

Current Reality and GAPSS Assignment

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Part A: Professional Learning Current Reality

Vision

The Department of Georgia Education describes the Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPSS) Analysis as an onsite assessment of a school's progress toward meeting the School Keys. Their vision is to see schools perform and to be assessed much in the same manner that students are assessed on the Common Core Standards (CCGPS). This description is clear and understandable about what schools need to know, understand and be able to do. This explanation helps teachers become collaborating partners with administration in improving student outcomes in their schools. This explanation of GAPSS can help teachers and schools better understand what is expected of them and their schools.

“Job embedded professional learning is the goal for the Thomas County School System’s Professional Learning Department. Scientifically based research concludes that the most promising strategy for substantive school improvement is developing the capacity of the school personnel to function as a professional learning community” ([Thomas County Schools](#)). At Hand in Hand Primary School, teachers are included in many collaborative initiatives. Hand in Hand is a two graded school consisting of Prekindergarten and Kindergarten which helps more easily align the two curriculums and keep them developmentally appropriate. As staff is given the data on the previous year’s PreK assessment of [GELDS](#) (Georgia Early Learning Standards) and kindergarten assessment of [GKIDS](#), the faculty is involved in devising plans to increase students’ proficiency. For the 2014 school year Hand in Hand’s focus was to increase scores for students who are economically disadvantaged, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. Both of these assessment tools are online services that help teachers stay current and focus on those students who are scoring in the

“at risk” range. Hand in Hand’s principal, Mrs. Mayhall, has a special education background and she is passionate about bringing up the test scores of students with disabilities. Mrs. Mayhall also knows that technology can play a key role in helping students with disabilities through assistive technologies. These assistive technologies have been instrumental in helping many at-risk students. Last year the county installed SMART Boards in all classrooms from prekindergarten to high school. The teachers take pride in using them and continually ask for more training to help them enhance lessons that support the Common Core standards. The SMART Boards can be interactive with students as they are able to move some objects around on the board, write on them and create their own drawings. Hand in Hand also has a SMART Table in which several students can give input at the same time. This technology has allowed the school to take virtual field trips and introduce students to places, ideas and people they might not otherwise have been exposed to. “This computer assisted technology (CAI) has been shown to increase motivation, attention and time on task” (Mechling, Gast & Krupa, 2007). Mrs. Mayhall would like to see students using technology in all subject areas and for teachers to be able to fully implement the SMART Board technology. As well, she would like students more engaged in research projects, as many teachers at Hand in Hand have demonstrated what even the youngest students can accomplish with technology. Currently, she is writing a grant in hopes of obtaining several iPads for each classroom. These iPads are engaging and convenient for students to work in small groups or independently on remediation or enrichment activities and fit the needs of all students regardless of their level of proficiency. Ms. Mayhall is also keenly aware of the developmental needs of young students and realizes student-computer interactions can be a passive experience and this age group needs to be moved “to a more active, constructive or interactive level” (Mayer and Alexander, 2011). The interactive white board technology allows for teachers to have

students up, moving and working in groups on projects, skills and movement and music activities.

Needs Assessment

Hand in Hand is an unusual school as it is devoted to the earliest years of students' schooling. It is a two graded school with five wings consisting with a population of approximately 700 students, with 58% white, 39% black, 2% Hispanic and 1% other. The Hand in Hand school improvement plan obtained input from surveys that included teachers, support staff, parents and students. Student data was also collected through GKIDS, DIBELS Next, Pre-K Work Sampling, and Infinite Campus. Surveys and Data were then presented in collaborative work sessions that included; staff, Parent Advisory Meetings and school council meetings. Better Seeking Teams (BST) are broken down into leader groups who are responsible for presenting data on language, math or behavior issues. These leaders present the data at weekly BST meetings for the staff to develop initiatives to improve test scores, perceptions and attendance. Early in the year, staff meets with the assistant superintendent to brainstorm the most pressing needs of the school improvement plan (SIP) and ways in which to best approach these needs.

