

# The Aspen Early Learning Center PLC



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## Valuing First Impressions

There are few things more important than a first impression. The closeness and trust we depend on from our early relationships are often enough to fundamentally alter the trajectory of our success. Knowing this, the Aspen Early Learning Center (AELC) strives to make the very best first impression in the school lives of our young learners. In being named a Model Professional Learning Community at Work for the second time, our school community has had the opportunity to reflect and build on our success in ways that bring the support of high-quality data and peer leadership to our everyday work with kids. The setbacks and successes we have faced in pursuit of a high-quality PLC have unearthed a few important lessons

that may be useful to other districts seeking to advance their own early learner programming.

Since its inception in 2016, AELC has developed a community of educators who have dedicated their time and energy to making our birth-through-kindergarten school the very best it can be for our students. Our student population, averaging around 250 students in our various program levels, is among the first generation of learners to benefit from our district's renewed focus on birth-through-kindergarten learning and has been the subject of a PLC development process that has aimed to meet a number of community needs.

After finding that more than 60 percent of our young learn-

ers were coming into our elementary schools without any pre-school experience, our district leadership set about creating various programs that would help meet this need. Through a steady development process, our school was able to design and implement programming at four distinct levels: (1) kindergarten, which maintains ten full classrooms and represents the majority of our day-to-day operations; (2) a kindergarten Boost program, which serves as a kinder-preparation program for many kindergarten-aged learners who are not ready for the social/emotional or academic rigors of kindergarten; (3) pre-school, which expands no-cost services to the community and helps equip our littles with many of the social and sensory experiences they need to navigate their early school lives; and (4) the Learning With Littles program, which extends a range of educational services to families in our community with young children and which holds community-connecting seminars wherein these families are connected with the various state and local child services. Each of these program platforms has been the subject of an extensive PLC process that took a number of years to fully realize.

## Becoming a PLC

The process of developing and streamlining our PLC began in earnest in the fall of 2016 and was met with some early challenges. Having drawn a staff from a number of buildings around our district, our early work in developing a successful PLC was focused largely on building collective action. The diversity in our staff understanding of how to go about doing the work of a Model PLC was both an interesting challenge and a sincere benefit and required some intentional work in these early days to set us on the right track.

This early work for the AELC came at a fortunate time. Our district was in the process of rolling out a number of trainings and support networks intent on helping schools craft their PLCs with a focus on best practices. This districtwide work certainly helped our staff and administrators set their sights on a number of key features of high-quality PLCs; specifically, we were able to develop core values around data literacy and data teams, prioritizing standards, building assessments, setting priorities for continued improvement, and, perhaps most important, adopting the philosophy that “every student is our student.” This latter sentiment became the cornerstone of much of our work. Maintaining the mindset that our programs, classrooms, and services work in harmony with one another has helped bolster much of the work that may have at one time taken effect in only a small sector of our school.

The strategies that were the most valuable for us in building this early collective mindset were often deceptively simple. Creating a single spreadsheet for staff to input relevant data and information about their Boost and kindergarten students has helped our teams review data across classrooms in a way that has strengthened our work as a collective. Further, our administrative team has ensured that the support that our staff needs is readily available through a structured mentorship program, wherein new staff are put in touch with a seasoned teacher to help develop their practices in the image of our schoolwide agreements around instruction and standards; through frequent observations that allow teachers the opportunity to see their peers in action; and through a list of common expectations that is frequently reviewed and molded during meetings in our PLC.

Another aspect of our early PLC work was sketching out a schedule that would balance the various interests of our staff. Among our highest priorities was providing our teachers and related service staff with enough time to fully engage with one another and develop and maintain the systems they need to support student success. At the same time, our team also sought to provide these professionals with the opportunity to focus on the meaningful work they do with students to the greatest extent possible. From this, the AELC developed a two-part PLC,



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wherein our leadership team and wider staff were able to do the work we thought was most appropriate to them.

The first of this two-part structure involves a weekly guiding coalition meeting, which sees a diverse group of school leaders doing much of the work that clears the way for our staff work to be as streamlined as it can be. This includes addressing concerns brought about by staff, discussing trends in student behavior and academic needs that are deserving of a schoolwide intervention or focus, planning timely training for new initiatives or those undergoing revision, and, crucially, setting the agenda for weekly PLC meetings. This team has seen perhaps its greatest success in getting the precise agenda and expectations out to staff, who then have the opportunity to prepare the data and materials they need to tackle the PLC agenda.

The second part of our structure involves the whole staff. An hour-long weekly meeting most often sees our entire AELC professional staff coming together to report on the various aspects of each program that are thriving and those that are in need of creative problem-solving or intervention. Having the opportunity to hear from staff working within our different program levels reinforces much of the philosophy of collective

ownership and accountability that we have sought to imbue within our wider community and goes a long way toward clarifying how our school is functioning as a whole.

Additionally, this weekly meeting provides an opportunity for staff within the same grade or program level to focus on fidelity and needed support. Most often, our teams review information in at least three domains: the progress of students along the skills continuum we have established, the next steps or the ways in which we can ensure that our students are making sustained progress, and the areas in which staff feel there are shortcomings either in fidelity or support that require collective action.

