

Evidence Cluster #2:
An Analysis and Action Plan for School Capacity Building

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EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

Abstract

Although Leeds Middle School has made a promising initial commitment to implementing professional learning communities by prioritizing time and resources, there is a lack a consistent data-based approach that is focused on getting results. Additionally, North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey data shows dissatisfaction with opportunities for teacher leadership. Thus, my action plan proposes building on existing professional learning community structures to strengthen norms and procedures and implement common formative assessments. This plan will empower Leeds Middle School teachers to use their collective wisdom to collaboratively design assessments that will assist them with making more informed instructional decisions.

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

An Analysis and Action Plan for School Capacity Building

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been embraced by many leaders not only for their deliberate results-orientated focus but also for their collaborative structure which empowers teachers and capitalizes on their collective wisdom. Yet, the term PLC has become so overused that DuFour (2011) is actually afraid the term will become meaningless. He writes, “the rise or fall of the professional learning community concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the commitment and persistence of the educators within it” (p. 11). Thus, even as powerful as PLCs can be, their success depends on the professionals involved. Although Leeds Middle School (LMS) boasts of embracing a PLC structure, they are clearly in the early stages of implementation. Furthermore, there are specific organizational structures and PLC procedures in place as well as dedicated time allowed for PLCs to meet, LMS has failed to consistently implement a data-based approach focused squarely on improving student achievement.

LMS PLC Strengths

LMS consistently embraces some components of the PLC structure. The administration recognizes that teachers need time to collaborate, and the school’s master schedule allows common planning time for grade level teachers. Teachers are required to meet weekly in their content area PLCs to reflect on lessons, adjust instruction, and plan for the next week. In fact, many content area groups actually meet daily—even if just for a few minutes—in order to fine-tune daily instruction and compare with each other the results of that day’s lesson. Steady growth in student achievement data in reading, math, and science at all grade levels shows that LMS staff members have transcended the “my kingdom—my classroom” mentality that impedes a truly collaborative environment (DuFour, 2004; Sparks, 2008). The majority seem to understand that they have an obligation to all students in the school and not just those on their class rosters.

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LMS PLC Challenges

However, there are some basic elements of effective PLCs that have not yet been realized. Although the meetings are usually amicable and productive, there are no formally adopted standards or norms that ensure conversation will stay focused on student learning rather than devolve into a complaint session. While sharing lesson plans and strategies contributes to the collegial environment, the focus must be on learning rather than just teaching in order for PLCs to be effective (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; DuFour, 2004; Konza & Maloney, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Schmoker, 2006; Sparks, 2008). LMS PLCs lack consistent data-based progress monitoring and instead rely significantly on anecdotal teacher observations. Without norms and progress monitoring, there is no accountability to ensure that the lesson plans and strategies being shared positively impact student learning. Also, since there is no accountability, teachers are free to ignore the work of the PLC. Not all departments have embraced PLCs as an effective tool to bring both consistency and rigor to instruction. Furthermore, even when there are worthy conversations that take place, there are no processes in place to make sure action follows.

The LMS PLC implementation lacks a data-driven focus because the only common formative assessments utilized are the district mandated benchmarks. However, district benchmarks are only given in reading, math, and 8th grade science. While some teachers may argue that common assessments take away their sovereignty by requiring they all give the same test, Rose (2008) argues that classroom teachers still have independent responsibility for daily formal and informal assessments since common assessments are not the only assessments. Without common assessments, teachers cannot know how well their students have learned the material because there is no comparison data. Furthermore, without frequent and monitored

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

common assessments, teachers are not held accountable for their classroom effectiveness in-between the nine weeks district benchmarks. Nine-weeks is a long time to wait to intervene with struggling students or teachers.

Value of PLCs

If implemented effectively, PLCs can shift the entire culture of a school. Du Four, Du Four, Eaker, and Many (2006) describe how PLCs change the culture of a school “from independence to interdependence, a language of complaint to a language of commitment, from long-term strategic planning to planning short-term wins, and from infrequent generic recognition to a culture of celebration” (p. 189). In other words, students benefit because PLCs value that a lesson be effective rather than just completed. Teachers benefit because instead of focusing on lofty goals that require overwhelming and broad-reaching systematic change, PLCs motivate with frequent celebrations that honor measurable results.

