in *Standards for Professional Learning* (Learning Forward, 2011).

Our school improvement plan explicitly targets strengthening reading instruction. To improve

basic reading foundations in kindergarten through second grade, all teachers at those grade levels are trained in the SMART™ (Systematic Multisensory Approach to Reading Training) program offered solely by Syllables Reading Center. The SMART™ program emphasizes phonetic instruction and rules for attacking words to facilitate the development of decoding strategies. Extensive professional learning and follow-up is offered to classroom teachers in the areas of balanced literacy and full implementation of the SMART™ program.

Funding & Incentives

Funding for professional learning at Centennial Place comes from state appropriations, Federal funds, and local school allocations as well as significant income, from grant sources (A. Shelton, personal communication, January 22, 2014). Title I funds are available for some professional learning, and our foundation has assisted with funding professional learning activities, particularly relative to use of Promethean Boards. Professional learning expenditures can also include staff costs for bringing in trainers, cost of using district administration or specialized personnel, substitute teachers for teachers' release time, conference or training fees, and cost for materials and resources. To reduce the cost of professional learning – specifically external opportunities – teachers are encouraged to apply for grants and apply to be presenters at conferences, and several have received awards that they have used to attend professional learning opportunities or conferences outside Georgia. In addition, the principal applies a portion of her discretionary funds provided by the district to support teachers' participation in workshops at Regional Educational Service Centers (RESAs) or attend other professional conferences held nearby (A. Shelton, personal communication, January 22, 2014) or to bring in outside trainers for our SMART™ program.

Incentives for teachers to participate in professional learning and improve their practice are extrinsic and intrinsic. Professional learning activities are a professional responsibility, but teachers have

many daily constraints on their time which make it challenging for them to engage in professional learning. Most teachers at Centennial Place participate in training in addition to basic required activities because they are committed to their excellence as teachers and want to see their students succeed (A. Shelton, personal communication, January 22, 2014). At the same time, some training sessions are mandated by the state or district, so teachers are required to participate. Teachers are compensated for participating in required off-site, after-hours training, and the school pays registration fees and travel expenses when required (CPES, SIP, 2013). During professional learning workdays we provide nominal “prizes” in the form of classroom supplies that are available to teachers after participating in the workshop, and often our PTA provides “door prizes” such as gift cards as an incentive to teachers attending professional learning (A. Shelton, personal communication, January 22, 2014). Many teachers at Centennial Place also pursue subject endorsements or graduate degrees in their fields and completing those formal activities is compensated through the district’s salary schedule.

Diversity

Professional learning to assist teachers in working with students with special needs and those who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is generally provided by Atlanta Public Schools staff. For example, our social worker, who serves several schools, provides regular training in working with students living in transitional housing. Our school nurse and special education teachers provide professional development activities, usually in faculty meetings or during weekly common planning time, and assist teachers in working with students who have physical disabilities or health concerns. Professional learning and resources for working with students and families who speak languages other than English are provided regularly during faculty work days or weekly common planning time by the ESOL teacher who is based at Centennial Place in collaboration with our school social worker. Additionally, Atlanta Public Schools sponsors a limited number of teachers each year

who participate in online training offered through Pearson Learning in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) designed for English learning students.

Collaborative Teams

Teachers at Centennial Place Elementary School participate in a variety of collaborative school-wide professional learning teams, and these are described in our School Improvement Plan (CPES, SIP, 2013). Grade level groups, vertical teams and cross-discipline groups are key to achieving school-wide initiatives and goals. As expressed in *Standards for Professional Learning*, “learning communities share collective responsibility for the learning of all students within the school” (Learning Forward, 2011). Grade level teams meet every Tuesday during a common planning time. They document their discussions and share the minutes of these meetings schoolwide and with the Instructional Leadership team, which meets every two weeks and includes representatives from each grade as well as fine arts, special education, and the media specialist. Subject-area groups with representatives from each grade level meet once each quarter, often on teacher workdays, to compare strategies and share strategies between age groups, and often make recommendations for professional learning activities. Special groups such as the fine arts team and media committee convene monthly to collaboratively plan instruction that supplements classroom core instruction. Several times throughout the year cross-grade-level groups, for example kindergarten-1st grade, 1st grade-2nd grade, and so on, convene to focus on education foundations needed for student transitions between grades. We will expand these groups to include middle level education beginning in 2014-15 as our charter transition gets underway.

Evaluation

The impact of professional learning on teacher practice is generally evaluated through student learning data. Since we use data to identify specific domains that could be improved through

professional learning, we can return to those domains to evaluate whether professional learning has demonstrated success, although we have not made a formal effort to evaluate the effectiveness of professional learning directly related to student achievement. Additionally, descriptions of participation in professional development activities are included in formal teacher evaluations and are self-documented through TKES (Teacher Keys Effectiveness System) electronic portfolios. Formal and informal classroom teacher observations by the school principal or assistant principal can document whether instructional strategies reflect formal professional learning activities. Attendance in district-sponsored professional learning is assessed by teacher completion of surveys and evaluations related to these activities. We will develop plans for formal evaluation as part of our charter school operations beginning in 2014-15 (A. Shelton, personal communication, January 22, 2014).

References:

Centennial Place Elementary School Schoolwide Continuous Improvement Plan 2013-2014. Revised October 29, 2013. Atlanta, GA: Centennial Place Elementary School.

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