

The ABCs of PLCs

PLCs another tool for teachers

As we are now well into September, the determined focus to meet the learning needs of all our students in the Westwind School Division continues to be evident in all our schools.

Through implementing the tenets of Professional Learning Communities, we are using the best and most current research in the field of education to improve student learning.

Throughout the year, teachers will be working in teams to plan their approaches to teach the Alberta Curriculum, utilize common assessments, and then analyze both the degree of success students are achieving as well as their teaching practices on an ongoing basis.

Westwind teachers are committed to excellence in classroom practice and in continuous professional learning throughout their careers. In time dedicated to their professional conversations, teachers will be collaborating in a disciplined and purposeful manner on the fundamental PLC questions:

- 1. What is it we expect students to learn?*
- 2. How will we know if they have learned it?*
- 3. What will we do if they haven't learned it?*
- 4. What will we do to enrich their experience if they have learned it?*
- 5. What specific causal impacts can we identify as being the most successful in our teaching practices?*

Over the next few months we will continue to provide both general information about our Professional Learning Community and the specific impact it is having on teacher practice and student learning.

For more information follow the PLC link on our website at <http://bit.ly/1oktFxD>

They say it's a poor craftsman who blames his tools. Cody Toone is proof the opposite is true as well.

The Cardston Junior High School vice-principal is quick to praise the tools that have been provided educators in Westwind School Division through the auspices of Professional Learning Communities.

Two years ago he and fellow math teachers from across the Division gathered to talk about essential outcomes of math curriculum – those critical things that students needed to learn – and share successful strategies in getting those points across.

"I know several kids that I was able to get to where I had been

teaching a class and had pretty well exhausted all the tools in my toolbox," says Toone, now in his 10th year of teaching. "I went to the PLC meeting and I was able to grab a few more and the kids were able to latch onto that idea much more effectively than when I was struggling with my own tools."

The old philosophy of 'teaching to the middle' – with the hopes that the struggling students will catch up and those excelling won't get too bored – doesn't fly anymore, says Toone, who taught Language Arts and some options after focusing on math the year prior..

Instead, teachers can push some students higher and pull up those who may have otherwise been passed by through collaborating on the principles of PLCs – determining what students need to know, true indicators of whether they're succeeding and timely means to get them back on course if they aren't.

"In our world we call that differentiated instruction. And in a parent's world, it just means you were able to reach my kids," he says.

If shared knowledge and expertise is the teachers' biggest benefit from PLCs, Cardston Junior High School has taken that to another level. The school brings together teachers from various courses together to delve into the curriculum of one particular course.

"A person who doesn't normally teach Language Arts asks 'what does this mean? I'm not used to this, explain it to me – which forces us to communicate much more richly,'" says Toone.

Professional Learning Communities also offers a spin-off benefit for teachers, he says.

"The fundamentally sound educators – I work with many amazing educators – when they can sit down together and put into words what they knew intuitively to be good practice, that's a confirmation that they're doing what they're supposed to do and it acts as an empowering agent to be able to let them leverage their previous knowledge," says Toone.