PLCs impact instructional practice and language when teachers align their curriculums in order to create common assessments and the data is then used to plan interventions (Many, 2008). Instead of using canned programs or a little-too-late remediation, PLCs implement early interventions designed to catch students before they fail. In addition, PLCs change relationships between teachers by increasing in mutual accountability to each other as professionals (Many, 2008). They cannot ignore their colleague who is either unwilling or unable to achieve results because common formative assessments effectively highlighted areas where teaching has not actually translated into learning. Additionally, PLCs improve teacher relationships with administration because a building level commitment to the PLC process requires that teachers step up their instruction and that administrators provide them with the time and resources in order to achieve measurable results.

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

Another benefit to PLCs is how they empower the teacher as a *professional* who is capable of identifying, analyzing, and acting upon their own craft. According to Schmoker (2006), traditional professional development creates a dependence on an outside consultant to come in and fix what teachers are doing wrong. Instead, PLCs allow teachers to capitalize upon their collective strengths and give teachers time to act upon what they already know.

Additionally, there is less resistance when change comes from inside (Schmoker, 2006). At its highest implementation level, PLCs are safe environments where teachers are free to analyze and reflect upon instruction without judgment. As Ainsworth and Viegut (2006) emphasize, teachers are more empowered to collect and analyze data for instructional effectiveness when they know that the data is being used to improve student learning and not for teacher evaluation purposes.

In the NC Teacher Evaluation tool, PLCs are significant. Standard One asks that teachers demonstrate leadership both in and out of the classroom while Standard Four focuses on how teachers facilitate learning. By working collaboratively with colleagues to monitor and increase student achievement, PLCs empower teachers to make effective, data-based instructional decisions that meet a variety of student learning needs. In addition, when teachers in a PLC engage in reflective analysis of the effectiveness of those instructional decisions, they meet Standard 5. However, with the 2012 addition of Standards 6 and 8 on both the North Carolina teacher and principal evaluation tools respectively, PLCs are even more crucial. These standards measure student growth by placing emphasis on both the growth of the teachers' own students as well as the school as a whole. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2012), classroom scores account for 70% while the school-wide data accounts for 30% of the teacher effectiveness rating. School-wide student growth data is included "to encourage

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

collaboration and collective ownership of all outcomes” (p. 37). Thus, implementing an effective PLC structure is imperative as effective teachers cannot work in isolation.

Role of Common Formative Assessments in a PLC

Without a data-based approach, a PLC is no different than a traditional teacher planning session where teachers may blindly follow the pacing guide but not stop to analyze how well students mastered the material. The shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning must be monitored through the use of data which in turn is used formatively to plan and implement interventions (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; DuFour et al., 2006; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). That data is best gathered through common formative assessments created around a common curriculum and administered to all students (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Rose, 2008; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). Student data is then compared across all teachers to analyze strengths and weaknesses both individually and collectively.

However, common formative assessments should not be viewed as just “tests”. Ainsworth and Viegut (2006) assert that students are “over-tested” but “under-assessed” (p. ix). They draw a distinction between tests as summative evaluation tools that let us know how well students have performed versus formative tools that provide insight on how to help students improve. Common formative assessments are collaboratively designed by small grade level or content area teachers, address timely and specific learning targets, and are administered frequently to monitor student progress. Teachers then analyze the results to see whether students have mastered the learning targets, identify strengths and weakness, and adjust instruction accordingly (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009).

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

Role of the Administrator in Common Formative Assessments

In a PLC, teachers are empowered to improve student learning by being directly involved with planning, refining, and analyzing their instruction. However, administrators are still important to the process. Administrators must prioritize time for PLCs to operate, protect it from interruptions, and allow flexibility for teachers to design assessments and analyze results. Administrators also provide the leadership to make sure PLCs stay focused on results.

Most importantly, administrators must nurture a climate that contributes to effective PLC implementation. They need to encourage open and honest dialogue about instruction and how it impacts student learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2011). Keeping conversations focused on data rather than personal judgments can help build trust within a PLC. For example, teachers need to trust that data will not be used to evaluate teachers. A true PLC recognizes and respects the needs of each individual to be able to learn from one another without fear of judgment or reprisal from colleagues or administration.

Data Sources

When LMS administrators aligned the schedule in 2006 to provide grade-level content area teachers with dedicated planning time, teachers used the opportunity to share lessons, strategies and resources, using their strengths to the benefit of their own students and their colleagues'. The increased collaboration at LMS also coincides with a period of dramatic growth in North Carolina End of Grade achievement data for reading, math, and science. Prior to 2008, LMS had never achieved Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind legislation and was deep in sanctions.