This meeting has been the epicenter of much of the planning and structuring of our multilevel systems of support that have been a feature of our district's wider vision of academic success and our school's primary driver of instructional and programming decision-making. The follow-up that has been so necessary and often so elusive to staff and student support in previous iterations of our staff's collective work has also seen a significant transformation through this process and has become one of our great strengths.

Although we saw steady progress in the early stages of our



PLC development, our real journey toward becoming a Model PLC began after a number of meetings helped our staff identify the areas in which we needed to see growth. During these sessions, our team was able to determine that there were two areas in which we needed to develop both a framework for action and specific procedures that were unique to our work with early learners. We were in need of a high-quality data regime that not only tracked student performance during the year, as our later grades are subject to as well, but that could also take our staff from having little or no data on a student to having an actionable set of data that could help determine both skill deficits and placement needs. Additionally, our team needed to align our expectations and curriculum for early learning to balance the needs and benefits of our various programs. Both of these areas of need became the subjects of a sustained process of growth and learning in our PLC that have clarified a number of lessons and likely obstacles to becoming a high-performing PLC for early learners.

## Developing a High-Quality Data Regime

The first identified area of need, that of developing a high-quality data regime oriented around the unique needs of early learners, has been a journey that has taught us a few critical lessons. Beginning with a set of questions about what we could do to improve our work with early learners, our team set about developing systems and procedures that could help us get reliable data on our students. The unique challenge we face at the kindergarten level is that we are taking in students for whom we have little or no data and, as we found in our community survey, who have few experiences in any formal classroom environment. The challenge, then, is to bring our knowledge from zero to one, so to speak, and to learn as much as we can about the strengths and needs of each learner as quickly as possible.

The process we developed to meet this need

centered around a few key pieces of programming. We offer a Camp Kinder program to encourage students and families to participate in activities and lessons before the start of the school year. Half-day schedules and activity-oriented learning help our students become familiar with the routines of school life, to meet many of the staff they will interact with throughout the year, and to begin to develop a shared understanding of the expectations they will be subject to come the first day of school.

Albeit an important part of our camp, these benefits are entirely incidental to the more staff-focused goal of data gathering. The central benefit of the Camp Kinder program for our staff is that we have the opportunity to conduct teacher observations of our incoming students and to develop a sense of the specific needs of incoming classes. These early observations help us with everything from connecting students to related service staff such as our speech language pathologists and counselors to determining placement. With the ever-increasing participation in this program, we have developed a strong ability to make many of the decisions around supporting student needs from day one that we have only ever been able to do after the school year started in previous years.

This isn't to say that the process of establishing a high-quality data-gathering system hasn't been without its challenges. We have consistently come up against the difficult reality of acting on the data that we gather. In fact, determining the right intervention for the various needs that we uncover through the process of developing a data-driven understanding of our students has been and continues to be a difficult task.

To meet this challenge, our PLC has developed a number of procedures to smooth the process of moving from data to action. Staff have helped delineate a process for mentorship that pairs new teachers with more experienced staff to move our teams from identification to action. Further administrative check-ins and PLC sharing of data across grade-level teams have done a lot to further support this crucial work.



Through the PLC process, one of the more difficult aspects of our work with early learners has become one of our most dedicated improvement strategies. Our PLC provides the foundation for staff to adjust the continuum of skills in math and ELA based on their direct observation of student needs within the standards and framework provided to them. The most significant improvement that we have seen as the result of our dedicated focus on the PLC process in this area is that staff have become increasingly comfortable with making these adjustments and recommending and following through with important program changes in a self-directed manner. Having the ability to lean on the experience and expertise of the staff who are working with our students directly, rather than solely leaning on the work of our still-important administrative team, has been of significant benefit to our overall success in maintaining accountability and high levels of instructional support for our students.

Another area of significant difficulty in developing a high-quality data regime has been in determining the precise interventions that our students need to realize their full potential in the classroom. Having a bevy of research on various interventions can be of great benefit. It can also be overwhelming. By ensuring a consistent shared vision for student improvement through our weekly collaborative meetings and by training staff in the precise use of the data-gathering systems that we have collectively decided to use, we have come a long way in meeting this challenge as well.

The fruits of this work have left us with a recent, and quite successful, intervention strategy within our building. Our PLC determined the need for a dedicated intervention specialist over two years ago, and since hiring for this position, we have seen a meaningful improvement in our ability to connect students with the interventions that they need to thrive. This intervention specialist is a position that has been provid-

ed to K–5 within our district but has taken on some unique responsibilities within our building that have bolstered our students' success. Primarily, this position involves individual and small-group work with students who are struggling to access Tier 1 instruction within the classroom. Whether for specific academic or social or emotional reasons, the students we identify for this pull-out program are observed within the

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classroom environment by our intervention specialist and quickly connected to one of our dedicated learning groups for work within their identified area of need. These students are only recommended to our intervention specialist after having

## Aligning the Curriculum

The second, and in many ways more difficult, identified area of need is that of curriculum alignment. The difficulties of determining how best to align the skill continuum, both academic and social, from our preschool to Boost and kindergarten levels have been substantial. Although our early efforts saw a number of wrinkles and redundancies, our early work in building a philosophy of collective accountability helped us sidestep many more potential pitfalls. Having a thriving community that prided themselves on collective ownership and mutual support helped speed us through the early stages of development in this work and has remained an important locus of support in guiding our current efforts to perfect our continuum. More specifically, our PLC has taken up the task of determining how we will interpret and act on the priority standards that we operate under and which programs and policies we will establish as nonnegotiable.

