Core Function	Curriculum, Assessment, and Instructional Planning

Effective Practice	Engage Instructional Teams in developing standards-aligned units of instruction

Indicator: Instructional Teams develop materials for their standards-aligned learning activities and share the materials among themselves. (5105)

Explanation: The evidence confirms that effective Instructional Teams co-design units of instruction, which are standards defined and reinforced by materials developed to support the determined student learning outcomes. Resulting unit plans will explicitly state student learning outcomes as determined by the accompanying standards. Effective unit plans are sequenced and layered upon previously required skills and knowledge. The unit plans will establish a means to measure student pre unit abilities followed by ways to measure post unit gains, which in turn indicates instructional success.

Questions: What evidence will the district use to determine that Instructional Teams engage in developing standards aligned with units of instruction? How will the district ensure that the Instructional Teams have identified and developed the correct materials to support these units of instruction? How will the district and principal support the work of Instructional Teams? What types of data will the district and principal analyze to determine the effectiveness of the instructional units and supporting materials the teams have developed?

Teaching has long been seen as an individualized practice, with each instructor acting autonomously within his or her own classroom. Darling-Hammond, et al. (2009) refer to this as an "egg crate model of instruction," alluding to the very separate and independent nature of instructional practice (p. 11). Historically, it has been unusual for teachers to take on a true collaborative planning model, in which units and lessons are jointly planned and either individually or jointly implemented. However, it is becoming increasingly important to coordinate the ways in which teachers within a school building are working to improve student achievement; Instructional teams and professional learning communities (PLCs) are proven ways to facilitate this cooperation and alignment (DuFour, 2004).

The Importance of Collaborative Planning

Although teachers are largely independent professionals, they still have a need for connections to and practice-oriented conversations with their colleagues (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). In a recent study, Ronfeldt, et al. (2015) found that an overwhelming majority – almost 90 percent – of the teachers they surveyed thought that instructional teams and collaboration among peers were helpful or very helpful for checking in on student progress and developing instructional strategies. Yet Darling-Hammond, et al. (2009) found that across the country, fewer than 20 percent of teachers felt that there were high levels of collaboration in their schools, and fewer than 15 percent had actively tried to collaborate with their peers for coordination purposes.

While this type of collaborative work is not the norm among American teachers, Supovitz and Poglinco (2001) found that, "groups that form around some specific purpose are a more effective means to achieve that purpose than would be individuals working on the same task in isolation" (p. 13). Darling-Hammond, et al. (2009) similarly write:

Research shows that when schools are strategic in creating time and productive working relationships within academic departments or grade levels, across them, or among teachers school-wide, the benefits can include greater consistency in instruction, more willingness to share practices and try new ways of teaching, and more success in solving problems of practice (p. 11).

Multiple studies have found connections between increased collaboration among teachers and improved student achievement (Saunders, et al., 2009; Ronfeldt, et al., 2015). Ronfeldt, et al. (2015) speculate that some of the benefits to student achievement come not only from improvements in particular teachers' instructional ability, but also because the school staff at large is working together to be more effective. Teachers working together can certainly grow their own practice, but they also expand their knowledge about what is happening instructionally throughout the school, across their own content area or grade level and others (Crow & Pounder, 2000).

Working together within a school allows teachers to feel a sense of ownership over the instructional decisions made and to help garner support from their fellow staff members, both of which increase the excitement around and commitment to new initiatives (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). In addition to creating a greater sense of shared responsibility for the school's outcomes, as opposed to just those within an individual's classroom, instructional teams can also reduce a teacher's workload by streamlining practices and activities across the school (Crow & Pounder, 2000). Working in teams allows teachers to hear what is successfully happening in other classrooms – what was historically considered a private matter – and adjust their own practice to incorporate these ideas and techniques (DuFour, 2004).

Who Makes up an Instructional Team

Instructional teams differ most significantly from leadership teams in their activities and purpose. Instead of making decisions about the operations of the school, instructional teams work together to make shared curricular decisions (Redding, 2007). Like leadership teams, these teams typically consist of groups of teachers, the principal, and other administrators who may be academically focused, such as instructional coaches (Redding, 2007; Saunders, et al., 2009). The grouping of teachers can vary from school to school and

are either grouped horizontally–in grade-level teams–or vertically–in content area teams. (DuFour, 2004; Redding, 2007). As with leadership teams, it is important to note that all team members are valued as equals; one principal said, "I roll up my sleeves and I consider myself a learner along with them" (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001, p. 14).

The selection of team members is as important as its focus; Crow and Pounder (2000) argue that teams should reflect a balance of skills and specialties to maximize the impact of the collaborative effort. The members of the instructional team should also have a willingness to try new things in the classroom, work with others to improve practice, and to serve in informal leadership roles at the school. This level of commitment and interest has important consequences for the implementation and maintenance of what the team decides. Wenger (2000) writes: "A community has to consider what artifacts it needs and who has the energy to produce and maintain them so they will remain useful as the community evolves" (p. 232).

How Should Instructional Teams Work Together

According to Redding (2007), the primary goal of an instructional team is to collectively examine the learning standards to which the school or district adheres and the curricular models that the school uses; these two sources of information must then be arranged into unit plans – chunks of work that last approximately one month – for each of the grade levels or content areas that the instructional team covers. This ensures that teachers stay organized in their instructional plans and that what happens in classrooms across the school is congruent. Redding (2007) continues, "This is where the real fun begins – teachers sharing their most successful instructional strategies for meeting each objective in the unit of instruction (p. 105).

Wenger (2000) shares that communities of practice must have a "shared repertoire of communal resources–language, routines, sensibilities, artifacts, tools, stories styles, etc." (p. 229). In schools, these resources are largely derived from the work of an instructional team. Helping to align school-wide instructional practices across the school but to the relevant learning standards not only leads to greater consistency in the quality of instruction that all students are receiving, but it can

also encourage collective creativity and innovation in teaching (Wenger, 2000). Having a bank of shared resources also reduces duplicative efforts from teachers who would each typically have to create their own materials (Crow & Pounder, 2000).

Logistically, it is important for instructional teams to meet at least monthly, for long enough periods of time to develop the rapport and depth of conversation needed to drive teaching and learning in the school (Saunders, et al., 2009). Co-planning times may happen within grade-level or content-area teams on a weekly basis during teachers' prep periods. However, the instructional team, which guides the school-wide vision, will necessarily need more time, as its members have more courses to align, more student data to evaluate, and more teacher practices to address (Saunders, 2009). Schools that acknowledged the need for time to meet and planned it into the school schedule were found to have more stable and effective PLCs and instructional teams (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

In order for the collaborative process to work effectively, the team must establish an environment in which all team members feel comfortable with the work and with one another. Supovitz & Poglinco (2001) found that instructional communities are most successful when staff members feel safe taking risks, communicate openly, assign formal and informal leadership roles, and ensured both mutual accountability and flexibility for teachers. Wenger's (2000) work in organizational management and collaboration is also relevant here; effective communities of practice must have "collective understanding and mutual accountability" for the organization at large, as well as "mutual engagement and reciprocal relationships" among team members (p. 229). Before the process of curricular alignment to standards can happen, the infrastructure for positive and productive adult collaboration must be in place.

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