However, while PLCs were beneficial at LMS even in the implementation stage, last year's school improvement plan achievement data indicates a need to move the PLCs to the next

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

level. Despite seeing consistent high growth for the previous three years, there was a visible slow-down in that rate of change and an actual decrease in 2012 when our overall composite

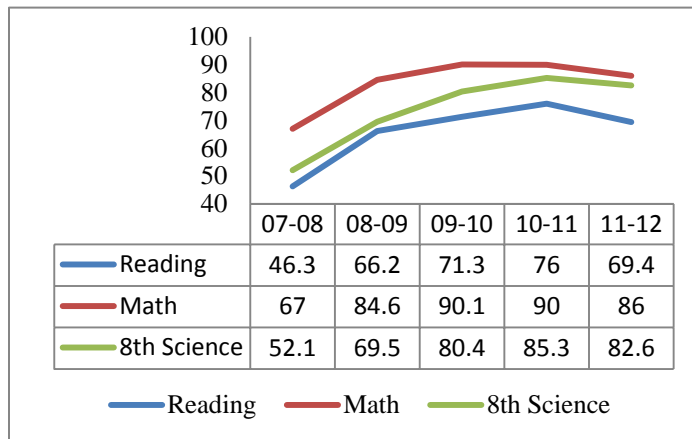


Figure 1. LMS EOG Proficiency scores by assessment topic 2007-2012. Reprinted from the 2012 LMS School Improvement Plan data profile.

performance dropped for the first time in four years from 83.4% to 78.8%.

Achievement levels in all three content areas also dropped. While they are

likely not the only contributors to a

decline in scores, PLC weaknesses such

as the lack of a data-based approach and

processes that hold PLCs accountable

have likely lessened their impact on student achievement over time.

Yet despite a gradual decline in academic impact, faculty and staff perceptions of teacher empowerment and leadership are largely positive. On the 2012 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (NCTWCS), more than 80% of the staff responded agree or strongly agree to six of the eight questions under teacher leadership (see Figure 2). On the whole, their scores were on par with the responses from other teachers in both Lincoln County and North Carolina and show consistency or even minimal increases from the 2010 results. However, teacher satisfaction with being encouraged to participate in school leadership roles jumped from 79% in 2010 to 91% in 2012. Interestingly, the survey also demonstrates that LMS teachers feel they work effectively as individual teacher leaders and as a group, but the same majority does not feel as though their leadership has much influence on actual school decision making. This is an indication that the PLCs' reach for school-improvement has been minimal.

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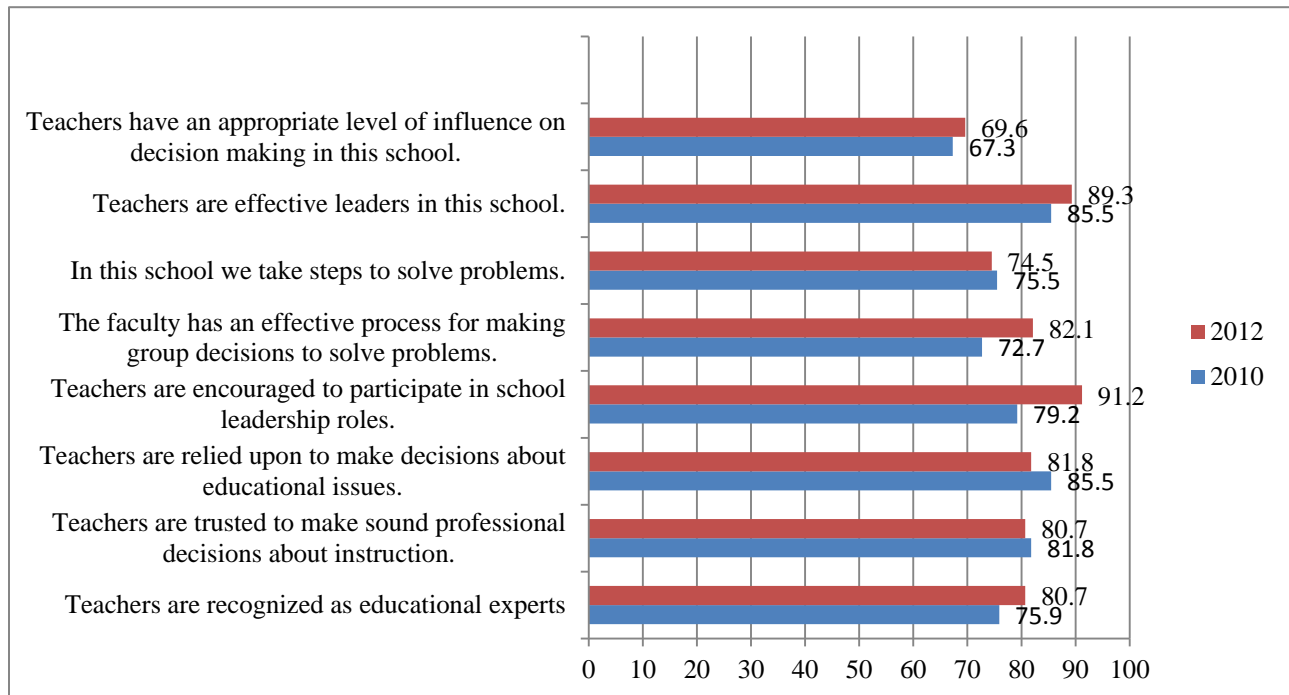