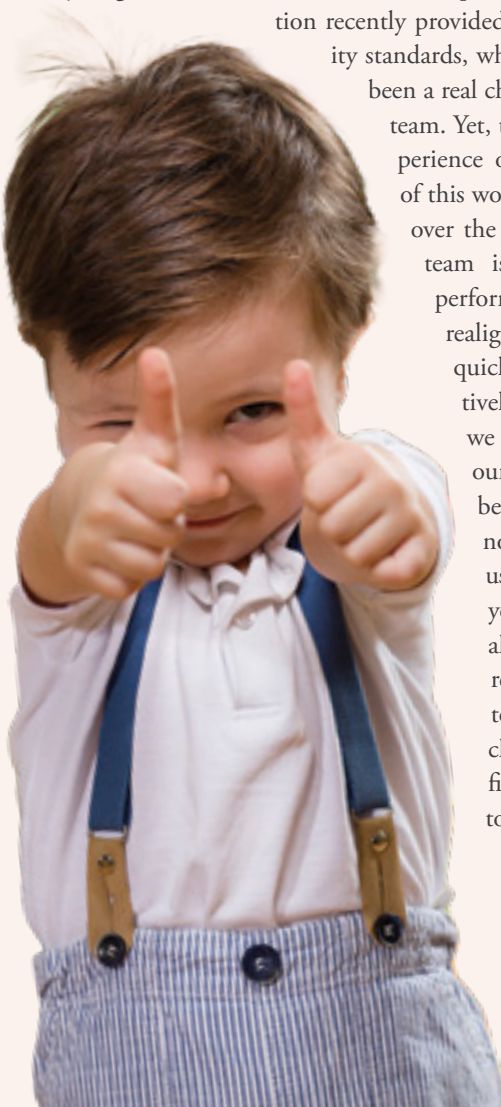
The work of vertically aligning social, practical, and academic skills through our various programs has become a lively source of input from our staff and has been met with a further opportunity to grow from our state. The state department of education recently provided a set of priority standards, which could have been a real challenge for our team. Yet, through the experience of doing much of this work for ourselves over the past years, our team is equipped to perform this work of realignment more quickly and effectively. In this way, we can say that our dedication to being a PLC has not only helped us thrive from year to year but also significantly readies our team to meet future challenges as our field continues to grow.

determined that our school differentiation and support methods (often including work with a paraprofessional within the classroom) have not helped the student see the sustained levels of improvement along the learning continuum that our data suggests they are capable of making.

Over the course of the last few years, the most common reason for recommendation to our intervention specialist has been low performance in reading. Through the implementation of high-quality reading interventions following an Orton-Gillingham-based approach, we have been successful in having more than 70 percent of these identified learners ready to return to the traditional classroom without further reading support by the end of their first year.

Another area in which we have seen our PLC help meet specific early learning challenges is in determining placement within the Boost and traditional kindergarten programs for our learners. Based on early academic scores, student age, and frequent interaction with families, we have developed a process for placement that we believe has significantly reduced many of the challenges we have faced historically with getting our students ready for their future elementary school lives. By organizing specific roles around assessment and team-placement decisions, we have been able to take some of our most unprepared students and transform them into leaders both within and outside the classroom.

The accompanying shift in the culture of our school and wider community in their perceptions toward these supportive programs, both Boost and intervention specific, has been an enormous benefit not only to our school's interaction and engagement with the community but also to our most vulnerable students. We are proud to see that nearly all of our Boost students are coming to their kindergarten years more than ready to take on the demands of learning at this level and that many are going on to the first grade with skills that either meet or exceed expectations in both reading and math. Many of the benefits that we are seeing in this area have only become possible through the process of ongoing placement and intervention decision-making that we do through our PLC.



## Establishing a Model PLC

By way of general principles for establishing a high-quality PLC for early learning, we have found that the following are important places to begin.

- Build a shared vision among all staff in the philosophy of collective action and accountability.
- Set schedules that balance the needs of staff to reflect on student progress and plan for future success.
- Develop a set of researched questions around improvement.
- Ensure accountability toward those actions or procedures that have been collectively established.
- Get precise and granular about your understanding of student needs.

In relating our journey in becoming a Model PLC, it is our sincere hope that we at the AELC can play a small part in helping other schools find some of the success that we have been fortunate enough to have through the tireless work of our staff and district leadership. ■

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