The weekly BST meetings have an agenda, however, they still maintain flexibility that allows for teachers to express ideas and concerns and this gives them a true sense of collaboration. These BST meetings are using "data as a point of departure for dialogue" (Knight, 2007) there is no one approach or solution to the needs of the students. Hand in Hand exemplifies what the Standards for Professional learning state, "The body of research about effective schools identifies collaboration and professional learning as two characteristics that appear in schools that substantially increase student learning" (Leaning Forward, 2011).

Professional Learning

Professional learning at Hand in Hand is offered in many ways and continuously. Learning may occur at the RESA center, in house or through online resources. Common Core and Work Sampling offer many tutorials that include examples and feedback through collaborative online webinar sessions. Many teachers may spend a year on a particular subject or topic. They may be asked to attend a content area specific workshop on language, science or math workshops and bring back the information and materials to share with staff in weekly BST meetings. With newly implemented Common Core standards, these trainings are usually targeted to help teachers use best practices to implement and assess the standards. Additionally, teachers plan together in groups by wings on the campus. This planning takes the form of implementing the standards that are to be taught and assessed in that nine week period. With the ease of email and Google Docs recently there has also been collaboration among the five kindergarten wings. If there are new teachers on the wing they are mentored by a veteran teacher on their wing.

Through Hand in Hand's technology coach, teachers have had in house coaching on Excel, Infinite Campus, Microsoft Office which includes Outlook Express with the creation of distribution list, teacher websites, DIBELS and SMART Board training. Hand in Hand's coach further provides assistance with modeling and implementing lessons either in BST meeting or one on one in the classroom.

Alignment of School Improvement Goals

The data in Hand in Hand's school improvement plan shows gains in many academic areas for kindergarten which include; language skills of reading CVC words, sight words and math skills of representing objects with a written numeral and counting to 100 by tens and ones.

Prekindergarten's math and science scores show increases after teachers focused their professional learning of those two domains. The data obtained from staff survey indicates a high morale among the staff, who rate the school as exemplary in all standards except the in the use of technology during instruction. The impact of consistent collaborative professional learning is evident as the scores indicate improvement in many areas of both grades. Even though there were significant gains in the language arts standards of reading common high-frequency words and CVC words the team feels this goal should remain as only 50.7% of the students met the goal of reading 30 high-frequency words in a minute and only 75.2% mastered reading CVC words. Gains in math were also significant as every subgroup for "exceeds" was met in representing a number of objects in written numerical form, however, this was the first year to assess counting to 100, and therefore this goal will also remain. As white students outperformed black students in all of the language goals, the focus on this sub group will be a major focus. Students with disabilities (SWD) had a high number of students (28.6%) scoring "Not Yet" for representing addition and subtraction with objects and had a fewer number of students scoring "meets" on this standard so this will also remain as a goal for this subgroup. Goals for both PreK and Kindergarten teachers are to develop higher order thinking/questioning strategies to develop higher order thinking for their students. Teachers will also revisit Hand in Hand's behavior management plan of *Conscious Discipline* for new teachers and those who feel they need a refresher course. As well, renewal of *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention* training, these behavior management goals are to help reduce the number of office and bus referrals. Bus drivers will also be included in a seminar to help them recognize age appropriate behavior for primary students.

Funding and Incentives

Hand in Hand is a Title I school and therefore it must adhere to specific Title I guidelines for professional learning, therefore, fundraisers can help bridge any gaps and provide additional funding sources to deal with school specific needs. Federal, state and local funds are pooled together to meet the needs of the school. As the SIP points out this provides for better utilization of funds from all resources, prevents fragmentation of services and increases program effectiveness. However, much of the discretion of how to use the funds is left to the principal,