Figure 2. Comparison of 2010 and 2012 NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey results.

Developing a Plan for Common Formative Assessments

In order to plan and implement a data-based approach to PLCs by using common formative assessments, I will work with both the School Improvement Team (SIT) and grade level department chairs to develop the action plan in Appendix A. We will use NCTWC Survey results, achievement data trends, and anecdotal observations to reflect on possible reasons for a drastic decline in test scores after such a consistent period of growth. This analysis will show that our success coincides with teachers first using the PLC process. However, the initial PLC emphasis was on increasing the teachers' repertoire of instructional strategies needed to meet the needs of a highly diverse population, and very little attention was paid to assessing the comparative effectiveness of those strategies. Thus, while there was an immediate boost to student achievement in the initial years, that success was unsustainable in the long-term because of a lack of accountability as strategies were used or dropped at teacher discretion without any

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

data analysis to determine the effectiveness of instructional choices. Yet, teachers were obviously implementing instruction effectively on some level based on previous achievement score growth and should, therefore, be empowered to also assess its effectiveness. Thus, common formative assessments, a previously unused PLC component, will be highlighted as the next step to increasing the effectiveness of our PLCs and positively impacting achievement.

In order to increase buy-in to common formative assessments, I will work with grade level and department PLC lead teachers to obtain feedback on related SIT action plan items and shape an implementation timeline. Since department PLCs will be collecting and using the assessment data, it is important that they be part of the process rather than viewing common formative assessments as an irrelevant administrative mandate.

Action Plan Narrative

Similar to how PLCs were introduced at LMS, implementing common formative assessments is a multi-faceted initiative that cannot be accomplished in a single year. Ainsworth and Viegut (2006) suggest that common formative assessments should “start slow and build steadily” (p. 63) because teachers need time to gain confidence and expertise in creating the assessments and using the data to refine instruction. Otherwise, teachers are unlikely to take ownership of the process and use it meaningfully to shape instruction. Thus, the LMS action plan is structured to build momentum over the course of a three year period starting with a pilot group, moving to common formative assessments once a quarter, and progressing to 6 to 8 assessments a year at the secondary level (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006).

Before we can meet the action plan goal of 100% of the core content area departments implementing common formative assessments, foundational PLC issues need to be addressed. For that reason, the initial action plan step involves staff reflection on current PLC practices and

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

effectiveness. Because the various PLCs may be at different implementation levels, this needs to occur at the individual PLC level in order to strengthen their operations. A short reflective survey by staff and SIT will identify strengths and weakness in how individual PLCs are impacting overall school improvement, especially since NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey data indicates that teachers are not satisfied with their input (see Appendix B). In addition, each PLC needs to set specific norms and operating procedures that align with the overall school mission and vision. Group norms and procedures create a sense of community, encourage the sharing of best practices, and facilitate safe environments where teachers feel empowered to both request and offer professional advice (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006; Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2006).

Once the PLC base has been reinforced, the common formative assessment concept needs to be explained to the staff with a focus on the value of the common assessments for improving teaching and learning. To maximize teacher buy-in and make common formative assessments an integral part of the school improvement process, Ainsworth and Viegut (2006) recommend that administrators support progress at a reasonable pace and encourage teachers to approach the process one piece at time. Therefore, I would present the concept at a school-wide faculty meeting by explaining the different components and highlighting key research. Since the seventh grade social studies department and the sixth grade English department have already experimented inconsistently with common assessments, I would ask these teachers to share their experiences. Each content area PLC will then assess their readiness for implementation. In the first year, common formative assessments will be implemented by volunteer data teams who are willing to accept the challenge because “their direct experience combined with improved results in student learning will generate the kind of enthusiasm and ‘buy-in’ needed to successfully

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introduce common formative assessments on a larger scale” (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006, p. 64). These volunteer data teams will also function in a train the trainer role as they will take the lead when common formative assessments are implemented school-wide. This will give additional weight to their recommendations because they are coming from in-building colleagues who are familiar with the positives and challenges that will contribute to whether common formative assessments will be successful.

