

Professional Learning Current Reality

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### **Professional Learning**

Many schools in Georgia must go through the GAPSS Analysis or the SACS Accreditation to ensure that schools are evaluating their current programs. The purpose of this is to, “provide a proves of data collection and verification of a school’s status and offer specific direction for school improvement.” (GAPSS 2012) The process of the GAPSS or SACS focuses on the school’s vision, evaluates teaching and learning, takes data from various sources such as test scores and classroom observations, and examines all factors for school improvement.

Professional learning for educators is an important part of the teaching and learning improvement process as well as the SACS or GAPSS Analysis. A school must continuously set goals for improvements and professional learning and this will provide educators with the tools they need to reach those goals. By setting teacher’s goals that align with the school’s vision, professional learning can be identified and implemented easily for the school’s improvement.

### **Darlington’s Vision**

Darlington School has a broad vision for technology and their mission states, “to empower students to learn with passion, act with integrity, and serve with respect.” Max Roach, director of the upper school, states that if we are going to ignite learning with a passion we have to consider whom we are teaching. We must realize that students have changed and we as educators must meet them where they are culturally. Switching to multiple solutions, including electronic ones, is key to working toward our learning goals and vision that is making classrooms more student centered instead of teacher centered. Faculty internalizes technology as a teaching tool rather than seeing it as an "add on" in addition to what is already done. In order to do this,

Darlington faculty will set professional development goals and monitor the impact of those goals on the classroom and school.

### **Identifying Professional Learning Needs**

The faculty members at Darlington School were tasked with the job of identifying the elements that they felt exemplified what a Darlington teacher should do. Faculty members were then asked to set their own professional goals that would put them outside of their own current standards and aligned with these new elements developed by the school. Teachers were then evaluated on their own goals and standards as well as the school's elements. Not just the department head and administrators conducted this evaluation process but the faculty member's peers were involved to ensure it was a true collaborative process that is more meaningful to the person being assessed.

Another step in the process of identifying personal learning needs is peer observation. The upper school director and the technology coordinator would assign peers to each instructor giving them the task to observe their classroom and report back with the results of that observation. Once the goal, evaluation and observation process had been completed then meetings with the teacher, upper school director and technology coordinator were set to determine what professional learning needs needed to be completed within a calendar year.

### **Professional Learning Opportunities**

Once professional learning needs are established for each faculty member, the technology coordinator, who is also the director of professional development, will seek out the best opportunities for that faculty member to meet those needs. Darlington School provides many learning opportunities as well as collaboration times for their faculty and staff members. Every

faculty member is encouraged to attend some sort of training yearly whether it is a conference, online class or workshop. Teachers at Darlington continually develop expertise in one's subject area, keeping abreast of changes in methods, technologies and best practices. Yearly faculty book studies are conducted, where all teaching faculty read one book to increase their knowledge for good teaching and learning. Darlington School provides their teachers with a technology coordinator and an instructional technologist to help with technology professional development and continuous coaching as needed. The technology coordinator and the Information Technology Department developed an online training course to help teachers understand how to do their job daily with technology as well as using technology for teaching and learning.

### **Professional Learning Evaluated to Aligned with School Improvement Goals**

At Darlington School teachers set professional learning goals and monitor the impact of those goals on the classroom and school through data such as quizzes, daily classroom achievement and exams. One example of this would be if a teacher was given the opportunity to teach AP (advanced placement) courses and given professional learning to teach that course. If students did extremely well on the exams, the teacher would continue to teach the classes and it would be assumed that the professional learning opportunity was successful in the situation. The school improvement goals and recommendations state that the professional learning should be more collaborative and as teachers engage in those opportunities they should share those new skills with those peers. Teachers now have planning periods that align with all department members so collaborative meetings can occur and the sharing of new ideas from professional learning can occur.