Teachers at Hand in Hand Primary School, are more than willing to meet during the day for professional learning. Teachers are rarely asked to remain after school leaving them free to conduct their own family duties and to stay involved with their own children's after school extra-curricular activities. It also leaves the teacher free to work on classroom lessons which is difficult during the day as the age of the children mandates that two adults be with them at all times. This makes a traditional planning time almost impossible for PreK and kindergarten; therefore, teachers meet in two different groups according to their grade level's scheduled nap times. The teachers do help with fundraisers; by meeting their students and parents for dinner at local fast food restaurants. These restaurants give portions of the proceeds back to the school; this is an important connection with students' families, as well as, an additional funding source. Teachers also receive professional learning units (PLU's) for their professional learning. This is another incentive that keeps teachers from having to pay for their own professional development through colleges. Mrs. Mayhall is aware as *Leaning Forward* explains "student data alone is insufficient" (*Leaning Forward*, 2007) she listens to her teachers and considers their concerns and ideas about how to meet goals in ways that are developmentally appropriate for this age group. She has also, considered time, technology, money, and the changes in policies needed to bring about "changes in educator practice and student achievement" (*Leaning Forward*, 2007).

Diversity

Hand in Hand's school improvement plan is based on the identification of students and groups of students who are in the category of Not Yet Achieving on the Common Core Georgia Performance standards (CCGPS) and the state student achievement standards. These students include; economically disadvantaged students, students from Major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities and students with limited English proficiency. Mrs. Mayhall plans much of professional learning around making sure teaching staff are able to differentiate lessons based on students' abilities and around their goals on RTI (Response to Intervention) plans and for those students who are being served in EIP (Early Intervention Program) classrooms. The teaching staff of Hand in Hand, take pride in their ability to create lessons that are differentiated for struggling students, as well as, those students who need more enrichment.

Hand in Hand also serves migrant students through the Migrant Education Program. Kindergarten students who qualify receive EL services with a certified EL teacher, PreK students receive one to two hours of additional support from a migrant paraprofessional both in and out of the classroom and the school also provides a full day three-year old special education program for migrant students. Students are also provided with extra time on computer programs that help with language, these include; Reading Eggs, Edmark Games, Harcourt Math games, iPads for one on one tutoring and time on the SMART Board to practice handwriting or additional tutorial games.

Collaboration

Professional development at Hand in Hand is truly collaborative as it includes teachers,

principals, pupil services personnel, paraprofessionals, as well as, parents. Data analysis at Hand in Hand is conducted by teachers using DIBELS data for three benchmarks per year in kindergarten. Teachers meet in collaborative teams to review the data from DIBELS, Report Cards, and sight word fluency assessments to determine who needs remediation or enrichment and adjust the instruction and learning groups accordingly. As mentioned earlier, teachers meet once a week in BST meetings. BST leaders meet once a month to determine progress of students receiving remedial support. Additionally, PreK teachers meet weekly and review Work Sampling Data. Also, at each RTI meeting teachers consult with special education teachers and parents for individual students. This data can include behavioral frequency charts, teacher checklist, contracts, student portfolios, work samples, anecdotal notes and photos. This team decides if the child is on grade level and if the child should move back to Tier 1. RTI data is also going to be made available online in the near future.

Evaluation

Teachers at Hand in Hand are evaluated using the teacher keys effectiveness system (TKES) evaluation process. This provides teachers with clearly defined expectations and ongoing evaluation and support. Additionally, the TKES process is aligned with the school improvement plan (SIP) which helps teachers focus on the data within the SIP. The first step in the TKES process is to have teachers self-evaluate, this helps teachers articulate and hold themselves accountable for their own needs and growth. Administrators view these self-evaluations and administer informal walk-throughs, as well as, more formal and longer observations. These visits are informative to not only the administration but to teachers, as they show growth, and areas that need development. After visits have been conducted teachers are given feedback online and can read all of their evaluations. This allows the teacher to have immediate and ongoing view of

their evaluation. For the administrator the TKES system shows areas that may be common among the staff and further help them plan for professional learning. The primary purpose of TKES is to “optimize student learning and growth”, however, it also a system that “promotes collaboration between the teacher and the evaluator” (TKES, 2013). At Hand in Hand this is evident.

References

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