Because the remaining PLCs will carefully watch how the volunteers and administration respond, it is important these initial groups be given the opportunity to work through the process without feeling overly scrutinized. For that reason, Ainsworth and Viegut (2006) recommend that PLCs receive no formal training for their first common assessments and instead draft them based on their collective expertise. This will give teachers a sense of ownership over the process and empower them to take the necessary risks to see what works without feeling like they will be evaluated on their first attempts. This will allow them the “freedom to evaluate the effectiveness of the *process*—without concern over the actual assessment results” (p. 65) which is crucial to gaining eventual acceptance. However, Ainsworth and Viegut (2006) do not discount professional development, but it is only after the initial common assessment has been drafted, implemented, and evaluated for effectiveness that they recommend sustained formal training. They argue that learning how to make well-written assessment after the first draft makes the training more relevant.

Implementing common formative assessments does not simply mean that grade level content area teachers all give the same test. There are additional steps throughout the process that are all important to making common formative assessments meaningful to teaching and learning. Because assessing the entire curriculum would be an overwhelming task, data teams first

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

determine power standards that are vertically and horizontally aligned (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006; Bailey & Jakicic, 2012, Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). Identifying key curriculum standards that will be assessed does not mean that other standards are eliminated. Instead, teachers prioritize and assess power standards that are essential to student success on the next level of learning. When this occurs at a school-wide level, there must be time for data teams to meet with one another but also with other grade levels and content areas in order to see how the chosen data team power standards fit into a greater context. Once the standards have been chosen data teams must determine to what degree each standard will be assessed and choose the most appropriate measurement tool. Concurrently, teachers must be trained for implementing a backwards planning model where teachers use the power standards to create common assessments and *then* plan their instruction in order to improve both the quality of instruction and its alignment to the standards upon which the assessments are based (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012).

Scoring the assessment and analyzing the results is as important as designing the measurement tool. Collaborative scoring of common formative assessments is recommended because the collective insight helps teachers be more purposeful about not only the assessment itself but also the instructional choices they make because they must work together to come to a common understanding of proficiency (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). Identifying anchor papers and double-scoring engages teachers in powerful conversations about what student mastery looks like. Likewise, common assessments require systematic data analysis involving both pre- and post-assessments. Pre-assessments help teachers plan differentiation for acceleration and remediation while post-assessments highlight effectiveness. In the data analysis stage, teams will chart the data, analyze the results for strengths and weaknesses, set SMART goals by ranking areas of need, select teaching strategies to meet those needs, and determine

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

levels of mastery. This five-step process is important because it empowers collective wisdom and makes teachers admit professional development needs, making it immediately more relevant to the teachers' professional growth. Celebrating even small milestones validates the PLC process and increases buy-in to PLC processes and goals (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012). In addition, a centrally located data wall will communicate progress to stakeholders.

The biggest hurdle will be finding release time for teachers to write and score the assessments and analyze the results. While the content areas PLCs have weekly common planning time, there are a multitude of other responsibilities during that time that may diminish their commitment to the common formative assessment process. When common formative assessments are implemented school-wide, additional release time will be provided for by using the existing intramural schedule which flexes the master schedule to allow students the opportunity to engage in intra-grade level competitions. Elective teachers will facilitate the competitions as normal while grade level teachers engage in PLC team meetings.

Reflection

The biggest threat to our PLCs and common formative assessments is the lack of consistent implementation across the building. Fullan warns that, "the terms of reform—professional learning community, capacity building, assessment for learning—travel easily, but the underlying conceptualization does not. Many leaders take shortcuts by slicing off the visible part of an iceberg and then assuming that they have captured its full power" (In Many, p. 68). In the existing PLC structure, we have mandated time but have not provided the leadership to keep PLCs action-orientated and focused on results. If the teachers whose leadership makes their PLCs successful leave, they will most likely fall apart. However, if we implement common formative assessments and seize the opportunity to celebrate those places and teachers where the

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

PLC structure is getting results, then it might encourage those teachers who are giving it lip-service. In addition, common formative assessments are an opportunity to build upon relatively positive NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey results about teacher leadership opportunities and address a lack of satisfaction with teacher input in school-wide decision-making.