The instructional technology coordinator and the technology integration specialist scheduled follow up meetings to train, encourage and help master the new skills that were taught in these professional learning opportunities. Mentors and technology liaisons were also appointed for each grade level to encourage peer learning. All of these things combined help the school to reach goals toward their school improvement plan and show that the school's professional learning is inline with that plan. Other faculty members and department head also evaluate the teacher over the following school year to evaluate if the professional learning opportunity met the goals of the teacher's needs for the classroom. During the teacher's evaluation process they are asked to report back on how the professional learning helped them to met their goals for the classroom and school improvement.

One of the intricate school improvement goals is to renovate programs and align with student achievement and best practices. One way to renovate the programs is to provide enough professional learning that includes diversity, especially for a school that is so culturally rich as Darlington School.

### **Professional Learning Opportunities for Diversity**

Darlington School has a very culturally rich enrollment due to the boarding school environment. One of the school's main goals is to maintain a healthy diversity within the international population and between international and domestic population. To reach and maintain this goal the school must provide, implement and follow up with many types of professional learning to help with ESL (English as a Second Language) students. The first step the school has taken was to hire a full time ESL teacher that provides classes, coaching and

encouragement to all students and teachers in cultures and languages to help our international boarding students to thrive.

The school also provides teachers with many learning opportunities for our faculty to enrich their classroom to help students that may be struggling due to the language barrier. The school participates in a school-wide ESL training at the beginning of every school year. The full time ESL faculty member then coaches the teachers through out the year to remind them of the practices they learned so they become a daily part of their classroom techniques. The funding for ESL training has been a challenging part of providing this training but the school has seen the benefits and improvements from it, so they have made it a budgeted line item every year.

### **Funding and Incentives Professional Learning**

Darlington School sees professional learning as an intricate part of school improvement and student achievement. Due to this acknowledgment of importance, the school has a very large professional development budget. The school requires every teacher be involved in at least one professional development opportunity every year, so the school must provide the funding for that teacher to participate in that occasion.

The school not only has a large professional development budget but they also provide many incentives for a teacher to gain more knowledge to provide a classroom rich with student centered engagement. There are several grants and fellowships that are awarded for teachers that have new ideas or show exemplary work to continue training and/or obtain tools to continue their work. The school's technology department recently received a Wood's Fellowship Grant, "The proposed Carla and Leonard Wood Distinguished Faculty Fellowship will help us to build a culture of continual professional development among our faculty. Teachers tend to be learners,

but the intense routine of the teaching year makes it difficult for us to plan for our own growth, with the result that we sometimes lean on what we already know year to year. Time set aside for travel and study, and money set aside for tuition, materials and other resources would allow teachers to explore the newest research in their fields and adopt the best practices of innovative programs. For instance, our science department is planning to change our course sequence in the Upper School from Biology – Chemistry – Physics to Physics – Chemistry – Biology. With a Wood Fellowship, our Science Department Chair could study the rationale for the change, visit schools which have already effected this change, plan with his department for changes in materials, emphasis, and procedures which making the switch would require. The funds would also help in acquiring new materials. More than that, however, would be the critical steps of planning how best to communicate all this to his teachers, see that they are properly trained, and clearly communicate to our students and parents why and how the change would be accomplished. Changing a sequence which has been around since the late nineteenth century takes study, time, training and resources—all of which the fellowship would make possible” (Darlington 2013). The fellowship awarded was in the amount of \$25,000 to build a “Maker Space” to give students a place to learn more about STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) with hands-on practice and to enrich the science and technology department with tools and professional learning. This fellowship would provide many teachers with the funding to learn more about STEM and how a “Maker Space” can improve student achievement.

The school also pays for half of high education for teachers to obtain their Master’s degree. Upon receiving the degree, teachers are given a pay raise of 2%. At the end of the

school year the employees at Darlington are given a dinner party in their honor that includes prizes and awards for teachers that strive for greater achievement.

### **Conclusion**

Darlington School has a broad vision for school improvement whether that be to integrate technology, to be more culturally diverse or be inline with student-centered classroom activities. To continue our already successful school improvement plan, the school must continue to see professional learning as that key for the success. By helping their faculty members to continuously grow and learn, Darlington School provides classrooms rich with student engagement, technology and diversity.



References

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