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

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EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

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[Professional-Learning-Communities@-The-Surest,-Fastest-Path-to-Instructional-Improvement.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/106045/chapters/Professional-Learning-Communities@-The-Surest,-Fastest-Path-to-Instructional-Improvement.aspx)

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

Appendix A:

Leeds Middle School Improvement Plan

School Improvement Goal: Improve PLC processes to include common formative assessments and data-based decision making.

Objective: By 2015-2016 100% of content area departments (social studies, science, English language arts, and math) will administer common formative assessments and collectively analyze data in PLCs on a monthly basis.

Action Step	Persons Responsible	Resources Required/Budget	Potential Barriers	Due Date
Year One: 2013-2014				
Survey teachers to analyze current levels of PLC effectiveness	Administration	NA – Use free online Survey Monkey tool	Teachers not taking the survey—facilitate survey in grade level meeting to ensure participation	10/2013
Review survey results with SIT and use data to guide PLC improvements	Administration SIT	NA	NA	10/2013
Set individual PLC norms and procedures	PLC teams	NA	Ineffective norms—set school-wide minimum expectations	11/2013
Present common formative assessment concept overview to staff	Administration Lead teachers	Copies of Common Formative Assessments by Bailey and Jakicic (2012) for initial training team (10 copies/Staff Development Budget approx. \$250.00)	NA	12/2013
Identify 2 or 3 common formative assessment pilot teams	Administration Volunteers	NA	No volunteers—capitalize on effective PLC groups	12/2013

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

Complete one common formative assessment cycle (identify standards, write assessment, teach standards, give assessment, analyze results, adjust instruction)	Pilot PLCs	Subs to provide release time for collaboration (general funds & staff development funds)	NA	1/2014 – 2/2014
Reflect on cycle and address areas where teachers feel they need additional support	Pilot PLCs Administration	Professional development resources as needed	NA	3/2014
Repeat cycle with identified improvements	Pilot PLCs	Subs to provide release time for collaboration (general funds & staff development funds)	NA	3/2014-4/2014
Present pilot experiences to the staff	Pilot PLCs	Data projector	Presentation will not be positive—make sure prior concerns have been addressed and acknowledge a plan for future areas of improvement	5/2014
Year Two: 2014-2015				
Complete quarterly common formative assessment cycles (identify standards, write assessment, teach standards, give assessment, analyze results, adjust instruction)	Content Area PLCs	Additional release time for assessment collaboration (weekly intramurals + regular PLC planning time)	NA	10/2014 12/2014 2/2015 4/2015
Reflect on each cycle and address areas where teachers feel they need additional support	Content Area PLCs Administration	Professional development resources as needed	NA	11/2014 1/2015 3/2015 5/2015
Year Three: 2015-2016				
Increase frequency of common formative assessments to a monthly basis	PLCs	Additional release time for assessment collaboration (weekly intramurals + regular PLC planning time)	NA	8/2015-5/2016

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

Provide on-going professional development as needed	Administration	Professional development resources as needed	NA	8/2015-5/2016
<p>Evidence of Success:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completed common formative assessments • Data wall charts • Data celebrations <p>Evaluation Process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly PLC minutes • Map of Common Formative Assessment targets to be assessed and when 				

EVIDENCE CLUSTER 2

Appendix B:

PLC Participation Survey

Please answer the following questions about your experiences with professional learning communities at Leeds Middle School. This survey will help guide continued improvements to our PLC structure.

Grade Level: 6 7 8 6th-8th

Please indicate to what degree you agree with each statement below. You may provide additional comments at the end.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
We meet regularly (at least once every two weeks).				
We follow agreed upon norms and expectations for participation that help us be productive.				
We focus mainly on issues related directly to student learning (rather grade level or school issues such as field trips, discipline, schedules, etc.)				
We determine our own agenda items that are relevant our needs.				
I feel comfortable expressing alternate points of view during PLC discussions.				
We deal with conflict constructively.				
I have changed my instruction as a result of my work within the PLC.				
We use data such as test scores and student work samples to support instructional decisions.				
We regularly give common assessments in order to compare data.				
Overall, I feel that PLCs are a valuable part of our school and positively impact teaching and learning.				
Comments:				